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Hopeless Romantics:  
The Poetics of Unredeeming Nature

by

Jordan L. Greenwald

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements of the degree of

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in

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and the Designated Emphasis

in

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of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Lucey, chair

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Abstract

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Jordan L. Greenwald

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

Designated Emphasis in Critical Theory

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Michael Lucey, Chair

As an alternative to the modern myth of “Nature” as a factory of redemption or a well of hope, this dissertation considers a Romantic literary (counter-)tradition that reflects on the unredeeming qualities of nonhuman nature. I show how European and American writers of the Romantic era—broadly construed from 1789 to the 1860s—theorized an epistemology of hopelessness that aimed to liberate nature from a pre-established conceptual burden of dispelling alienation and recuperating modernity’s losses. In analyses of nineteenth-century poetry, fiction, and literary theory, and in conversation with contemporary reflections in critical theory and the environmental humanities, I uncover an environmental ethics of critical hopelessness in Romantic-era poetics. Even as the authors of my study often posit a return to nature as a cure for historical disappointment and enlightenment “disenchantment,” their writings nonetheless suspend or interrupt the hope of finding redemption in nature. These hopeless Romantics reflect on nonhuman nature in its inability to promise futurity, to provide consolation, to meet endless demands, and to act as either the catalyst or the stage for humanity’s self-fulfillment in history. In doing so, they do not sanctify “Nature” as a unitary entity wholly set apart from human aspirations, but rather make a case for the simple ecological awareness that nonhuman nature exists beyond the psychic economy of hope and fulfillment.

The first chapter, “Nature Ruined in Nerval and Chateaubriand,” puts Gérard de Nerval’s novella *Sylvie* (1853) into conversation with François René de Chateaubriand’s *The Genius of Christianity* (1802), showing how Nerval critically reformulates Chateaubriand’s fantasy of restoring the receptivity to nature that allegedly preceded the disenchanting violence of the Enlightenment. Nerval transforms Chateaubriand’s figure of ruin into the sign of the permanent refusal of restorative fantasies, thus inscribing human hopelessness in nature. The second chapter, “Dickinson’s Companions,” shows how the writings of Emily Dickinson resist the Transcendentalist ideal of redemptive unification with nature. Rather than grasping toward an ever-expanding and all-encompassing poetic vision—one in which nature, God, and humanity blend into systematic harmony—Dickinson’s poems stage the impasses of integration and communion. Dickinson’s companionship thus offers the basis for an ecological mode of consciousness that, like Nerval’s ruined pastoral, refuses to find in nature the promise of a return to original integrity.



Against a common understanding of Walt Whitman as a redemptive prophet of pleasure, the third chapter, "Limp Whitman," explores an iteration of the poet who dilates or surrenders the self not to take in or to amplify pleasure, nor to masochistically dissolve the self, but rather to attenuate the demands he places on the earth and on his own body. The fourth and final chapter, "Hell on Earth with Baudelaire (and Poe)," considers contemporary environmentalist reflections on how one might register and respond to the massive loss engendered by ongoing damage to the planet. I show how, very presciently, a century and a half before these environmental thinkers, Charles Baudelaire and his greatest literary influence, Edgar Allan Poe, theorized a poetics of transience, believing that the value of poetry was fundamentally tied to an acknowledgement of mortality and human limits. Baudelaire's aesthetic theory and (a)theological thinking provide us with a worldview fit for inhabiting a planet that is permeated by loss, as they exhibit a commitment to thinking and living without redemption, of inhabiting a world that is at once alien and familiar, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, alive and dead.

*To my parents, John and Joanne Greenwald*

## CONTENTS

<b>List of figures</b>	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	iv
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	xxvii
<b>Chapter One</b> Nature Ruined in Nerval and Chateaubriand	1
<b>Chapter Two</b> Dickinson's Companions	31
<b>Chapter Three</b> Limp Whitman	65
<b>Chapter Four</b> Hell on Earth with Baudelaire (and Poe)	94
<b>Bibliography</b>	132

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1. From Andreas Vesalius, *De humanis corporis fabrica* (1543) 129
- Figure 2. From Eustache-Hyacinthe Langlois, *Essai historique, philosophique et pittoresque sur les danses des morts*, vol. 2 (1851) 130
- Figure 3. Félix Bracquemond, Unfinished draft of frontispiece for second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1860) 131

## INTRODUCTION

*Mysticism of stone,  
Which failure cannot cast down  
Nor success make proud.  
-Robinson Jeffers, "Rock and Hawk"*

### i. climate crisis and the epistemology of hopelessness

In keeping with the method of this dissertation, which mines nineteenth-century literature to shed light on the environmental history of the present, let us begin by reading a prose poem by Charles Baudelaire in juxtaposition with contemporary environmentalist discourse. In "*Chacun sa chimère*," the speaker recounts a moment when, in a desolate, gray landscape with no signs of life, he comes upon a group of men marching forward, bent over under the strain of a load on their backs. The burdens they bear—"as heavy as a sack of flour or coal, of the full field equipment of a Roman soldier"—are, he discovers, giant Chimeras that grip at the men's chests with their claws, enveloping their heads with their mouths "like one of those horrid helmets which ancient warriors wore to terrify the enemy."<sup>1</sup> The speaker cannot help but to investigate:

Je questionnai l'un de ces hommes, et je lui demandai où ils allaient ainsi. Il me répondit qu'il n'en savait rien, ni lui, ni les autres ; mais qu'évidemment ils allaient quelque part, puisqu'ils étaient poussés par un invincible besoin de marcher.

Chose curieuse à noter : aucun de ces voyageurs n'avait l'air irrité contre la bête féroce suspendue à son cou et collée à son dos ; on eût dit qu'il la considérait comme faisant partie de lui-même. Tous ces visages fatigués et sérieux ne témoignaient d'aucun désespoir ; sous la coupole spleenétique du ciel, les pieds plongés dans la poussière d'un sol aussi désolé que ce ciel, ils cheminaient avec la physionomie résignée de ceux qui sont condamnés à espérer toujours. (*FE* 342)<sup>2</sup>

Rife with the irony and mystery of a Kafka parable, like any good parable this one resists the closure of a single interpretation. Regarding the way the men march forward as if compelled by an external force, a reader familiar with Baudelaire's deep scorn for the idea of a progress inherent to modernity could surmise that their determination represents blind faith in the forward motion of history: as time moves forward, things improve, and there is a better world just past the horizon. On the other hand, one might read the men as analogs for Walter Benjamin's angel of history, propelled forward by the storm of homogeneous empty time. Rather than the horror expressed in the backward glance of Klee's angel as it stares at the catastrophes of the past piling up, however, these figures face what we might read as the future with a stoic expression.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*, trans. William H. Crosby (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1991), 343. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *FE*.

<sup>2</sup> "I questioned one of the men and asked him where they were going like this. He answered that he didn't know, neither he nor the others. But evidently they were going somewhere, since they were driven by an invincible need to go.

A curious thing to note: not one of these travelers seemed irritated by the ferocious beast hanging on his neck and pasted to his back. You'd think he considered it part of himself. All these tired and earnest faces showed no sign of despair. Under the splenic dome of heaven, their feet plunged in the dust of a soil as desolate as the sky, they tramped along with that resigned expression of those condemned to hope forever" (*FE* 343).

“Condemned to hope forever” (“*condamnés à espérer toujours*”): what is certain in this narrative is that a relationship exists between the men’s resignation and their refusal to despair. Irony abounds. If the men exhibit what might be characterized as stoicism, they do so apparently with hope, whereas hope is contrary to the principles of stoicism that hold desire to be a corollary of fear—both to be avoided. Moreover, in common understanding, hope brings with it the joy of anticipation, or is at least a balm that counters the very resignation the men appear to inhabit in their hopefulness. Whether this oddly hopeful resignation is what *propels* the men to move forward or simply the attitude they must adopt as they are propelled by something else, hope in this instance does nothing to disrupt the status quo—either of their interminable march forward toward the horizon, “where the roundness of the surface of the planet hides from the curiosity of human gaze,” or of the gnawing of the chimeras at their backs (*FE* 343). The attitude is apparently contagious, as the narrator concludes by recounting that, after “a few moments” in which he was “determined to understand the mystery,” he is beset by “an irresistible Indifference” that renders him “more heavily oppressed than they themselves had been by the crushing Chimeras” (*FE* 343). The speaker succumbs not only to indifference but also, as critic Joseph Acquisto puts it, to “indifferentiation, fading back into the landscape itself and dissolving the distinction between observer and observed that he had maintained while watching the travelers.”<sup>3</sup> If the poem is indeed a parable or an object lesson from which a transformative knowledge might be drawn, the speaker undergoes no such redemption, drawn instead into the unredeemed state of ignorance and resignation from which he had seemed to stand apart.

Baudelaire’s resolutely unredemptive vision notwithstanding, the wager of this study is that a lesson may indeed be drawn from this story, even if it is not a lesson that will “save” us in any tangible or immediate sense. The parable can and should be understood as a commentary on the harmful irrationality of blind faith in progress, on the absurdity of our seemingly boundless capacity to adapt to a grievous situation rather than to actually address it, and on the minimal distinction (if any) between pure indifference and quietist optimism. Most important, however, is the notion that hope itself may not be as liberatory nor as reliable a goad to action as we might think. Or, conversely, that hopelessness, despair, and loss of faith may have value in themselves as a heuristic, a way of thinking our way out of the condition of being condemned, forever, to the hopeful resignation of the men in “*Chacun sa chimère*.” Indeed, hopelessness can be a condition for political, even revolutionary action.

This is the position of the Dark Mountain Project, a global network of writers, artists and thinkers—heirs, to be sure, to a Romantic mode of thinking and feeling—who have committed to “walking away from the stories that our societies like to tell themselves, the stories that prevent us seeing clearly the extent of the ecological, social and cultural unravelling that is now underway.”<sup>4</sup> Co-founders Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hines, both former journalists and environmental activists, grew deeply disillusioned by an environmental movement they felt had succumbed to an instrumental logic in which climate change became a “problem” that must be solved by reducing carbon emissions at any expense—trading a forest for a windfarm, for instance. With this concession, environmentalism had also resigned itself to the false hope endorsed by the global capitalist order, a vision of a “sustainable” future markedly continuous with present modes of energy and resource consumption. In 2009, Kingsnorth and Hines formed Dark Mountain, named after a line from Robinson Jeffers’s “Rearmament,” and penned a manifesto titled “Uncivilization,” which declares the inevitable fall of global mass consumer civilization while also reminding its readers that “The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 184

<sup>4</sup> “About the Dark Mountain Project,” *The Dark Mountain Project*, <https://dark-mountain.net/about/> (accessed August 2, 2019).

which lead to the unknown world ahead of us.”<sup>5</sup> Asserting the psychic and material necessity of actually facing the grief occasioned by widescale environmental loss without the buffer of the false hope of recuperation, in a 2014 interview Hines took pains to emphasize that Dark Mountain was advocating neither nihilism nor resignation, but rather a kind of receptivity to the reality of planetary ecocide unmitigated by the defense mechanism of hope: “Let’s not pretend we’re not feeling despair. Let’s sit with it for a while. Let’s be honest with ourselves and with each other. And then as our eyes adjust to the darkness, what do we start to notice?”<sup>6</sup> The question of what might be noticed or registered by those dwelling in a hopeless disposition will be central to this study, even as it focuses on nineteenth-century authors who did not, could not have envisioned the planetary condition contemplated by Dark Mountain.

Hopelessness is of course a tough sell: if it is not an easy, much less a desirable attitude to adopt, it is also readily dismissed as politically unsound given its definitional inability to envision a brighter future. Kingsnorth and Hines were unsurprisingly met with accusations of privileged apathy, some readers mistaking the grim affective realism of Dark Mountain for programmatic defeatism or accelerationism. In the context of global ecological crisis, similar claims have been made against considerations of anti-futurity and negative affect in twenty-first century queer theory. Advocating militantly for a “queer-feminist future beyond Man,” Drucilla Cornell and Stephen Seely write, “It would... seem that many theorists have their own form of cruel attachment—a cruel pessimism?—to the idea that revolution is something we (can) no longer desire. Perhaps this is a form of immunity to the inevitable disappointments of political struggle: we can no longer be disappointed if we no longer hope for a more just future or believe it is possible.”<sup>7</sup> Setting aside the fact that much of the theory they condemn with unqualified vigor is committed to figuring out how to live with and through disappointment—including and especially that of political struggle—we should note that Cornell and Seely equate revolutionary sentiment with envisioning and hoping for a better future.

Revolutionary desire and futurity, however, may not be as tightly bound as they presume. An organizer of the Saint Petersburg activist and artist collective *Chto Delat?* (“What is to be done?”), philosopher Oxana Timofeeva has argued in favor of “a catastrophe communism” that “accepts the fact of our real-time apocalypse, [taking it over] as the only true revolutionary situation—a situation where there is no hope, but only despair. In this situation, we cannot keep waiting for a future catastrophe (with a happy end); a messianic moment of hope, of believing in the future... puts us to sleep, lost in dreams. Only when... facing no future, do we really have nothing to lose.”<sup>8</sup> Timofeeva’s formulation speaks to a shortcoming of the Dark Mountain group’s manifesto, which is that it posits “the end of the world as we know it” as an event to come, a future anterior. Timofeeva, on the other hand, urges us to imagine that the apocalypse is already with us, and therefore that we have no choice but to act, with minimal thought and energy dedicated to envisioning the future, whether utopian or dystopian. In keeping with this position, *Chto Delat?* has staged performance pieces in which they enact a “zombie apocalypse” in public, prompting viewers not just to understand the apocalypse as already here, but to sympathize with and think through the zombie as a revolutionary figure who lives beyond

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<sup>5</sup>“The Manifesto,” *The Dark Mountain Project*, <https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> (accessed August 2, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/magazine/its-the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-and-he-feels-fine.html>

<sup>7</sup> Stephen D. Seely and Drucilla Cornell in *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016), 12-13..

<sup>8</sup> “The End of the World: From Apocalypse to the End of History and Back,” *e-flux*, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60337/the-end-of-the-world-from-apocalypse-to-the-end-of-history-and-back/> (accessed August 2, 2019).

the worst and fights in solidarity with her allies in the struggle. This point of view, for some at least, may not take much imagining at all: in a study of contemporary Indigenous science fiction, environmental philosopher Kyle Whyte, a member of the Potawatomi Nation, calls attention to the fact that Indigenous writers and artists rarely approach climate crisis as “an impending future to be dreaded,” as settler colonial violence has already exposed Indigenous people of the U.S. to levels of environmental destruction that “seem actually a lot like what many other people in the world fear will happen with climate destabilization when those same people portray apocalyptic and dystopian science fiction futures.”<sup>9</sup> Whyte emphasizes the importance of intergenerational “spiraling” time in much Indigenous fiction, arguing that although historical linearity can be present in that temporality, fighting for or against “the future” is rarely the framework in which Indigenous environmental struggles are conceived. Keeping these perspectives in mind, Dark Mountain’s respect for the epistemology of hopelessness can be understood not as an endorsement of defeatist logic—of letting things get worse before they get better—but rather a basis for sensing and feeling the ongoing catastrophe of the present without a sense that the future will bring an escape from that ongoingness—a position similar to what Donna Haraway has formulated as “staying with the trouble.”<sup>10</sup>

## ii. romanticism, enlightenment, hopelessness

As its title indicates, *Hopeless Romantics* holds that writers of the Romantic era—in this study, broadly construed as roughly two-thirds of a century, from the French Revolution in 1789 to the 1860s in which Baudelaire wrote “*Chacun sa chimère*”—offer profound insight into the epistemology of hopelessness. Part of what makes Romanticism such a rich site for exploring the lessons of hopelessness lies in its emergence as a reaction to the (orthodox) Enlightenment, an intellectual-historical context in which the infinitely hopeful concepts of history-as-progress and the perfectibility of humanity came into being. Another is the fact that Romantic writers—especially in the context of France and its European neighbors—wrote in the wake of a revolution (and in fact, several “revolutions” thereafter) that brought with it both profound hope for a transfigured, utopian future *and* the overwhelming disappointment that came with that future’s perpetual non-arrival. To paint with the very broadest of strokes, if Enlightenment thought regarded the future as the frontier beyond which humanity would endlessly expand in its process of self-improvement, Romantic thinkers and writers often wished to put the brakes on this ceaseless advancement, to take account of what or who might be on the losing end of the supposed victories of instrumental rationality, utilitarianism, scientific innovation, and, later, industrial and urban modernization. Kingsnorth—a great admirer of Wordsworth—validates this understanding of Romanticism when he proudly embraces the epithet of “Romantic” thrust upon him by critics who characterize him as being nostalgic for simpler times: if one is to “romanticize” anything, he holds, it is wiser to idealize the past than to succumb to the societal demand to idealize the future. Or, as Theodor Adorno put it, “So long as progress, deformed by utilitarianism, does violence to the surface of the earth, it will be impossible—in spite of all proof

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<sup>9</sup> Kyle Whyte, “Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, vol. 1 (1-2), 224-242; 227. By no means do I mean to imply that non-Indigenous persons should adopt this mentality by imagining themselves in the position of the colonized. See further commentary below.

<sup>10</sup> See Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).



to the contrary—completely to counter the perception that what antedates the trend is in its backwardness better and more humane.”<sup>11</sup>

Adorno’s idea that “progress” is destructive to the earth brings us to another reason for Romanticism’s pride of place in the history of literary and philosophical hopelessness: its thematic concern for environmental loss—perhaps its claim to fame. In the English and American context especially—the writings of Blake, Wordsworth, Clare, and Thoreau among others—there is a pressing sense that the environment is (or will be) among the many casualties of Enlightenment modernity. To respect the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature is thus to give up hope in (false) progress, whose (supposed) gains are only secured at nature’s expense. In the twentieth century, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer gave a studied philosophical voice to this Romantic critique when they wrote of an “alienated” Enlightenment which held the domination of nature—and along with it, the domination of the self and other humans—to be the primary purpose of the faculty of reason. As philosophers Kate Soper and Akeel Bilgrami have argued, the critical impetus behind *The Dialectic of Enlightenment’s* critique of instrumental reason finds its origins in the Romantic period, as concepts central to their critique, such as disenchantment and alienation, first emerged in the context of Romanticism’s reaction to the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> According to Bilgrami, we must look to “the long Romantic tradition”—from the late eighteenth century to the Frankfurt School and beyond—to ground a theory of an ethics of enchantment, one that asserts the value of nature outside and beyond the abstract, quantifiable, and instrumental value that alienated scientific reason exclusively finds in it.<sup>13</sup> While this study will prove deeply sympathetic to Bilgrami’s claim regarding the helpfulness of Romanticism in this regard, it hews more closely to Soper’s more sobering take, which reminds us that though we may take inspiration from them in the present, both the Romantics and their Frankfurt School descendants have clearly failed to make manifest a world governed by their values—“I do not want to give the impression that I feel greatly optimistic that any more constructive Romantic revival will come to our aid,” Soper writes.<sup>14</sup> As Adorno and Horkheimer themselves put it in a fragment “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History,” “A philosophical interpretation of world history would have to show how, despite all the detours and resistances,”—Romanticism included—“the systematic domination over nature has been asserted more and more decisively and has integrated all internal human characteristics.”<sup>15</sup> When they write toward unalienated reason and “true” enlightenment, they do so

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<sup>11</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 64.

<sup>12</sup> See Akeel Bilgrami, *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) and Kate Soper, “Passing Glories and Romantic Retrievals: Avant-Garde Nostalgia and Hedonist Renewal” in Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby eds., *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 17-29.

<sup>13</sup> Making a similar claim in a different context, Colin Jager conceives of Romanticism as a movement that offers a critique of the disembodied subject of the Reason of Enlightenment and, in doing so, furthers the process of secularization. For instance, Jager conceives of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* as an iconoclastic text that challenges the idolatry of a dispassionate and disembodied Enlightenment Reason that is incapable of critiquing itself. According to his reading, Wordsworth shows us that “To begin with the assumption that the world is meaningless or dead . . . To be a literalist about the world, to insist on calling things according to what they are, is not to be disenchanted but rather to make an idol of one’s own supposedly disenchanted reason.” Colin Jager, “This Detail, This History: Charles Taylor’s Romanticism” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Antwerpen, Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010): 166-192; 191.

<sup>14</sup> Soper, “Passing Glories and Romantic Retrievals,” 19.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 185.

under the sign of missed and averted opportunities in which the myth of the transcendent Enlightenment subject might have been shattered. In this sense, as we think with Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Romantics, we will be thinking with the losers of history.

As the last 30 years of ecocriticism attest, of course, Adorno and Horkheimer are far from the only thinkers to identify in Romanticism a counter to the ecocidal logics of alienated reason. In what has been called the “first-wave” of ecocriticism in the 90s, scholars such as Lawrence Buell, James McKusick, Karl Kroeber, and Jonathan Bate argued against a prevailing understanding in the wake of New Historicism that nature functioned primarily as an ideological screen or discursive construct in Romanticism, instead taking earnestly the ecological commitments of writers such as Wordsworth and Thoreau and thus staking a claim to Romanticism as the birth of modern environmentalism.<sup>16</sup> From this, a “second wave” of ecocritics emerged in the early 2000s (among them Onno Oerlemans, Greg Garrard, Kate Rigby, and Ashton Nichols), eager to elucidate on Romantic environmentalism while also grappling with poststructuralist theory, from which ecocriticism—in an effort to clear a space where the referent of nature might be addressed in earnest—had departed.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most polemical of all these works, Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2009) addressed the concept of “nature” as a pernicious threat permeating Romantic aesthetics, contemporary environmentalist discourse, “nature writing,” and ecocriticism itself. Morton declared nature “a transcendental term in a material mask,” largely conceived as a “surrounding medium that sustains our being” and taken to be “a way of healing what modern society has damaged”—in other words, the concept of “nature” serves to alienate us from the natural world we ostensibly seek when we invoke it.<sup>18</sup> Tracing the troubled elaboration of “nature” in Romantic writing, Morton’s aim was thus to “dissolve” the elusive concept altogether in the interest of an ecological consciousness in which “we coexist in an infinite web of mutual interdependence where there is no boundary or center” (23). In his critique of the concept of “nature” from an ecological standpoint, Morton echoed earlier environmentalist thinkers such as William Cronon and Bill McKibben.<sup>19</sup> In the wake of second-wave ecocriticism, recent Romantic ecocriticism likewise often aims to depart from mystified representations of “Nature” in order to explore the myriad scientific and materialist discourses of the Romantic era, or to reflect on concrete environmental histories in Romantic writing. In doing so, they have shown that poetry and science, Romanticism and the Enlightenment are neither

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<sup>16</sup> See Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995), James McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2000), Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), and Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 1991). For much of the bibliography in this paragraph and for the break down of the successive “waves” of ecocriticism, I am deeply indebted to the work of Lisa Ottum’s and Seth T. Reno’s work in their introduction to the edited volume *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2016), 1-27. Immensely helpful for navigating this terrain also is Kate Rigby’s entry “Romanticism and Ecocriticism” in Greg Garrard ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60-79.

<sup>17</sup> See Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2002), Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: the Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), and Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbannatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 14, 4, 22. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>19</sup> See William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995), 69-80, and Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

as inimical nor as monolithic as we might think, and that “Romantic science” in fact offers a rich reservoir of ecological thinking, constituting a veritable counter-tradition to the rationalist domination of alienated Enlightenment.<sup>20</sup>

I highlight Morton’s work above to mark a point of departure for this study, regarding both the affective normativity Morton perceives in Romantic ecocriticism as well as the question of the disposability of a concept of “nature.” In his books subsequent to *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton has advocated for a “dark ecology” to replace a predominantly affirmative culture in ecocriticism and environmental discourse: “Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine...It’s sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and ‘healthy.’ Where does this leave negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? Are these simply nonecological categories?”<sup>21</sup> Morton thus seeks to identify these negative qualities—qualities apparently abjected in much of Romantic ecocriticism—in texts from Romantic culture and beyond. *Hopeless Romantics*, inspired as it is by traditions of negativity in Marxian Critical Theory, affect studies, feminism, and queer theory (and, we might add, Romanticism itself), could not agree more with the project of combatting emotional policing and the normativity of positive affect. Indeed, going forward we will see the authors in our study embrace many of the affects, themes, and conditions listed above—however painfully or ambivalently. Nevertheless, I must disagree with Morton on two important points. The first is that even if we are to accept the claim that “environmental rhetoric” is overwhelmingly affirmative (Dark Mountain, along with much of the environmental theory cited in this study thus excepted), it is far from the case that Romantic criticism—or even Romantic ecocriticism—currently is. Over the past decade, illuminating works by Rei Terada, Anne-Lise François, Matthew Taylor, Branka Arsic, Dana Luciano, Anahid Nersessian, Sarah Ensor, and Amanda Jo Goldstein among others—all varyingly engaged with questions of environment and ecology—have tarried with themes of loss, introversion, reticence, dissatisfaction, melancholy, illness, numbness, senescence, and terminality in British and American Romanticism.<sup>22</sup> This study follows in their footsteps.

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<sup>20</sup> With respect to the project of challenging the false binary of Romantic/Enlightenment and opening up a more capacious understanding of Romanticism that sees it as continuous with what has been termed “the Radical Enlightenment,” I have in mind first Marjorie Levinson’s reading of the Romantic Spinoza in “A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza,” *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Winter 2007), 367-408: “[W]e might at long last lay the ghost of a Romanticism born in reaction to Enlightenment, and recover instead the sense of a movement of immanent critique modeled on a major figure of the Enlightenment.” (369). Amanda Jo Goldstein’s *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) masterfully excavates a mode of poetic and scientific inquiry that challenges the paradigm of “alienated Enlightenment,” illuminating the “interanimation between poetry and natural knowledge” embodied in the tradition of Lucretian materialism in Romantic science and poetry (2).

<sup>21</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 16. See also Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Lisa Ottum’s and Seth T. Reno’s eds. *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2016) addresses (and challenges the notion of) this affective normativity in Romantic environmentalist discourse.

<sup>22</sup> See Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), Branka Arsic, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes Without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literatures* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), Sarah Ensor, “Terminal Regions: Queer Ecocriticism at the End,” in Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood eds. *Against Life* (Evanston, IL:

The second point of disagreement—and here we depart, too, from some of the scholars just mentioned—concerns the question of a new “ontology” or “materialism,” such as the “object-oriented ontology” that Morton has advocated since *Ecology without Nature* or the spate of theoretical ontologies that have emerged in the past decade in the fields of science studies, actor-network theory, animal studies, posthumanist theory, secularism studies, affect theory (especially of the Deleuzian variety), and speculative realism—many of them engaging directly with Romantic-era literature and philosophy. Though *Hopeless Romantics* will agree with many of the principles and heuristics elaborated in these theories—primarily their skepticism toward traditional Western conceptions of human sovereignty, rationality, subjectivity, and agency—it will not seek to elaborate a “new” materialism or ontology. And this for a reason central to this study: Romantic literature shows how the myth of “Nature”—and it is certainly a myth—is not as easily overcome as Morton and others might have us believe. For as much as the “new” materialisms urge us to understand (post/in)humanity as inherently relational, enmeshed in an immanent field or network of interdependent sympoietic entities, they also imply that our transcendent view of nature may be transcended by this mode of thinking. In other words, in attempting to step outside of the redemption myths governing the Western subject—the myths dissected in great detail by Adorno and Horkheimer—they offer the hope of redemption in the form of a renewed disposition toward the natural world.<sup>23</sup> Taking aim at an apparent norm of happiness in posthumanist and affect-based ecological theories, Clare Colebrook offers a trenchant critique of their performative optimism:

By declaring that the man of reason, in his representational, cognitive, calculative, individual, and disembodied comportment is a fiction that we have now overcome, and by insisting that we are already affectively attuned to the earth, we enclose the world and ourselves in a myopic bubble of happiness. We refuse to face a future in which humans will literally not

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Northwestern UP, 2016), 41-62; Dana Luciano, “Sacred Theories of Earth: Matters of Spirit in *The Soul of Things*,” *American Literature* 86.4 (December 2014), 713-736; 728.

<sup>23</sup> By way of example, allow me to explore one such myth in the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose philosophy has had a profound influence on certain strains of affect-based ecological thought as well as posthumanism. In “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature,” Deleuze connects the deterritorializing exuberance of his philosophy (which inspires much of posthumanist discourse) with a projective fantasy of “Anglo-American literature,” which operates as a locus of desire, a space in which thought, writing, even life itself, might become otherwise. Consistent with some of the ideas he earlier expresses in his work on Kafka, Deleuze sees in American literature a program of “writing” (to be distinguished from what he characterizes as the more French “interpretation”) that follows “lines of flight” and flees the confines of European thought, the constraints of the “self” of personality, and the prohibitions associated with the psychoanalytic topos of the human mind (French literature, meanwhile, “is often the most shameless eulogy of neurosis” (Gilles Deleuze, *Critique et Clinique* [Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1993], 49). These lines of flight, in fact, are what enable the act of writing to constitute a flight from “humanity” itself, as conceived within the tradition of Western philosophy. Through points of affective contact with various others, the Anglo-American writer manages to become otherwise, to become a “becoming”: “To write has no other function: to be a flux which combines with other fluxes – all the minority-becomings of the world” (50). Deleuze’s idea of American literature’s deterritorializing potential is predicated directly on Westward expansion: “American literature operates according to geographical lines: the flight towards the West, the discovery that the true East is in the West, the sense of the frontiers as something to cross, to push back, to go beyond. The becoming is geographical” (37). In one sweeping sentence, Deleuze seemingly endorses twin fantasies of redemption, both with pernicious implications: the Orientalist fantasies in which “the East” functions as reprieve or redemption for a world-weary European subject, and the settler colonial fantasy in which Westward expansion offers an escape both from that subject as well as from the baggage of “history.”

exist, a posthuman future that will be precipitated by our current sense that we have easily cast off the worst of the human.”<sup>24</sup>

A similar dream of regenerative re-enchantment, we will see, inheres in what has been called the “redemption myth” that permeates much (though certainly not all) of Romanticism, and the authors of this study are immersed in various iterations of this myth even as they critique it and resist its narrative demands. I will elaborate on the classic explications of the Romantic redemption myth in a moment, but first let us dwell with what it means to think—in the tradition of Romantic negativity—against standard narratives of redemption, a task that lies at the center of this project.

### iii. thinking negatively with romanticism

Rather than finding hope in new ontologies, we will sit with what Kate Rigby characterizes as the “extremely gloomy” outlook of the Frankfurt School.<sup>25</sup> If Rigby opts to forego Adorno and Horkheimer’s tendency toward “committ[ing] to a modernist mindset even while despairing of its telos” in the interest of “an ecologically informed postcolonial reconsideration of particular nonmodern onto-epistemologies,” in *Hopeless Romanticism* I will be more than happy to sit with the despair of the Frankfurt School (4).<sup>26</sup> This not because “we” moderns—that is, those of us who inhabit a subject position within or in relative proximity to the privileged confines of whiteness, of (settler) colonialism, and of (neo)imperialist and metropolitan seats of power—do not have much to learn from these ontologies: indeed, quite to the contrary, we have *everything* to learn from them.<sup>27</sup> But as recent reflection on decolonization and “white fragility” have shown, *unlearning* may be as crucial as learning itself for such subjects—indeed it may be the precondition for a learning that is actually committed to dismantling the modes of domination from which such subjects (and I am counting myself here) benefit.<sup>28</sup> This underscores the ongoing relevance of the Adornian project I hope to

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<sup>24</sup> Clare Colebrook, “The Once and Future Humans: Between Happiness and Extinction,” *Against Life*, ed. Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016], 63-85; 76.

<sup>25</sup> Kate Rigby, *Dancing With Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>26</sup> In her profoundly influential *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), Jane Bennett makes a similar gesture to Rigby’s, referring to a perceptual openness to the presence of nonhuman forces “the capacity for naïveté,” and suggesting that “one tactic [for developing this capacity] might be to revisit and become temporarily infected by discredited philosophies of nature, risking ‘the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes’”(18).

<sup>27</sup> Anthropology—a discourse arguably better suited for such inquiry than literary study or philosophy, given the disciplinary demands of a method that does not reify, idealize, or misrepresent the cultural modes it studies—is currently experiencing what has been called an “ontological turn,” which holds precisely the goal of naming and describing alternative modes of inhabiting the world that are more open to nonhuman nature’s significance—often, but not exclusively in domains outside the paradigm of a Western “naturalist” subject. To name just a few: Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Peter Skafish, “The Descola Variations: The Ontological Geography of *Beyond Nature and Culture*,” *Qui Parle* 25.1-2 (Fall/Winter 2016), 65-94; and many of the essays in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> For one example: as Kyle Whyte argues in the article cited above, in the case of non-Indigenous U.S. activists working in solidarity with Indigenous-led environmental activism, a fantasy of becoming the “good” settler via such solidarity may predominate. This mindset works against the settler activists from adopting a

further in this study: the task of inhabiting a negative mode of thinking that, unlike that of alienated Enlightenment, does violence to itself rather than capitulating to the thinking subject's desire for a false reconciliation with non-identity. This false reconciliation is characteristic of what Adorno terms "identity thinking," which aims to dominate non-identity by assimilating it to the terms of its pre-existing system of thought. The archive of *Hopeless Romantics* is admittedly canonical (all texts by now well-established white poets of nineteenth-century France and the U.S.) not because it wishes to universalize the modes of thinking and feeling explored by poets in a context of relative power and privilege, but because subjects of power and privilege can stand to learn, with and against these texts, how to dwell in a (self-)critical realm of unredemption.

Like the contemporary thinkers of materiality, Horkheimer and Adorno sought a way to combat alienated enlightenment and its objectifying myths of Nature; they did so, however, within and against the conceptual frameworks in which the Enlightenment had articulated itself and announced its triumphs. Their gestures toward the potential for unalienated enlightenment and "true" reason—a mode of thinking that would allow the undoing of a culture of domination—emerged primarily in their negative critique of the Enlightenment. To think in this manner was to consider myth and enlightenment dialectically, such that alienated enlightenment was shown to champion the myth of its own demythologization. Under alienated enlightenment, "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought that does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths" (*DE* 2). In elevating its normative subject—a subject that stands apart from and above "mythical" nature so as to exert its will—alienated enlightenment created the myth of its imperviousness. Alienated reason shuts itself off from the world that surrounds it, asserting its own perpetual triumph with all the regularity of a paranoid obsessive. To inhabit this position means to encounter the world only in a way that conforms to preconceived notions of one's own dominance. It finds its philosophical program in what Adorno would come to call the "identity thinking" of a Hegelianism that seeks a coercive and false reconciliation between subject and object by assimilating the object to the subject's universalizing and totalizing conceptualization.

Much as it does for the Romantic authors of this study, for Adorno "nature" (a term that Frankfurt School thought employs without hesitation even as it subjects it to dialectical nuance), in its status as non-identity, can serve a role that allows both philosophy and poetry to resist and undo the fantasies of this alienated subject. As an alternative identity thinking, Adorno worked in *Negative Dialectics* toward a theory of thinking whose "reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogenous and beyond that which is one's own."<sup>29</sup> Central to this theory is the idea that in nonhuman nature exists *non-identity*, the remainder of the human-nature dialectic which, independent of the subject of identity, lies beyond its limits. This means that nature can indeed *redeem*, but only on its own terms, when it is not forced into a schema of redemption preconceived by the thinking (and I will add, feeling) subject. As Deborah

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truly decolonial position, as it shields them from full acknowledgement that they are living their settler ancestors' dreams at the expense of the Indigenous peoples of the U.S. Moreover, it perpetuates a settler colonial dynamic because, in an inversion of the "white savior" myth that is nonetheless consonant with it, it instrumentalizes the Indigenous as saviors, bearers of an ecological knowledge that will absolve settlers from the sins of their ancestors while saving the world from the consequences of the colonial ecocide from which they continue to benefit. I do not mean to imply that Rigby or any of the aforementioned scholars inhabit this mindset, but rather to point to the need for vigilant self-reflexivity in the context of this complex dynamic.

<sup>29</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1996), 191.

Cook beautifully puts it (paraphrasing Robert Hullot-Kentor), “Adorno wants to plumb the capacity of thought to allow nature to break in on the mind that masters it.”<sup>30</sup>

As it is for this study, crucial to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is an investment in working against reified narratives of redemption and dispelling false hope. Both of these commitments are constitutive of its critique. Adorno and Horkheimer write against “the guaranteed paths to redemption,”: “The self-satisfaction of knowing in advance, and the transfiguration of negativity as redemption, are untrue forms of the resistance to deception” (DE 18). If these “paths” corrupt our relationship to nonhuman nature, they have also distorted our sense of history. In the fragment “On the Critique of the Philosophy of History” cited above—after remarking, rather fittingly for our concerns, that humans have destroyed life on the planet “more thoroughly than any other species”—they write:

By attributing humane ideas as active powers to history, and presenting them as history’s culmination, the philosophy of history stripped them of the naivety inherent in their content....The philosophy of history repeats what happened in Christianity: the good, which in reality remains at the mercy of suffering, is dressed up as a force which determines the course of history and finally triumphs. It is deified as the World Spirit or as an immanent law. But not only is history thereby turned into its direct opposite, but *the idea, which was supposed to break the necessity, the logical course of events, is itself distorted...*

...Because history as the correlative of unified theory, as something capable of interpretation, is not the good but, in fact, the horror, thought is in reality a negative element. *The hope for better conditions, insofar as it is not merely an illusion, is founded less on the assurance that those conditions are guaranteed, sustainable, and final than on a lack of respect for what is so firmly ensconced amid the general suffering.* (DE 186, emphases mine)

The vision of unalienated enlightenment emerges for Adorno and Horkheimer in the cracks of historical myth, in the turning points of a story where things could have gone otherwise. Because things *didn’t* go otherwise, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment’s* critique is intelligible only from the standpoint of historical loss, of those yearning for an enlightenment that could have been. The idea of a historical moment where an idea might have broken through the “logical” course of events is not far from the Frankfurt School’s compatriot Walter Benjamin’s conception of *Jetztzeit*. Yet if Benjamin’s backward-looking angel of history is ultimately the enactor of a “weak redemption” that allows that historical moment in all of its revolutionary contingency to break through in the present, Adorno and Horkheimer ask us instead to inhabit the uncertainty of such historical moments in all their unredeeming incoherence.

British Romanticism supplied us with its own version of this attitude of dwelling with indeterminacy in Keats’s “*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”<sup>31</sup> We will see many similar versions of this posture in the French and American Romantics of this study, all of whom achieve it by forgoing the “guaranteed paths of redemption” of their historical milieu. To supplement Keats’s “fact and reason” after which those who are negatively *incapable* reach, we might add “hope.” One insight that I wish to offer in *Hopeless Romantics* is that negative thinking is thwarted not only by our

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<sup>30</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2011), 63.

<sup>31</sup> John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, vol. 1, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 193-194. For an illuminating exploration of the relationship between negative capability and the Frankfurt School, see Robert Kaufman, “Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* vol. 27, no. 2 (Winter 2001), 354-384.

desire to dispel confusion, as Keats implies, but also by our need to redeem ourselves—by whatever means necessary—from the pain and discomfort of hopelessness. Negative thinking, in other words, is not just a problem of thought, but a problem of affect; this is a knowledge felt more keenly by the Romantic poets of this study than it was by the members of the Frankfurt School. In any case, as Adorno and Horkheimer show us, the idea of thought as a “negative element” does not mean shutting oneself off from the hope of redemption *per se*; rather, one must remain skeptical of, if not wholly opposed to, the forms of redemption that the philosophy of history—as written by its victors—has rendered *intelligible* as redemption. Hope, if we think of it as fundamentally tied to a futural projection, is barely recognizable in this context—a hope beyond hope. If it exists, it is identical to the negation of the present moment in all its horror—taking notice of the chimeras at our backs and throwing them off.

#### iv. the romantic redemption myth

Romanticism, of course, has its own myths, in which “nature” almost unfailingly plays a key role. While the fantasy of alienated Enlightenment is the domination of nature, Romanticism often counters it with a fantasy of regeneration *through* nature. If Adorno and Horkheimer did not go so far as to edify us on Romanticism’s myths, fortunately the seminal Romanticist criticism of Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, M.H. Abrams, and Geoffrey Hartman did just that. In his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Frye analyzed and enumerated the many structural myths undergirding Western literature, including, most relevant for our purposes, the genre of romance. For Frye, “the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality.”<sup>32</sup> In *A Study of English Romanticism* (1968), Frye applied this insight to the Romantic movement as a whole, with special attention to its resonances with the “encyclopedic myth” of Biblical interpretation that he had expounded upon first in the *Anatomy*. The encyclopedic myth can be boiled down to the Christian narrative in which there is first an Edenic unity of God, humanity, and nature, followed by a fall from that harmonious state, followed by a triumphal reintegration of humanity, God, and nature brought about first by the sacrificial redeeming agent of Christ, and second by the apocalyptic Second Coming foretold in the Book of Revelations.

In an opinion echoed by Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), Frye understands Romanticism to be in part a secular humanist internalization of this religious myth, a “recovery of projection” in which the poet seizes a heretofore externalized “divine” power, now imparted to himself primarily, but also inherent in nature.<sup>33</sup> What had once been a literal idea of Eden is now metaphorized as “an original identity between the individual man and nature,” and the “fall” is attributed to “the original sin of self-consciousness,” which separates humanity from nature by inscribing relationship between them into the terms of subject and object, respectively (*CW* 103). What Frye terms “the Romantic redemption myth” hinges upon the dream of a “reintegration with nature” that replaces the idea of a lost paradise to be recovered with “an unborn world, a pre-existent ideal” (*CW* 103). The redeeming agent of this myth becomes the poet with his transformative faculty of imagination, undertaking a “quest of identity” whose direction “tends increasingly to be downward and inward, toward a hidden basis or ground of identity between man and nature” (*CW* 114). This, Frye concludes, is Romanticism’s unique and innovative take on the *romance* form, the theme of which is the attainment of an “expanded consciousness...of an apocalyptic vision by a fallen but potentially regenerate mind” (*CW* 117). As we will see, the writings of François René de Chateaubriand, the

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<sup>32</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193.

<sup>33</sup> Northrop Frye, *Collected Works*, vol. 17 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 100. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *CW*.



veritable founder of French Romanticism, translates the “fall” of alienated consciousness into the Enlightenment as a concrete historical moment, thus illustrating precisely how Frye’s Romantic redemption myth can manifest as a historical reaction formation. Frye notes that this process is far from finished: “Romanticism, thus considered, is the first major phase in an imaginative revolution which has carried on until our own day, and has by no means completed itself yet” (*CW* 101).

Bloom and Abrams expand on Frye’s Romantic redemption myth even as they differ from his assessment in significant respects. In contrast with Frye, who holds social utopia to be an integral part of the transformative vision of Romantic redemption, Bloom assesses Romanticism as “the internalization of quest romance,” stressing the inward nature of Frye’s “imaginative revolution”: “The Romantic movement is from nature to the imagination’s freedom (sometimes a reluctant freedom), and the imagination’s freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction but destructive of the social self.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Bloom holds, the Romantics, including Wordsworth, were not truly “questing for unity with nature” but rather for an internalized vision of nature transfigured (10). In his expansive *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams focuses on the Christian apocalyptic myth as a source of inspiration to Romantic-era poets and philosophers alike. In his account, Romanticism can indeed be understood as a reaction to the Enlightenment, a dialectical adjustment to both the gains and losses of humanism and rationalism, a secularizing enterprise characterized by “the resolve to give up what one was convinced one had to give up of the dogmatic understructure of Christianity, yet to save what one could save of its experiential relevance and values.”<sup>35</sup> Tracing the history of the successive internalization of the apocalyptic vision in Christian psycho-biography, Abrams shows the movement from religious yearning for a paradise that will *replace* the natural world to an allegorized vision of the “paradise” of the soul’s eventual salvation to, finally, in the case of Wordsworth, “the re-creation of the world which an individual mind can accomplish here and now” (*NS* 56). Essential to this account is the idea that, for Romantics such as Wordsworth and Blake, the means to this “re-creation” is an expansion of the senses, a receptivity to the wonders of the natural world in its immanent presence, as it already *is*. True to the title of his comprehensive study, Abrams concludes that the Romantics “naturalize the supernatural and...humanize the divine” (*NS* 68).

I rehearse these accounts rather extensively here not to imply that the idea of the Romantic redemption myth is adequate to explain the entirety of the intellectual and historical formation of Romanticism, nor to endorse the aforementioned critics’ readings of Romantic poetry and philosophy as the “correct” ones. They are, however, particularly compelling interpretations of, and points of entry into, the enormous body of texts we now consider under the rubric of “Romanticism.” Moreover, they cover an array of the themes broached thus far: the centrality of the concept of “nature” to Romanticism, the idea of Romanticism as a kind of philosophy of history that counters (yet, as Abrams shows, also dovetails with) that of Enlightenment, and the centrality of *hope* in any overarching theory of Romanticism. As Abrams remarks with respect to this last point, Romanticism can be viewed through the lens of a “widespread shift in the bases of hope” (*NS* 65), and hope, he opines, is also at the center of the Christian worldview: “[A]s Paul and other early propagandists pointed out, the immense advantage of the Christian scheme as against competing schemes [is this]: paganism is hopeless, but Christianity gives man hope; hope is not only an obligation but also a reward of Christian faith” (*NS* 37). If this is indeed the case, *Hopeless Romantics* will think not only against Abrams’s grand narrative of Romanticism, but also against Christianity itself.

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<sup>34</sup>Harold Bloom, “The Internalization of Quest Romance,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1970), 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>35</sup> Abrams, M.H.. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 68. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *NS*.

It is critical to understand, however, that such negative thinking occurs not *outside* this Christian redemptive framework, but immanently, from *within* it (this, we will see, is precisely Baudelaire's approach to theology). Just as Frye notes that the "imaginative revolution" tied to his Romantic redemption myth has yet to reach its completion, so too does Abrams speak of the ongoing relevance of the apocalyptic narrative he explicates: "If we...remain unaware of the full extent to which characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology...that is because we still live in what is essentially, although in derivative rather than direct manifestations, a Biblical culture, and readily mistake our hereditary ways of organizing experience for the conditions of reality and the universal forms of human thought" (*NS* 66-67). Given the framework provided by contemporary secularism studies—in which secularity is defined primarily as a number of *positive* practices, embodied dispositions, and state formations that together come to distinguish the religious from the non-religious—Colin Jager has justly criticized *Natural Supernaturalism* for equating secularization with the decline or transformation of explicitly religious *beliefs* and *ideas*.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, we might detect in Abrams's statement the grounds for a pluralist, non-universalizing theory of secularism in which the alleged religious neutrality of the "secular" West might be interrogated and questioned. In any case, if we are to agree with Abrams's sense that Christian apocalypticism structures the unconscious of thought in the West—and his sweeping study renders this sentiment rather convincing—then the critical task that lies ahead is not to find a conceptual realm untouched by the Romantic redemption myth, but rather to identify its presence in the Romantic texts at hand in order to find cracks and inconsistencies—the moments where, to echo Adorno and Horkheimer once again, the *necessity* of redemption in the "logical course of events" might be contested.

Abrams and Frye provide us *strong* theories of the romance at the heart of Romanticism, in the sense not only that they aim to elaborate an overarching, even universalizing structure, but also in the sense, following Eve Sedgwick's definition of *strong theory*, that we will always easily find evidence of their veracity if we are looking for it.<sup>37</sup> But, as Geoffrey Hartman has certainly shown us, it need not always be so. Hartman's reading of the *Prelude* revealed a Wordsworthian nature that indeed could provide renewal, but in a manner decidedly non-apocalyptic: in everyday intimations that do not take the form of revelatory or violent events, but rather enter obliquely into the psyche in a way as unexpected and unearned as divine Grace.<sup>38</sup> Responding directly to Frye's deeply structuralist *Anatomy of Criticism*, Hartman countered with the post-structuralist insight that "a myth mediates a discontinuity—winter, death, paradise lost, *temps perdu*—and its very movement, the narrative, is a series of bridges over a gulf."<sup>39</sup> Drawing on Frye's explication of romance, Hartman offered his own narrative of Romanticism's romance as being the movement from Nature (Eden) to Self-Consciousness (Fall) to Imagination (Redemption), but stressed that its "journey...does not lead to what is generally called a truth," and wrote of the "horror...and enchantment" that so often stalled

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<sup>36</sup> Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>37</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> See Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964). Anne-Lise François's *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), with its literary and theoretical explorations of grace and non-emphatic disclosure, offers us extended meditations on this aspect of Hartman's/Wordsworth's nature,

<sup>39</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "Structuralism: The Anglo-American Adventure" in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 3-23; 15.

and suspended the Romantic quest for reconciliation with nature.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, in an essay “The Poetics of Prophecy,” written in honor of Abrams, Hartman contested the sense of determinacy in Abrams’s apocalyptic account of Romanticism. He offered the prophetic—in its valence as an enigmatic and inscrutable message to be deciphered only from the vantage point of the future—as an alternative to the apocalyptic, the latter defined as “an anticipatory, proleptic relation to time, intensified to the point where there is at once desire for and dread of the end being hastened.”<sup>41</sup> Arguing that the apocalyptic mode had the potential to turn “against nature insofar as it participates in the temporal order,” Hartman’s reading of Wordsworth’s father’s death in the *Prelude* showed a link between hope and fulfillment that was “inarticulate, like nature itself,” defining Wordsworthian prophecy as that which “renew[s] time rather than hasten[ing] its end” (24). Dwelling with the suspension of hope as one possible technology for inviting the Wordsworthian “gentle shock of mild surprise,” *Hopeless Romantics* draws from this well of Hartman’s insights regarding the potential for gentling the Romantic redemption myth, or opening space within it.

As we have seen, the dilation of time and narrative causality is also a form fitting to the task of negative thinking prescribed by Adorno and Horkheimer. The method going forward will thus be one that seeks to dwell with moments where expectations are defied, where what is quested after—vitality, spiritual affirmation, a sense of unity, an “enchanted” or Edenic past, and of course, hope for the future—is not readily forthcoming. Its method will be to trace the romance of redemption across various historical formations and to find the weak spots, the moments when—especially in lyric poetry—the quest for redemption is dissolved, suspended, or set aside. Vital to our inquiry is Patricia Parker’s observation that the genre of romance always bears with it the potential for dilation and deferral: “when the end is not, typologically, an apocalyptic fulfillment but rather abyss or catastrophe... “romance” involves the dilation of a threshold rendered now both more precarious and more essential... For poets for whom the recovery of identity or the attainment of an end is problematic, or impossible, the focus may be less on arrival or completion than on the strategy of delay.”<sup>42</sup> Unsurprisingly for readers of this introduction, Parker counts Keats among the poets who adopt this strategy, noting in his letter on “Negative Capability” his “preference for a wise passivity over an impatient questing, for the openness of ‘speculation’ over the active pursuit of a predetermined object or end” (171).

## v. unredeeming nature

Readers by now may wonder why the *Romantic* schema of redemption, if it is not identical to the kind of historical redemption envisioned by “alienated enlightenment,” is worth resisting. One reason is that, as Kate Rigby, Luc Ferry, and Leo Lowenthal have each shown in separate instances, the ideological fantasy of a triumphant return to originary nature has undergirded projects of nationalism and imperialism in the nineteenth century, and fascism in the twentieth.<sup>43</sup> Yet this is not

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<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, “Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness,” in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 298-310; 307.

<sup>41</sup> “The Poetics of Prophecy” in Lawrence Lipking ed., *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M.H. Abrams* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 20. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>42</sup> Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 5.

<sup>43</sup> See Luc Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), Kate Rigby’s discussion of Heinrich Heine’s *History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* in “Romanticism and Ecocriticism,” Greg Garrard ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),

reason enough for dismissal, as the fantasies of return staged in such contexts are always to nature in its immediate state, untouched by a sense of history and unmediated by the dialectical operations of Hegel or, for that matter, Marx.

Rather than focusing on the myths that deploy “Nature” for obviously pernicious ends, my goal in *Hopeless Romantics* will be to examine how even projects of (seemingly) radical liberation often resort to the rhetoric of anthropocentric narcissism, symbolically erasing the presence of nonhuman nature in the quest for (self-) affirmation. Even a thinker as rigorous and critical as Karl Marx can exhibit such tendencies, and I would like to now trace a lineage from Marx to Ernst Bloch in order to illustrate why a theory of what I will call *unredeeming nature* is vital for a present defined by ecological crisis. Abrams’s take on Marx, based primarily on the “Romantic” Marx of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, provides us with the perfect occasion for understanding the problems posed by the Romantic redemption myth when it comes to the question of an entity called “Nature.” As Abrams notes, for the Marx of the *Manuscripts* capitalism has alienated humanity from nature by estranging the worker from the product of his labor, thus corrupting a human-nature relationship of subjective mediation in which humanity’s labor upon nature *humanized* nature. As a result, workers no longer “sensed” or experienced nature as such, since nature was now situated in the context of their domination and the extraction of their labor value. Abrams reads Marx’s idea of a “return” to communism, which had once been primitive and in the future will be “mature,” as an iteration of the Christian apocalyptic narrative: in this instance, the return to unalienated nature is identical to the advent of social revolution (NS 313-315).

Let us turn to Marx’s own language:

The *human* essence of nature first exists only for *social* man; for only here does nature exist for him as a *bond* with *man*—as his existence for the other and the other’s existence for him—as the life-element of the human world; only here does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence. Only here has what is to him his *natural* existence become his *human* existence, and nature become man for him. Thus society is the consummated oneness in substance of man and nature—the true resurrection of nature—the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfilment...

History itself is a *real* part of *natural history*—of nature’s coming to be man.<sup>44</sup>

In Leo Lowenthal’s appraisal of the fascist view of nature, nature comes to represent a kind of mystified divinity that overshadows humanity, such that “Nature’s timetable replaces the timetable of history.”<sup>45</sup> The implication to this mindset is that “man must expect a life without meaning unless he obediently accepts as his own what may be called the law of nature”—a law that is all too easily “interpreted” and implemented by authority. For the Marx of the *1844 Manuscripts*, on the other hand, it is just the opposite: nature is actualized and “resurrected” only by society within the context of human history. The rhetoric of “the naturalism of man” notwithstanding, there is a resolutely one-sided aspect to this dialectical relationship, in which the object of nature is ultimately assimilated to the subject of humanity in the name of “society,” with little to no dialectical reversal in sight. Though Adorno will develop his theory of non-identity through his engagement with Marx, it is also

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and Leo Lowenthal’s discussion of the popular twentieth-century Swedish novelist Knut Hamsen in *Literature and the Image of Man* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986).

<sup>44</sup> Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 85, 91. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *MR*.

<sup>45</sup> Leo Lowenthal, *Literature and the Image of Man* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), 194.

clear in this instance how Marx's thoughts on nature exhibit the Hegelian contours of "identity thinking."

When the early Marx is *not* writing nature into a story of humanity's redemption, nature is nonetheless similarly eclipsed. In *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx departs from the paradigm of the return to nature, but also goes so far as to seemingly declare that nature does not exist in itself independently from humanity's use of it:

[T]he important question of the relation of man to nature (Bruno goes so far as to speak of the 'antitheses in nature and history', as though these were two separate "things" and man did not always have before him an historical nature and a natural history) out of which all the 'unfathomably lofty works' on 'substance' and 'self-consciousness' were born, crumbles of itself when we understand that the celebrated 'unity of man with nature' has always existed in industry and has existed in varying forms in every epoch according to the lesser or greater development of industry, just like the 'struggle' of man with nature, right up to the development of his productive powers on a corresponding basis... For that matter, nature, the nature that preceded human history... today no longer exists anywhere (except perhaps on a few Australian coral-islands of recent origin)... (MR 170-171)

In the context in which this quotation appears, Marx's analysis does some conceptual work that is essential to building the theory of historical materialism. Critiquing the transhistorical continuity of Feuerbach's "sensuous certainty," Marx demythologizes nature, contesting the idea of some eternal nature "out there" that transcends history, including human history. By historicizing nature, he takes exactly the opposite approach from the fascist mystification of nature mentioned above. The demystification of transcendent nature will go on to inspire Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, who will see in the idea of "natural history" a venue for imagining the denaturalization of capitalist ideology's reification of the world in "second nature."<sup>46</sup> The passage, with its evocation of "a few Australian coral-islands" untouched by human history, also eerily anticipates Bill McKibben's declaration in *The End of Nature* that "nature" defined as an entity separate from humanity's influence has ended in the age of global climate change, as well as Dipesh Chakrabarty's articulation of the Anthropocene as the age in which the wall between human and natural history is permanently breached.<sup>47</sup> Despite the ideological demystification and prescient ecological insight inherent in this passage, however, it is also clear that Marx has written nature out of existence. If in the *1844 Manuscripts* unalienated nature marks the horizon of a resolutely social revolutionary dream, in *The German Ideology* it appears—deromanticized, we might say—as raw material to be transformed, a permanent object to the human subject of history.

In his three-volume magnum opus *The Principle of Hope*, Ernst Bloch, the twentieth century's most famous Marxian theorist of hope, recapitulates Marx's *overwriting* of nature along with his redemptive *rewriting* of nature in humanity's own image. *The Principle of Hope* is in part a historical compendium of images of "abstract utopias," visions that gesture toward a "not-yet." For Bloch, these utopias call our attention to the fact that history is unfinished business, that there is still much to be determined. Historical materialism is thus defined as a means of bringing about that future in the form of a "concrete" utopia. In all fairness to Bloch, his thought aims to annul the exploitative logics of

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<sup>46</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

<sup>47</sup> See McKibben, *The End of Nature* and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* vo. 35 (Winter 2009), 197-222.

technological capitalism, and he supplants Marx's resolutely humanist outlook with a utopian vision of true co-productivity, in which nature too attains the status of a subject of mediation acting on humanity.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, his reading of nature as a "cipher" presaging the utopian world-to-come speaks to the outcome of situating nature squarely within a redemptive schema, as "nature" at the end of *The Principle of Hope* attains the status of a site of an inexhaustible resource—*potential*:

Nature is capable of not only standing sideways-on to human ranks of purpose above all because it is anything but a bygone or a so-called residuum to the prehistory of man. It is not only the soil of man but also his lasting surroundings; it is certainly not a burnt-out ruin but rather the architecture for a drama that has not yet been performed. In all human history so far the drama that could completely transform nature into a bygone has at least not yet been played to its end; if human history has not yet dawned into brightness, then certainly nature has not yet done so through human history. Therefore nature, a nature which is not past but surrounds us on all sides and arches over us, with so much brooding, uncompletedness, meaning and cipher in it, *is not a bygone but morning land*.<sup>49</sup>

If above Marx had conceived of nature as the handmaiden of humanity's redemptive self-development and the object of human industry, here it is both and more. Nature plays a myriad of roles for humanity: its raw material, its holding environment, its stage, its horizon, its sidekick, and, most important of all, its enigmatic source of infinite hope. Though Bloch's focus is on nature as a site of indeterminacy, he assigns to it a list of predicates that define it first by its relationship to humanity and to humanity's *future*. This dreamy passage brings to mind Morton's critique of the idea of nature as *ambiance*, a "surrounding medium" in which misguided environmentalists wish to immerse themselves. So, too, by point of contrast, does Anahid Nersessian's notion of "utopia limited," which finds itself in "occasions when the human demand for a better world is matched by the recognition that the world can only take so much of human demands."<sup>50</sup> Bloch demands from nature precisely the hope for a better world, yet that demand is by definition limitless in *The Principle of Hope*. It takes little explication to show how the transformation of nature into the perpetual promise of redemption replicates the fantasy of endless resources consonant with the ongoing devastation of the Anthropocene era. The passage is likewise marked by a sense of futurity in which the idea of nature as a "burnt-out ruin" seems inconceivable, whereas it is certainly imaginable at present.

In the literature of the Romantic era, nature, as it does for Bloch, often served as "a guaranteed path of redemption," to once again echo Adorno and Horkheimer's language. But not exclusively so, to be sure. As an alternative to the fantasy of nature as a factory of redemption or a well of hope, I will ask readers of *Hopeless Romantics* to consider a Romantic literary (counter)tradition that reflects on nonhuman nature in all its unredeeming incapacity—its inability to promise futurity, to provide consolation, to meet endless demands, and to act as either the catalyst or the stage for humanity's self-fulfillment in history. If the early Marx had alternately subsumed "Nature" into the history of industry or written it into a narrative of triumphant humanism, many of his Romantic contemporaries did neither, attending to nonhuman nature as peripheral or interstitial to the stories humanity tells itself about its own self-development.

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<sup>48</sup> For a comprehensive yet accessible overview of Bloch's thought, see Paul Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 1353.

<sup>50</sup> Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 22.

The Marxian tradition, of course, is not absent these reflections on the autonomy of nature, as Adorno undertook the task of carving out a conceptual space for that which escapes conceptualization not just in the *negative* and in the *aesthetic*, but also in the realm of *non-identity*. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno offers a critique of Hegelian aesthetics, arguing that it represses the idea of natural beauty in order to champion the concept of freedom and human dignity. The result is alienation from all aspects of the world that are not co-extensive with the human subject: “in accord with this concept nothing in the world is worthy of attention except that for which the autonomous subject has itself to thank. The truth of such freedom for the subject, however, is at the same time unfreedom: unfreedom for the other.”<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, natural beauty still persists as the return of the repressed, “the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity” (73). According to Adorno, natural beauty is perceived in moments where it is not sought after, and in this sense “nature can in a sense only be seen blindly” (69). If natural beauty “withdraws from universal conceptuality,” nature also “by its expression...repels intentional humanization” (70, 74). For Adorno, art functions as a model for respecting nature’s autonomous aspect, its non-identity. Art does not seek to imitate nature *per se* but rather draws inspiration from nature’s mute “language” and strives to express its own parallel version of the nonconceptualized. It does so in a sense by turning *away* from nature, by adopting the impossible task of articulating in decidedly *human* terms the language of nature: “Mediate nature, the truth content of art, takes shape, immediately, as the opposite of nature...art exposes itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction...[within] the idea of making the mute eloquent” (78). The interpretations in *Hopeless Romantics* draw inspiration from this theory of the practice of aesthetics—and more specifically, *poetics*—as the art of letting nonhuman nature be.

By Adorno’s analysis, nature is elusive not because it resides in a transcendental or mystical space “out there,” but rather simply because it *exists* independently of our need for it. Just as artistic beauty depends on the presence of the nonconceptualized in the art object, the perception of natural beauty depends on the suspension of the concepts that mediate our relationship to nonhuman nature as an object of our *intention*. Likewise, in the absence, suspension, or interruption of the intention to redeem or find hope, nonhuman nature emerges in *Hopeless Romantics* as unredeeming, indifferent and unresponsive to humanity’s redemptive claims on it. My focus on this emergence, to be sure, is not to sanctify “Nature” as a unitary entity wholly set apart from human desires and aspirations, but rather to make a case for the ecological value of an awareness of the simple fact that (living) entities do exist independently of our psychic economy of hope and fulfillment. As I hope I have by now established, this same economy, despite the best intentions governing it, threatens to hasten the extinguishment of those entities.

## vi. feeling hopeless(ly)

As mentioned above, this study takes a number of lessons from queer and feminist theory, many of which allow me to fill out and feel out the affective dimensions of thinking negatively and of making space for non-identity. One such lesson is the value and the difficulty of the necessary task of thinking with and through negative feelings. In the essay in which he introduced the term “structures of feeling” to analyze the cognition of the historical present, Raymond Williams asked his readers to consider “not feeling against thought but thought as felt and feeling as thought.”<sup>52</sup> Following Williams, when queer and feminist theoretical inquiry has taken up the task of thinking against heteropatriarchal

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<sup>51</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 62. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>52</sup> Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 132.

ideology, it has often embraced negative affects—shame, grief, rage, resentment, dissatisfaction, failure, and dejection, to name just a few—that are policed either externally by heteronormativity and patriarchy or by *internal* demands for political efficacy (“ugly” feelings being counterproductive) or for a shared sense of progress, accomplishment, and pride. Refusing to always equate the negative with the bad, queer and feminist theory has instead demanded that negative feelings be taken seriously as constitutive elements of both identity and political action.<sup>53</sup> Central to these considerations is the idea that avoiding negative affect constrains our ability to think about the present and learn from the past, while dwelling with “bad” feelings can open up possibilities for imagining how things might be (or could have been) otherwise.

The queer critique of “futura” as a tool for enforcing political complacency has informed this study’s approach as well. In his polemic against “reproductive futurity,” Lee Edelman has made the “truly hopeless wager” that queer theory must insist on queerness’s negativity in the symbolic order, thus resisting all obligation to secure a future or promote a general good in a heteronormative social order whose fantasies “reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future.”<sup>54</sup> Though I do not follow Edelman’s path of steadfastly resisting the very idea of a future, my thinking going forward is often inspired by considerations that have occurred in the wake of *No Future*, including in critiques of it.<sup>55</sup> Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, for instance, interrogates “the ‘technologies of patience’ that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the now.”<sup>56</sup> Michael Snediker, meanwhile, has pointed to the need for a theory of optimism that is not promissory but “embedded in its own immanent present,” an optimism “along nonfutural lines.”<sup>57</sup> Responding to Edelman, Snediker asks, “why does rejection of a primary attachment to futurity...necessarily require the embodiment of negativity?” (24). Snediker’s point is well-taken: hopelessness as a nonfutural orientation is not necessarily visited by negative feelings, as many of the examples of hopeless Romantics going forward will show. Nevertheless, the feelings occasioned by a hopeless state are rarely if ever recognizable as joy, satisfaction, or pleasure—rather, when despair is absent, (non)feelings of indifference, ambivalence, and neutrality often abound. Indeed, feeling detached and/or neutral—topics explored extensively in the late lectures of Roland Barthes—will be central concerns in the chapters that follow on Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman.

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<sup>53</sup> Sarah Ahmed, for instance, has argued that the ideal of happiness as a goal must be interrogated and challenged in feminist thought because “feminism by refusing to go along with public displays of happiness can participate in the widening of horizons in which it is possible to find things” (Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010], 69). Heather Love, to offer another example, has warned against the historiographic desire to “redeem” the “difficulties of the queer past”: “By including queer figures from the past in a positive genealogy of gay identity, we make good on their suffering, transforming their shame into pride after the fact” (Heather K. Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007], 32).

<sup>54</sup> Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 5, 31.

<sup>55</sup> In the domain of queer theory, this dissertation will contrast perhaps most sharply with José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). Drawing much inspiration from Bloch’s writings, Muñoz defines queerness as “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* [New York: New York University Press, 2009], 1). Though I find Muñoz’s commitment to the utopian dimensions of queerness to be inspiring and edifying, I do not agree that futurity is necessary to thinking beyond the limits of the world *as is*. Indeed, the deferral allowed by the promise of a future may be exactly what renders the present a “quagmire.”

<sup>56</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 28

<sup>57</sup> Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2009), 2, 23.



Finally, this project is deeply indebted to Rei Terada's work on queer affect and its resistance to positivist modes of thinking and feeling. In *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, Terada argues that "Historically, it's queer consciousness that has sensed most keenly the moments when fact is ambiguously social or natural, and has had motive and energy to examine and reexamine even those pervasive conditions that seem most natural."<sup>58</sup> Given Adorno's propensity to allow for and justify the feeling of dissatisfaction, Terada counts him in the camp of those thinking against the false natural, a sentiment with which I obviously agree. That being said, I share, too, Terada's resistance against assuming *negation* to be the necessary outcome of dissatisfaction with the given. If Terada makes the case for an embrace of "mere" phenomenality that "rather than negating, declines to affirm," *Hopeless Romantics* explores similarly inflected modes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving which, in forgoing the agonism of affirmation and negation, make affective space for the non-identity of nonhuman nature in all its unredeeming neutrality (8).

Terada's commitment to theorizing affect beyond the well-trodden paths of psychic repair have likewise provided this study with a vocabulary of registering and dwelling in damage—a condition that hopelessness brings before it gets snuffed out by the many technologies of redemption. In "Hegel's Bearings," Terada offers a reading of Hegel's philosophy that could be described as an evaluation of the psychic and affective dimensions of what Adorno diagnosed as "identity thinking." Terada shows how Hegel's dialectics "bear with" the transition from one political disappointment to the next by integrating its outside into a philosophical system that neutralizes its demoralizing force, thus preserving the integrity of the subject while resisting (re)cognition of a world outside its boundaries. Hegel's philosophy, as an "inside that knows no outside," thus articulates "the horizonless condition of an antipolitical society that extends from the late Napoleonic era to our own."<sup>59</sup> As an alternative to this philosophical attitude of bourgeois self-enclosure, Terada offers what she describes as the "Romantic impasse," which consists of

further applications of theory [that] would depart from the potentialities that exist within the world "as is" and bring out more of what it is, and pass on to potentialities that don't exist and can only destroy. In nonpejorative language, these would be utopian potentialities that exist only outside or inside the existing world in a way that does destroy identity, and whose realization would *make it something altogether different*. (24)

Terada's notion of the Romantic impasse advocates the dissolution of any and all reified boundaries that, by reinforcing the subject's integrity or identity (or the notion of a subject at all, for that matter), allow the subject to "bear with" a transition whose qualities are always predetermined. As the disposition of the Romantic impasse facilitates an openness to the "further applications of theory" and "utopian potentialities" of which Terada speaks, it must necessarily also come at the cost of "feeling the full impact of political catastrophe" (27). In a different context, Terada writes similarly toward a theory of "ruined" life, a "life valued for its capacity to acknowledge the irrevocability of damage," a form of living (on) that she regards as fundamentally queer.<sup>60</sup> If Adorno—and before him,

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<sup>58</sup> Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9. Hereafter cited in text.

<sup>59</sup> Rei Terada, "Hegel's Bearings." *Romantic Circles (Praxis Series)*, 2011, <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/disaster/HTML/praxis.2012.terada.html> (accessed August 4, 2019), 24, 5. Hereafter cited in text.

<sup>60</sup> Rei Terada, "Living a Ruined Life: De Quincey Beyond the Worst?" *European Romantic Review*, 20:2 (April 2009), 177-186; 184.

the Romantics—offered us reflections on “damaged life,” Terada has provided us with an idea of the affective disposition in which such reflections are made possible.

### vii. hopeless romantics: chapter descriptions

The first chapter puts Gérard de Nerval’s novella *Sylvie* (1853) into conversation with François René de Chateaubriand’s *The Genius of Christianity* (1802), showing how Nerval critically reformulates Chateaubriand’s fantasy of restoring the receptivity to nature that allegedly preceded the disenchanting violence of Enlightenment. Nerval is known for his valorization of paganism, a fascination that critics have often understood as evidence of his desire for a return of pre-modern enchantment in the form of philosophical pantheism. I argue, instead, that Nerval writes such pre-modern enchantment in ruins: elusive, struck through with loss, and resistant to any claims to recapture or restore it. If Chateaubriand’s description of humanity as “a fallen edifice” gave literary form to the historical hopelessness characterizing the *mal du siècle*, Nerval transforms the figure of ruin into the sign of the permanent refusal of restorative fantasies. Nerval’s writings affirm a permanent alienation in the relationship between humanity and nature, they also modeling an anti-redemptive ecological ethos in which humanity must not look to nature as a means of recouping its own losses—the losses of modernity. On the contrary, human hopelessness is inscribed in nature, attesting to the irrevocable impact of human history (the history of Enlightenment, of capital) on the natural world.

The second chapter shows how the writings of Emily Dickinson resist the Transcendentalist ideal of redemptive unification with nature. If for Jonathan Edwards “the affair of redemption was to gather in one all things in Christ in heaven and on earth,”—a vision preserved in Emerson’s aspirations of restoring unity to the world by seeing it “in the light of thought,”—Dickinson favors the unredeeming vision of individual beings keeping their distance and maintaining their separateness. This amenability to separation extends to realms outside the human, such that Dickinson’s writings may be said to craft an image of the world in which a being’s value or meaning does not depend on its connection to a larger whole. Crucially, this does not mean that such beings do not maintain valuable connections between each other; to the contrary, Dickinson portrays the setting aside of any theoretical totality as a reinforcement of the meaningful connections that beings establish with one another. Drawing on a term from a now famous 1862 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, I refer to this mode of relation as *companionship*. By putting intellectual history into conversation with close readings of her poems, I show how Dickinson challenges Transcendentalism’s love affair with Coleridge’s faculty of Reason, which incorporates finite pieces into universal and absolute consciousness. Rather than grasping toward an ever-expanding and all-encompassing poetic vision—one in which nature, God, and humanity blend into systematic harmony—Dickinson’s poems stage the impasses of integration and communion. Dickinson’s companionship thus offers the unredeeming basis for an ecological mode of consciousness that, like Nerval’s ruined pastoral, refuses to find in nature the promise of a return to originary integrity.

Against our common understanding of Walt Whitman as a redemptive prophet of pleasure, the third chapter explores the eco-poetics of what I call “limp Whitman,” an iteration of the poet who dilates or surrenders the self not to take in or to amplify pleasure, nor to masochistically dissolve the self, but rather to attenuate the demands he places on the earth and on his own body. To do so means giving up hope, abandoning fantasmatic scenes in which nonhuman nature will proffer pleasure for the poet’s body while conferring meaning on his writings. Through close analysis of the poems “Song of the Rolling Earth” (1856) and “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” (1860), I argue that the topos of limpness allows the poet to express the intricacies of slackening the will-to-pleasure’s hold on nonhuman nature. As he feels himself dissolve into the meaningless

“writings” of the earth, states of inanimacy and even death become his only point of comparison. The loss of self in this instance, however, exhibits none of the “shattering” *jouissance* that certain strains of queer theory have come to associate with the death drive. Instead, the poem offers a dedramatized account of death as *going limp*, attaining a state of numbing banality devoid of pain, pleasure, and meaning. In the gesture of releasing the self from the demands of a hopeful disposition, the speaker in turn releases his claim on the earth as a means by which the (human, poetic) self may be affirmed or negated.

The fourth and final chapter opens with considerations of contemporary environmentalist reflections on how one might register and respond to the massive loss engendered by ongoing damage to the planet. I show how, very presciently, a century and a half before these environmental thinkers, Charles Baudelaire and his greatest literary influence, Edgar Allan Poe, theorized a poetics of transience, believing that the value of poetry was fundamentally tied to an acknowledgement of mortality and human limits. In an era when, both in France and the United States, Enlightenment narratives of progress and human sovereignty dominated, these writers placed death, decay, and human *vanitas* at the center of their work. Baudelaire’s aesthetic theory and (a)theological thinking provide us with a worldview fit for inhabiting a planet that is permeated by loss, as they exhibit a commitment to thinking and living without redemption, of inhabiting a world that is at once alien and familiar, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, alive and dead.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Nature Ruined in Nerval and Chateaubriand

#### i) introduction: the (natural) history of ruins

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in France, the ruin comes to represent the failed aspirations of human history, allowing Romantic writers to register and express the damage that comes with the failure of revolutionary ideals to manifest themselves. Throughout the tedious and disappointing cycle of revolution and restoration in the French nineteenth century (the 1799 coup, the 1815 Restoration, the 1830 July Revolution, the second republic in the wake of the 1848 revolution, and, following that, the coup and establishment of the Second Empire), meditation on ruins allowed French Romantics to contemplate such disappointment without immediately resorting to repair, which too often recycles the political forms and gestures of a stagnant past—a problem Marx identified in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* when he made his famous pronouncement that the revolutions of the nineteenth century must “let the dead bury the dead.”<sup>1</sup> This fascination with the ruin is inherited by two generations of French Romantic writers. Viewing post-Revolutionary France as faced with an impasse (the inability to transform the world into accordance with one’s values, political or otherwise; the inability to comprehend history as taking the form of something that resembles “progress”), François René de Chateaubriand offered to his progeniture the ruin as his preferred metaphor to describe a fallen humanity: “man is but a fallen edifice, the rubble of sin and death : his tepid love, his weak faith, his limited charity, his incomplete sentiments, his insufficient thought, his broken heart, everything about him is ruins alone” [*l’homme n’est lui-même qu’un édifice tombé, qu’un débris du péché et de la mort: son amour tiède, sa foi chancelante, sa charité bornée, ses sentiments incomplets, ses pensées insuffisantes, son coeur brisé, tout chez lui n’est que ruines*].<sup>2</sup> Yet if the ruin takes on metaphysical significance in this instance, in another it is deeply historical. In Chateaubriand’s *René*, the titular character, in the period of his exile from France, expresses this condition by way of the ruin: “the past and the present are two incomplete statues: one has been pulled mutilated from the wreckage of the ages, the other has not yet received the fulfillment of the future” [*le passé et le présent sont deux statues incomplètes: l’une a été retirée toute mutilée du débris des âges; l’autre n’a pas encore reçu sa perfection de l’avenir*].<sup>3</sup>

At the opening of his novella *Sylvie* (1853), Nerval writes of a recent historical past by deploying a temporality of ruin:

We were then living in a strange period, one of those eras that usually follow in the wake of revolutions or the declines of great reigns. But its hallmark was no longer the heroic gallantry of the Fronde, the stylish vice of the Regency, or the skepticism and outlandish debauchery of the Directory. It was instead a mixture of activity, hesitation, and indolence, an assortment of dazzling Utopias, religious or philosophic aspirations, vague enthusiasms and dim intimations of renaissance in which a general weariness with the discords of the past was blended with ill-defined hopes for the future...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978, 597).

<sup>2</sup> François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme Vol. 2* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 42. Translation mine.

<sup>3</sup> François René de Chateaubriand, *Atala, René, Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 174. Translation mine.

<sup>4</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1999), trans. Richard Sieburth, 146. All subsequent English citations are from this edition. “Nous vivions alors dans une époque étrange, comme celles qui

In his description of the strange and disorienting temporality of the age, Nerval inscribes *Sylvie* within an already well-worn mode of Romantic writing in which the quasi-autobiographical narrator's personal suffering is explained as symptomatic of a generational illness. This malaise is characterized by a sense of uncertainty and incompleteness accompanied by the melancholic's acute awareness of the disjunction between one's wishes (spiritual, political, artistic, romantic) and the possibilities for their fulfillment in the sphere of material reality. Musset's novel *La Confession d'un enfant de siècle* (1836), was the first text to give this illness its name of the *mal du siècle*, making explicit its ties to the succession of disappointments (and traumas) that follow both the Revolution and the First Empire. It is in such a context of "vague enthusiasms and dim intimations of renaissance," that the narrator senses that history is repeating itself and yet is in need of being revived—although both *what* is to be revived, and in what manner, remains an open question. In other words, the repetition of the past presents both the problem and its solution. The wounds of the past continue to open, even as the present looks backwards for a remedy for its own disillusionment. Accordingly, the narrator will place the present in the category of "periods of renewal *or* decline" [*époques de rénovation ou de décadence*], highlighting a historical condition in which decay and restoration remain indistinguishable (146, 21).

In *Aurélia* (1855), the ruin speaks to an altered metaphysical condition that is nonetheless tied to a history—the history of enlightenment. Halfway through the narrative, the narrator remarks:

I have never been able to find relief in that school of philosophy which merely supplies us with maxims of self-interest or, at the most, of reciprocity, leaving us nothing but empty experience and bitter doubts. Such a philosophy combats our moral sufferings by deadening our sensibility; like the surgeon it knows only how to cut out the organ which is causing the pain. But for us, born in an age of revolutions and upheavals which shattered all beliefs, raised at best to practice a vague religion based on a few outward observances and whose lukewarm devotion is perhaps more sinful than impiety or heresy, for us things become quite difficult whenever we feel the need to reconstruct that mystic temple whose edifice the pure and simple of spirit accept fully traced within their hearts. "The Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life!" And yet can we rid our mind of all the good or evil implanted in it by many intelligent generations? Ignorance cannot be learned.<sup>5</sup>

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d'ordinaire succèdent aux révolutions ou aux abaissements des grands règnes. Ce n'était plus la galanterie héroïque comme sous la Fronde, le vice élégant et paré comme sous la Réfence, le scepticisme et les folles orgies du Directoire; c'était un mélange d'activité, d'hésitation et de paresse, d'utopies brillantes, d'aspirations philosophiques ou religieuses, d'enthousiasmes vagues, mêlés de certains instincts de renaissance; d'ennuis des discords passés, d'espoirs incertains. » Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie* (Paris : Gallimard, 2005), 20-21.

<sup>5</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1999), trans. Richard Sieburth, 291. "[J]e n'en ai jamais pu trouver dans cette philosophie qui ne nous présente que des maximes d'égoïsme ou tout au plus de réciprocité, une expérience vaine, des doutes amers ;--elle lutte contre les douleurs morales en anéantissant la sensibilité ; pareille à la chirurgie, elle ne sait que retrancher l'organe qui fait souffrir.—Mais pour nous, nés dans des jours de révolutions et d'orages, où toutes les croyances ont été brisées—élevés tout au plus dans cette foi vague qui se contente de quelques pratiques extérieures, et dont l'adhésion indifférente est plus coupable peut-être que l'impunité et l'hérésie,--il est bien difficile, dès que nous en sentons le besoin, de reconstruire l'édifice mystique dont les innocents et les simples admettent dans leurs cœurs la figure toute tracée. « L'arbre de science n'est pas l'arbre de vie ! » Cependant, pouvons-nous rejeter de notre esprit ce que tant de générations intelligentes y ont versé de bon ou de funeste ? L'ignorance ne s'apprend pas. » (Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Brix and Claude Pichois [Paris : Gallimard, 1989] 788-89)

He elaborates a conundrum that arises with the birth of French Romanticism: what happens to the “heart” or to “sensibility” in the aftermath of the twin traumas of modernity: the Enlightenment (*philosophie*) and revolution? Once again we encounter the figure of humanity yearning for a “reconstruction” of sorts – here of the “*édifice mystique*” that ostensibly still sits intact in the hearts of the blissfully naïve segment of its populace. But how to achieve such reconstruction? What is clear is that the solution is not homeopathy: the materialist philosophy of the eighteenth century cannot effectively heal the wounds it has wrought; cutting out an organ plagued with false belief and convention does not entail its replacement. And yet the aftereffects of this philosophy cannot be dispensed with—in a dark inversion of homeopathy, the only ostensible cure promotes the disease, and the solution, it seems, is to escape the logic of treatment altogether. In the impossible task of “learning” ignorance, in forgetting the knowledge that one was ever sick, lies the only cure.

In contrast with *Sylvie*, in which the narrator dwells persistently in the existential and temporal mode of the ruin even as he tries to escape the ruined historical present, the narrator of *Aurélia* seeks the most viable source of hope for restoration at his fingertips. In the following paragraphs he struggles with his own desire to theorize an actionable and achievable form of reconstruction, ultimately finding hope in a comprehensive vision in which science and belief are fused into a syncretic humanist religion: “I have higher hopes in the goodness of God: we may be well approaching that era when science, as predicted, having accomplished its entire cycle of synthesis and analysis, of belief and negation, will now be able to purify itself and usher forth the miraculous city of the future from chaos and ruin... (291).”<sup>6</sup> Here is a Providential vision in which no ruin is left behind; rather, what “philosophy” has left in fragments, “science” will absorb and transform in its act of self-purification; knowledge no longer leaves the world in ruins, but rather restores the ruined world to a state of utopia. In a remarkably Hegelian turn, the narrator comes to the belief that this science (in using the word, Nerval undoubtedly means to invoke the German *Wissenschaft* against the French materialist *philosophie*), promises to unite Enlightenment reason with the remainders of the “shattered...beliefs” [*croyances...brisées*] left behind by dechristianization (290, 789). After a brief hiatus in which the narrator hesitates to violate a code of Christian humility, he turns to an acquisitive, even Faustian mode of engagement with the world, recalling his research into the kabbalah and other “revelations of the past” and aspiring to amalgamate “everything the human mind had amassed” in order to unlock the mysteries of the “external world” as they have been deposited in the world’s religions (291). Later he describes this epistemological task succinctly: “My role, it seemed to me, was to re-establish universal harmony by cabbalistic arts and to discover a solution by summoning up the occult powers of the various religions” (306). The ambition for comprehensive knowledge is what animates *Aurélia* as a text, as the loss of the title character, the narrator’s personal Eurydice, sets into motion his quest to access the secrets of the “external world,” a term which designates simultaneously the afterlife, the mysterious realm of supernatural and divine forces, and the unconscious. To rescue Aurélia from this great beyond, then, the narrator takes on a reparative disposition, aiming to recover and decipher the mysteries of the past: “let us recover the lost letter or the effaced sign, let us recompose the dissonant scale and we shall acquire power in the spirit world” (291). For the narrator, rescuing Aurélia is tied to a quest for mastery and power through knowledge of the enchanted world of the occult.

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<sup>6</sup> J’ai meilleur espoir de la bonté de Dieu: peut-être touchons-nous à l’époque predate où la science, ayant accompli son cercle entire de synthèse et d’analyse, de croyance et de negation, pourra s’épurer elle-même et faire jaillir du désordre et des ruines la cité merveilleuse de l’avenir.” (789). I take this term of “syncretism” regarding this particular passage from Henri Lemaître, n2p789 of *Gérard de Nerval, Oeuvres Complète, Tome 1*.



With respect to this epistemological drive, Nerval's narrator is very much exemplary of the intellectual *Zeitgeist* of mid-nineteenth century France. A desire to amass and decode the supernatural mysteries of the ancient past as well as those of cultural others dominated the discourses of illuminism, neo-paganism, and idealist philosophy as well as the ostensibly more scientific disciplines of Orientalist philology and the nascent study of comparative religions. A belief common throughout these discourses was that all of the world's myths and religions constituted "the transitory and progressive forms of a single eternal truth."<sup>7</sup> In some instances, such as that of Catholic priest and philosopher Hugues Felicité Robert de Lamennais, that truth is Christianity, so that all other religions are rendered intuitions of the "universal" truth of that religion.<sup>8</sup> In other cases, such as poets like Lamartine and Nerval himself, lies the syncretic dream that the mysteries of all religions can be assembled into a modern universal faith—one that will actually come to replace Christianity in the West—uniting all forms of knowledge regarding divine mysteries. As D.G. Charlton notes in his *Secular Religions in France 1815-1870*, this notion of a pluralistic utopian occultism, "although...[it] has distinct leanings towards both pantheism and syncretism and always departs from Catholic orthodoxy to a greater or lesser extent, [bears] similarities to Christianity [that] are obvious, particularly in the doctrines of man's Fall and future redemption" (128). In other words, the presumption undergirding the occultism to which Nerval was drawn is a Romantic redemption myth in which an original unity has been lost and may be restored through the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge. The narrator's reference to the Tree of Knowledge early in the passage from *Aurélia* above, of course, registers his hesitation in embracing the idea that it is *knowledge* that would restore the original integrity of fallen man, but such hesitation quickly drops off as the occultist quest for knowledge takes on Messianic *gravitas*.

Though *Aurélia*, in its eager embrace of the occultist will-to-power/knowledge, passes hastily onward from its humble acknowledgement of the vanity (in both senses of the word) of human self-redemption, *Sylvie*, written two years earlier, lingers with baroque *vanitas*, meditating on the futility of seeking a lost plenitude that might, in some way, be restored. *Sylvie*, in other words, is a text of hopeless Romanticism, and it will serve as this chapter's anchor. French Romanticist scholar Paul Bénichou described Gérard de Nerval's generation of writers as the apotheosis of French

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<sup>7</sup> D.G. Charlton, *Secular Religions in France 1815-1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963),140. For a comprehensive study of Nerval's work with respect to the intellectual and cultural climate of occultism outlined in Charlton, see Kari Lokke, *Gérard de Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary* (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa's study of the emergence of the discourse of "comparative religions" or "world religions" in nineteenth-century Europe and the U.S. delineates the imperialist presumptions and aspirations undergirding this field of study—particularly its attachment to the idea of universality. For instance, Masuzawa identifies a predecessor of the study of world religions in "comparative theology," which attempts to theorize an Absolute Religion, of which Christianity is always the closest analogue and against which all other religions are relegated to an epistemological past, a collective category of failed particular attempts at striving toward the ostensibly universal truths of Christianity. This normative discourse has its secular counterparts as well: surveying Hegel, Tylor, Frazer, Comte, Lessing, Hume and others on the idea of a world history of religion, Masuzawa argues that, whether it is Protestant Christian consciousness overcoming itself or science overcoming superstition in favor of an objective grasp on reality, "the universal principle that guarantees the unity of the world, or the world as totality, ultimately comes to prevail as a direct extension of European Christianity, or Europe as (erstwhile) Christendom"(Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005]). Taking into account the work of Masuzawa, Talal Asad, and Said among others, Gil Anidjar argues that this model for a pluralistic universalism is synonymous with secularism itself in "Secularism," *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (Autumn 2006): 52-77

Romanticism because they transformed the “refusal of hope as a passing moment or suspension of the conscience” maintained by earlier Romantics into “a pure state....a permanent and resolute mode of being.”<sup>9</sup> *Sylvie*, with its hopeless dilation of pastoral romance convention, certainly adopts this position, as it critically unravels the idea of a return to an “enchanted” state of nature preceding the disenchanting violence of both Christianity and Enlightenment. Nerval is known for his valorization of paganism, a fascination that some have understood as evidence of his desire for a return of pre-modern enchantment in the form of philosophical pantheism. I argue, instead, that Nerval writes such pre-modern enchantment *in* and *as* ruins: elusive, struck through with loss, and resistant to any claims to recapture or restore it. In doing so, Nerval models an anti-redemptive ecological ethos in which humanity cannot and should not look to nature as a means of recouping its own losses—the losses of modernity. On the contrary, there is no alternative to the ruined life: human hopelessness is inscribed in nature, attesting to the irrevocable impact of human history on the natural world.<sup>10</sup>

By writing this natural history of hopelessness, *Sylvie* departs from the redemptive “re-enchantment” myth we see embraced at the opening of *Aurélia*. If this myth takes the form of a bookish occultism in *Aurélia*, in *Sylvie* it is characterized by a desire to return to an immediate state of nature untouched (it would seem) by historical change. In this, Nerval follows Chateaubriand, whose *Genie du Christianisme* (1802) posited an unmediated, enchanted nature as precisely the force needed to drive forward a redemptive program—in his case, the triumphant return of Christianity after revolutionary dechristianization. Following and defying Chateaubriand, Nerval’s work takes up the palingenetic aspirations of Romanticism—its desire for rebirth, regeneration, restoration, and recuperation—only to subject them to the disappointing and unfulfilling status of permanent ruin. And yet from Chateaubriand, too, Nerval inherits the *ruin* as a figure that allows for the dilation of the romance of redemption, a site in which nature emerges in the cracks of humanity’s grand narratives. Nature-in-ruins thus captures both the demythologizing power of a proto-Benjaminian “natural history” and the inflection of nature as non-identity, as an entity not reducible to *merely* the substrate of a history in which humanity is the (re)agent. To understand this inheritance which is also a point of departure, let us now turn to Chateaubriand’s *Genius of Christianity*, which articulates a complex reactionary redemption myth that also comes to serve as the conceptual framework in which much of French Romanticism operates—even as it also provides the poetics of ruin by means of which that myth comes unraveled.

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Bénichou, *Romantismes français II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 1705. Translation mine.

<sup>10</sup> Here and in this chapter as a whole I am very much indebted to Rei Terada’s essay, “Living a Ruined Life: De Quincey Beyond the Worst” *European Romantic Review*, 20:2 (April 2009), 177-186. Analyzing De Quincey’s reaction to the death of his sister Elizabeth, Terada argues that De Quincey exhibits a nonpathological orientation toward loss that rejects the “redemptive or diffusely ameliorative schemes that would seek to repair or recontextualize its impact” (181). Through her engagement with De Quincey, Terada theorizes the possibility of living a ruined life, a “life valued for its capacity to acknowledge the irrevocability of damage.” (184), a form of living (on) that she regards as fundamentally queer.

## ii) enchantment in ruins in Chateaubriand

*L'aspect d'un champ de blé ou d'un coteau de vigne ne vous donnerait pas d'aussi fortes émotions, que la vue de cette terre dont la culture moderne n'a pas rajeuni le sol, et qui est demeurée antique comme les ruines qui la couvrent.*<sup>11</sup>

—François René de Chateaubriand, letter to Fontanes

[A]ll ruins...[reveal] that the world is constructed. . . .and as such susceptible to unmaking or deconstruction. Modernity begins with this corrosively denaturalizing insight.

—Rebecca Comay, Mourning Sickness

Chateaubriand rewrites modern history within a revivalist narrative framework that assumes the return of reinvigorated Christianity as the telos of human history. In this grand narrative, historical loss is unfailingly translated into eventual gain, and the losers of history are portrayed only as temporarily embarrassed victors. What would appear from the standpoint of the *Lumières* as a return to superstition and irrationality is instead, from the perspective of Christian revivalism, recast as a form of enlightenment, and the Enlightenment proper is cast as a form of idolatry, superstition, and dead convention. In the introduction to the *Génie du Christianisme*, Chateaubriand portrays Christianity as the religion of an enlightened humankind, effectively recasting the *siècle des Lumières* as an historical aberration, a reactionary movement holding back the true progress of the human spirit that is the history of Christianity. Chateaubriand thus casts Voltaire, his *bête noire*, in the role of a modern-day Julian persecuting a Christendom that will undoubtedly triumph. He inverts the terms of the Enlightenment detractors of Christianity, who heretically regarded the religion as “a barbarous system whose fall could not come too soon for the liberty of mankind, the progress of knowledge, the pleasantries of life, and the elegance of the arts.”<sup>12</sup> In their return to neoclassicism and their figural deployment and valorization of the old gods of Roman and Greek antiquity, the *Lumières* had abandoned the civilizational advancement that was the embrace of Christian monotheism, and thus were nothing more than a “band of madmen, of impudents, or wild beasts” [*un troupeau d'insensés, d'impudiques, ou de bêtes féroces*] (56). By drawing a parallel between the ancient history of what we have come to know as “monotheistic disenchantment”<sup>13</sup> and the recent history of

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<sup>11</sup> “The sight of a field of wheat or of a vineyard would not provoke as strong emotions in you, as the view of earth of which modern culture has not rejuvenated the soil, and which remains antique like the ruins that cover it.” Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> [un système barbare dont la chute ne pouvait arriver trop tôt pour la liberté des hommes, le progrès des lumières, les douceurs de la vie, et l'élégance des arts]. François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 55. Hereafter cited in text. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>13</sup> In using this term I have in mind such speculative histories as Max Weber's in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which Weber posits that Protestant disenchantment constitutes the “logical conclusion” of a much older “great historic process in the development of religions” dating back to the Hebrew prophets and to Hellenistic thought (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Richard Swedberg ed [New York: Norton, 2009], 53). Following Weber, contemporary theorists of secularization such as Marcel Gauchet and Charles Taylor have adopted Karl Jaspers's idea of an “Axial Age” (the era of the positing of transcendence exhibited by the rise of both monotheism and Platonic thought) and traced its disenchanting influence as essential to the development of secular modernity. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.) For a psychoanalytically inclined theorization of the development of monotheistic disenchantment as constitutive of the modern ethical subject (rooted, of course, in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*) see Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton, “The Subject of Religion: Lacan and the Ten Commandments,” *Diacritics* 33.3 (2003): 71-97.

the Enlightenment and Revolutionary dechristianization, Chateaubriand depicts the triumph of Christianity over its detractors as a historical inevitability. In doing so, he trumps the *Lumières* in the sense that his narrative of the recapitulation of the victory of Christians over pagans, humanity over beasts, presents itself as the true history of Enlightenment.

Chateaubriand's rewriting of history involves a Providential narrative in which Christianity, chastened by the historical traumas of Enlightenment and Revolutionary dechristianization, arises all the more enlightened as the victorious protagonist. As one commentator notes, Chateaubriand's agenda in the *Génie* is "nothing less than a total reappropriation of world history" that casts Christianity as the "presiding 'genius' of the universe."<sup>14</sup> The work as a whole, in its epic proportions and its writing of Christianity's triumphant post-Revolutionary return, might be conceived as one example of the "epic of redemption" that Paul Bénichou argues is central to the counter-revolutionary literary imagination.<sup>15</sup> Deploying the prototype of the apocalyptic redemption narrative,<sup>16</sup> Chateaubriand casts Christianity as the subject of history: "The degenerate world requires a second preaching of the gospel; Christianity, in renewed vigor, is rising victorious over the most tremendous assault that the infernal powers ever made upon her. Who knows if what we have taken for the fall of the Church be not her re-establishment? She was declining in the enjoyment of luxury and repose; she forgot the cross: the cross has again appeared, and she will be saved."<sup>17</sup> This historical "epic of redemption" lends itself readily to a politics of Restoration, for, as Bénichou argues, this tale of the triumphant resurrection of the Christian faith finds its political analog in the compromise formation of an aristocratic and bourgeois elite who wishes to see a return of something of the old order while also registering that return as modified and tempered by some of the values that the Revolution had put in place.<sup>18</sup> Thus the narrative of Christianity's exile and return doubles as the self-conceptualization of the Restoration-to-come, subsuming the historical present of the French nation into a trans-historical Christian allegory.

Crucial to this story of Christianity's triumphant return is the idea that Christianity can bear with and endure through the disenchantment of Enlightenment and, in doing so, refine or reinforce its own forms of enchantment with nature. Consonant with the idea of Christianity as a historical entity that will undergo apotheosis not in spite of, but because of the determinate negation that is the French Revolution, the *Génie* submits Christianity as a cultural totality to the standards of Enlightenment reason as a means of reinforcing its supremacy. Accordingly, rather than writing a traditional apology grounded in debates around theology, Chateaubriand conceives of the *Génie* as a humanistic endeavor:

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Prickett, *Origins of Narrative: the Romantic appropriation of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 170.

<sup>15</sup> See Paul Bénichou, *Le Sacre de l'Écrivain, 1750-1830, Essai sur l'avènement d'un pouvoir spirituel laïque dans la France moderne*, in *Romantisme Français I* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2004), 138.

<sup>16</sup> See the introduction to this dissertation for more on this narrative, but here is a succinct recap of Abrams's formulation: "[The Romantics] radically...recast, into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise." M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 29.

<sup>17</sup> « Le monde dégénéré appelle une seconde prédication de l'Évangile; le Christianisme se renouvelle, et sort victorieux du plus terrible des assauts que l'Enfer lui ait encore livrés. Qui sait si ce que nous avons pris pour la chute de l'Église n'est pas sa réédification! Elle périssait dans la richesse et dans le repos; elle ne se souvenait plus de la croix: la croix a reparu, elle sera sauvée » (*Génie* 218). Translation is by Charles I. White in *The Genius of Christianity, or, The Spirit and Beauty of the Christian Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: John Murray, 1856), 643. Translation hereafter cited within the text, when used.

<sup>18</sup> See Bénichou, *Le Sacre de l'Écrivain*, 146-152.

But, it may be asked, may there not be some danger in considering religion in a merely human point of view? Why so? Does our religion shrink from the light? Surely one great proof of its divine origin is, that it will bear the test of the fullest and severest scrutiny of reason. Would you have us always open to the reproach of enveloping our tenets in sacred obscurity, lest their falsehood should be detected? Will Christianity be the less true for appearing the more beautiful? (White 40)<sup>19</sup>

Chateaubriand's text is in some ways an act of desacralization, in that it is willing to forfeit the sacred status of the religion: Christianity will glisten in the light of the Enlightenment day, showing itself to be illuminated by reason; not only that, but it will retain its ability to enchant even as it is subjected to the ostensibly disenchanting gaze of reason. In a dialectical move of self-transformation through negation, by submitting itself to reason, Christianity will prove to be its source. (Indeed, elsewhere in the *Génie* Chateaubriand claims even scientific inquiry itself, ostensibly the pinnacle of disenchantment as well as secular Enlightenment Reason, as a product of Christianity).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, it loses none of its enchanting or enchanted remainders. Those remainders, in fact, will shine all the more brightly for this negational maneuver: the disenchanting light of Enlightenment humanism provides the background against which the wonders of Christian enchantment come into relief.

According to the logic of the *Génie*, Christianity's forms of enchantment are fundamentally tied to aesthetics, in turn that aesthetics are fundamentally tied to the authentic appreciation of nature. Thus, at the heart of Chateaubriand's project in the *Génie* is to show not just that Christianity is *morally* superior to other religions, but also that it is more beautiful, especially with respect to its ability to appreciate and represent the marvelous [*le merveilleux*] in nature. The mythology of the pagans, Chateaubriand claims, "far from embellishing nature, destroys its veritable charms" [*loin d'embellir la nature, en détruit les véritables charmes*] (313). The ancient pagan pantheon (and with it, ancient pagan poetics) diminishes the beauty of nature in denying the truth of its unity. Chateaubriand stresses that it is not that the ancients lacked the *capacity* to perceive the beauty of

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<sup>19</sup> Mais n'y a-t-il pas de danger à envisager la religion sous un jour purement humain? Et pourquoi? Notre religion craint-elle la lumière? Une grande preuve de sa celeste origine, c'est qu'elle souffre l'examen le plus severe et le plus minutieux de la raison. Veut-on qu'on nous fasse éternellement le reproche de cacher nos dogmes dans une nuit sainte de peur qu'on n'en découvre la fausseté? Le christianisme sera-t-il moins vrai quand il paraîtra plus beau?" (*Génie* 57-58).

<sup>20</sup> According to Chateaubriand, the development of modern science in the West is tied to the rise of monotheism in the form of the Christian God: "In the sciences, its tenets are not hostile to any natural truth; its doctrine forbids not any study. Among the ancients, a philosopher was continually meeting with some divinity in his way; he was doomed by the priests of Jupiter or Apollo, under pain of death or exile, to be absurd all his life. But, as the God of the Christians has not confined himself within the narrow limits of a sun, he has left all the luminaries of heaven open to the researches of scholars: "He hath delivered the world to their consideration." [Eccles 3:11.] The natural philosopher may weigh the air in his tube without any apprehension of offending Juno; it is not of the elements of his body, but of the virtues of his soul, that the Supreme Judge will one day require an account. (405, White 388)." Here Chateaubriand recapitulates and reaffirms the Enlightenment ethos of dominion over nature that we associate perhaps most closely with the figure of Bacon, tracing its lineage back to the Bible, as Bacon himself did. Chateaubriand furthers this dominion through a Cartesian rhetoric of mind over matter that analogizes man to God to the spirit, all alike in their transcendence of the base material world: by concerning Himself primarily with matters of spirit, God allows the human race to control matters of matter.

nature, but that they were blinded by the intermediary figures of the myriad divinities with which they had endowed it. Mythology, “peopling the universe with elegant phantoms, stripped nature of its gravity, its grandeur, and its solitude” [*peuplant l’univers d’élégants fantômes, ôta à la création sa gravité, sa grandeur et sa solitude*]” (315). For this reason, Chateaubriand argues, true descriptive nature poetry was unknown to ancient culture, since the pagan poet “only encountered fauns, only heard dryads [*ne rencontrait que des faunes, il n’entendait que des dryades*]” in his perception of nature (315).

Crucially, and consistent with Chateaubriand’s reappropriation of disenchantment throughout the *Génie*, Christian receptivity toward nature exceeds rationality while also lending itself amenable to an ethos of disenchantment. Like the alienated enlightenment of Adorno and Horkheimer, the supremacy of Christianity is tied to its demythologizing force. The monotheistic disenchantment of Christianity will purge nature of these illusory intruders and provide for humankind a more authentic connection with nature and its God:

It was necessary that Christianity should expel the whole hosts of fauns, of satyrs, and of nymphs, to restore to the grottos their silence and to the woods their scope for uninterrupted contemplation. Under our religion the deserts have assumed a character more pensive, more vague, and more sublime; the forests have attained a loftier pitch; the rivers have broken their petty urns, that in future they may only pour the waters of the abyss from the summit of the mountains; and the true God, in returning to his works, has imparted his immensity to nature. (315, White translation 301)<sup>21</sup>

Here we find a striking analogy between poetic disenchantment and the monotheistic disenchantment that provides the conditions of possibility for modern science. In the latter, though, the purgation of the spirits inhabiting the natural world allows humanity to have dominion over nonhuman nature, while in the other it serves what we might consider to be the opposite end, to increase its *reverence* for nature, its capacity to be overwhelmed by its power. Key to that reverence is that nature is depopulated, deserted, so that man may commune both with God and nature (but God and Nature *only*) in the experience of solitude. In this act of depopulating nature, Christianity “alone rendered to the poet the freedom to represent deserts in their primitive majesty” [*a seule rendu au poète la liberté de représenter les déserts dans leur majesté primitive*]” (302). The word *primitive* signals Chateaubriand’s association of sublime intimacy with nature with his time in the North America, where he picks up the deeply violent settler colonial logic of “wilderness” by which, in the “savage regions” unlike the “cultivated fields” of Europe, one finds oneself “alone before God” (184). Yet it also signals the text’s agenda of recovering the ancient past: here in the section on descriptive nature poetry and throughout the *Génie*, a core aspect of the redemptive power of Christianity is that it returns one to a mythically primitive state. Christianity, as Chateaubriand states in the introduction, is “sublime in the antiquity of its memories that stretch back to the cradle of the world” [*sublime par l’antiquité de ses souvenirs qui remontent au berceau du monde.*]” (58)

Accordingly, while Chateaubriand discounts the elemental spirits with which the European pagans endow nature as resembling “at best the faeries of the Arabs and the genies of the Orient”, he adopts a more generous disposition toward the ostensibly primitive belief in divinities of place, since the latter functions as an avatar of the omnipresent singular God of Christianity:

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<sup>21</sup> “Il a fallu que le christianisme vînt chasser ce peuple de faunes, de satyres et de nymphes, pour rendre aux grottes leur silence, et aux bois leur rêverie. Les déserts ont pris sous notre culte un caractère plus triste, plus vague, plus sublime ; le dôme des forêts s’est exhaussé ; les fleuves ont brisé leurs petites urnes, pour ne plus verser que les eaux de l’abîme du sommet des montagnes : le vrai Dieu, en rentrant dans ses œuvres, a donné son immensité à la nature »( 315).

As to the vague sort of deities placed by the ancients in solitary woods and wild situations, they doubtless produced a pleasing effect, but they had no kind of connection with the mythological system: the human mind here fell back into natural religion. What the trembling traveler adored as he passed through these solitudes was something unknown, something with whose name he was not acquainted, and which he called the divinity of the place; sometimes he gave it the name of Pan, and Pan was the universal God. These powerful emotions, excited by wild nature, have not ceased to exist, and the forests still retain for us their awful divinity. (318, White 304).<sup>22</sup>

For Chateaubriand, the belief in the divinity of place represents a prelapsarian orientation toward nature, characterized by humble innocence and the abrogation of the will to know. It is on similar grounds that he defends popular devotional practices, such as the cult of saints and the worship of pilgrimage sites, from accusations of superstition. These practices, Chateaubriand claims, are fundamentally *poetic*, since poetry « founds itself on the emotions of the soul and the accidents of nature, rendered mysterious by the intervention of religious ideas » [se fonde sur les mouvements de l'âme et les accidents de la nature, rendus tout mystérieux par l'intervention des idées religieuses] (46). In this and other moments throughout the *Génie*, Chateaubriand stresses that what makes Christianity exceptional with respect to other religions is the sense of mystery it fosters and preserves. It is the sentiment provoked by divine mystery, at the ineffable that transcends, exceeds, or lies behind the empirical world of nature that Chateaubriand perceives to be the grounds for Christianity's superior appreciation of and enchantment with the natural world. Chateaubriand associates an excessively disenchanting will-to-knowledge with the *philosophes* and with rational scientific inquiry; Christianity, on the other hand, knows where to stop in the search for understanding the world, especially with regard to the truths of the human spirit: "Far from sullyng the imagination by allowing it to indulge in unbounded curiosity, it has drawn the veil of doubt and obscurity over things which it is useless for us to know; and in this it has shown its superiority over that false philosophy which is too eager to penetrate into the nature of man and to fathom the bottom of every thing" (White 271).<sup>23</sup> Thus, unlike in the case of science, Christianity's banishment of the minor pagan deities and divinities from the natural world is not in the interest of better *understanding* the world, but rather of *intuiting* the uncognizable element at its core—an intuition always tied to the experience of beauty and deep sentiment.

In Chateaubriand's revivalist description of the workings of Christian demythologization, God re-enters the world he has created via Christianity's act of disenchantment ("the true God, in returning to his works, has imparted his immensity to nature"); the aesthetics of Christian revivalism offered by the *Génie du Christianisme* aims for a similar act of return in its promise of the restoration of a more authentically receptive relationship with nature. The dialectic of enchantment and

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<sup>22</sup> « Quant à ces dieux vagues que les anciens plaçait dans les bois déserts et sur les sites agrestes, ils étaient d'un bel effet sans doute; mais ils ne tenaient plus au système mythologique : l'esprit humain retombait ici dans la religion naturelle. Ce que le voyageur tremblant adorait en passant dans ces solitudes, était quelque chose d'*ignoré*, quelque chose dont il ne savait point le nom, et qu'il appelait la Divinité du lieu : quelquefois il lui donnait le nom de Pan, et Pan était le *Dieu universel*. Ces grandes émotions qu'inspire la nature sauvage n'ont point cessé d'exister, et les bois conservent encore pour nous leur formidable divinité. » (*Génie* 318).

<sup>23</sup> « Ne croyons pas toutefois qu'en nous découvrant les bases sur lesquelles reposent les passions, le christianisme ait désenchanté la vie. Loin de flétrir l'imagination en lui faisant tout toucher et tout connaître, il a répandu le doute et les ombres sur les choses inutiles à nos fins; supérieur en cela à cette imprudente philosophie, qui cherche trop à pénétrer la nature de l'homme et à trouver le fond partout » (*Génie* 285).

disenchantment thus again articulates itself: while the Christian gaze disenchantments the natural world of its spirits, it ushers in a more robust and sincere enchantment with nature than what pagan mythology can offer. The neo-primitive modernity inaugurated by Christianity opens one's senses and allows one to perceive a natural world all the more animated, magical, and beautiful. The dissipation of natural spirits in the world results in an immediate apprehension of the glory of God in Nature.<sup>24</sup> Disenchantment is framed as a sacrifice, a loss that brings about a greater recovery: idols are shattered, but in the service of restoring a past disposition toward the world that, in its modern form, ushers in a new era of the aesthetic and moral appreciation of nonhuman nature. Cleared away are the ruins of allegorized nature—the history of human mediations of the natural—in order to make way for a new nature, restored in part by its regenerated, unmediated apprehension by Christendom.

From the standpoint of the critical counter-tradition of the hopeless Romanticism that is the focus of this study, there is much—to say the least—to be objected to in this paradigm. Chateaubriand charges the pagans of not being able to see the ocean for its nereids and the trees for their dryads, one might similarly inquire whether Chateaubriand sees the natural world as anything other than a guaranteed path of redemption that takes the form of self-annihilating sublimity. While freeing the natural world from anthropomorphic projection seems like a noble cause, it comes at the expense of instrumentalizing nature to serve the ends of personal communion with a transcendent divinity. One might also observe that nature is overwritten in the *Génie*, becoming the ideological fodder for two grand narratives of Christian redemption: the first is the familiar story of Christianity's restoration of man's fallen state, figured here as alienation from nature; the second is the triumphant tale of Christianity's own redemption of itself in world history through the assertion of its aesthetic and moral supremacy over the antagonistic phase of the "paganistic" Enlightenment.

For such reasons it is tempting to read the *Génie* against itself, as anthropologist Marc Augé does in his *Génie du paganisme*. Augé argues that Chateaubriand always experiences contact with paganism as an uncanny of sorts, as "the simultaneous sentiment of a strange familiarity and of a familiar strangeness [*le sentiment, à la fois, d'une familière étrangeté et d'une étrange familiarité*]." <sup>25</sup> Thus in Chateaubriand's system of thought paganism comes to be defined as that which Christianity conquers, transcends, and leaves behind, the immanent Other against which the colonizing Western gaze defines itself. At the same time though, the traces of "paganism" that inhere in the religion as custom, ritual, and folk belief (both the literal syncretic holdovers as well as those elements of

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<sup>24</sup> Paradoxically, it also entails an act of internalization, since in the *Génie* the vastness of nature is always ultimately a reflection of the vastness of the human soul in its painful longing for something more, something beyond the material world: "In the pictures of paganism, every thing has a physical character, every thing is external and adapted only to the eye; in the delineations of the Christian religion, all is sentiment and mind, all is internal, all is created for the soul. . . . There is more sweetness in one of those divine tears which Christianity draws from the eyes of the believer than in all the smiling errors of mythology" (353, White 343). Therein lies the paradox of Chateaubriand's praise of Christianity's alleged prodigiousness for descriptive nature poetry: the appreciation of the beauty of nature, an immersion in its wonder, always entails a renunciation of the temporal world, a desire for something beyond the immanent and immediate world of the senses. Chateaubriand pities the ancients who saw in the ocean only "the palace of Neptune": "It was hard that they should perceive only the adventures of the Tritons and the Nereids in the immensity of the seas, which seems to give an indistinct measure of the greatness of our souls, and which excites a vague desire to quit this life, that we may embrace all nature and taste the fullness of joy in the presence of its Author" (*Génie* 316, White 303). In Chateaubriand's aesthetic philosophy, nature becomes the place in which one embraces something like the death drive, surrendering the boundaries of the ego in favor of an ecstatic communion with the divine.

<sup>25</sup> Marc Augé, *Génie du paganisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 13.



Christianity that reflect a pagan disposition) reveal themselves to be more than just remainders. As Chateaubriand catalogs the physical features and embodied practices of Catholicism throughout the *Génie*, he registers the extent to which the practice of the religion is embedded just as much in the concrete as the abstract, the immanent as much as the transcendent. For Augé, Chateaubriand's "genius" of Christianity can be attributed at least in part to a disavowed experience of immanence associated with the polytheistic worldview—the "genius of paganism"—whose theoretical value Augé wishes to reassess.<sup>26</sup> Augé theorizes this disavowed experience of immanence in Chateaubriand's work through the lens of his own discipline: Chateaubriand, for Augé, is an unwitting anthropologist of Christianity, and adopting the anthropological gaze means taking up precisely the immanent worldview of a polytheistic framework.

Though Augé's commitment to theorizing the immanent in Chateaubriand's writing is less important *per se* for our purposes than the spirit that guides it: namely, dwelling with the ostensible losers of Chateaubriand's grand narrative—those figures, dispositions, or disbeliefs that are left behind or, worse, cleared away as the debris of history. For there are lyrical moments in the *Génie* where the text consistently betrays the revivalist, triumphalist, and transcendental logics it deploys in its advocacy for enlarged receptivity to Nature's enchantments. Despite the *Génie's* promise of a restoration of the faith inextricably coupled with the restoration of humankind's lost relationship with nonhuman nature, and despite, also, the pervasiveness of a speculative logic that calculates loss as the occasion for a greater gain to replace it, when nature—in all its "enchantment"—emerges most strikingly in Chateaubriand's writing, it does so decidedly outside of the narrative framework of humanity's conscious self-actualization or of history's steady self-fulfillment *by means of* nature.

Though the *Génie* deftly intertwines its religious agenda of post-Enlightenment Christian revivalism with its aesthetic aim of bringing about humanity's intentional and triumphant reconciliation with the mystery and wonder of nature, the most striking moments of natural beauty in Chateaubriand's writing are those in which nature consistently proves itself unwelcoming or even inimical to the chronicles of progressive enlightenment. The figure of the ruin, prominent in both the argument of the *Génie* itself as well as the two novellas that serve as examples of the aesthetics it promulgates, gives form to the experience of non-human nature as *non-identity*, as neither the grounds for a guaranteed programmatic restoration or return, nor the product of humanity's complex and agonistic saga of dis- and re- enchantment. If there is something like "enchantment" in nature, it reveals itself to be intimately connected with processes of ruination and decline. Decay becomes natural enchantment *par excellence*, nonhuman nature's non-emphatic reminder of its casual yet persistent existence, indifferent toward humanity's investment in it and askew of humanity's narratives about it.

In the section of the *Génie* on the "harmonies of the Christian religion with scenes of nature and passions of the human heart," Chateaubriand offers an extended meditation on the "picturesque effect of ruins" in which he argues that ruins, in their rapport with their natural surroundings, are

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<sup>26</sup> In a similar critical vein, Claude Reichler offers a compelling reading of Chateaubriand's "American" texts (including the *Génie*) as undergoing an effort to re-enchant the world through its depiction and valorization of the "enchanting" aspects of Catholicism. Reichler provocatively argues that in doing so Chateaubriand exhibits a remarkable (and for the time exceptional) sympathy toward what we might call the "lifeworlds" of Native Americans, in that he draws a parallel between the enchanting elements of indigenous religion(s) and the those of Christianity. Both, Reichler argues, constitute examples of a sensibility known generally as "religion" for which Chateaubriand is in mourning. Claude Reichler, "Le Deuil et l'enchantement dans les textes américains" in *Chateaubriand: Le Tremblement du temps*, ed. Jean-Claude Berchet (Toulouse: Presse Universitaires du Mirail 1994), 155-175.

always more picturesque than any intact edifice, whether classical or Christian. This rapport, coupled with the fact that ruins tend to exist in deserted locales, make ruin the ideal topos in which to experience the uninhabited sublimity that Chateaubriand identifies with Nature. In this chapter on ruins—symbols of both fragmentation and defeat—Chateaubriand provides a strange and beautiful account of the natural afterlife of Greek deities, one that seems to contradict—or at least temper—his denigration of Greco-Roman paganism’s figurations of divinity. He thus endows a site of Greek ruins with life through the description of an illusory effect brought about by nothing more than the seeming gratuity of natural processes:

The vale of Tempe, the woods of Olympus, the hills of Attica and of the Peloponnesus, are everywhere bestrewed with the ruins of Greece. There the mosses, the creeping plants, and the rock-flowers, flourish in abundance. A flaunting garland of [jasmine] entwines an antique Venus, as if to replace her cestus; a beard of white moss hangs from the chin of Hebe; the poppy shoots up on the leaves of the book of Mnemosyne, a lovely emblem of the past renown and the present oblivion of these regions. The waves of the Aegean Sea, which only advance to subside beneath crumbling porticos; Philomela chanting her plaintive notes; Alcyon heaving his sighs; Cadmus rolling his rings around an altar; the swan building her nest in the lap of a Leda,—all these accidents, produced, as it were, by the Graces, [enchant] these poetic ruins. You would say that a divine breath yet animates the dust of the temples of Apollo and the Muses, and the whole landscape bathed in the sea resembles a beautiful picture of Apelles, consecrated to Neptune and suspended over his shores. (White 470-471 [modifications mine]).<sup>27</sup>

Regarding the animation that takes place in this scene, one hesitates to say that the ruins are *reanimated*, especially since Chateaubriand would likely describe the divinities in question as *dead* figures from the very start, untethered from the vitality of nature. This scene of animation is not one of resurrection in which the past is brought back to life, redeemed of the negating ravages of time. Rather, the magic animating this scene is identical with the erosion of time itself. The poppy growing out of the book of memory emblemizes and condenses present (opiate) oblivion and past renown, indeed, but it does so with an indifference that problematizes the very idea of oblivion itself, demonstrating its relativity (forgotten by whom? By what? In what respect?) while also showing that forgetting is not the same as cancellation or total abandonment. Ruination and reverence occur in the very same act: To be forgotten by human civilization is to be remembered by the poppy seed. The conditional mode of the last sentence reminds us that this scene, composed entirely of natural “accidents,” is a scene of enchanted animation only insofar it is perceived as such by human imagination. Nevertheless, if we understand the human observation itself to be accidental, we understand this painterly tableau of animated ruins to be thrown together (conjectured, in its

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<sup>27</sup> “La vallée de Tempé, les bois de l’Olympe, les côtes de l’Attique et du Péloponnèse, étalent les ruines de la Grèce. Là, commencent à paraître les mousses, les plantes grimpantes et les fleurs saxatiles. Une guirlande vagabonde de jasmin embrasse une Vénus, comme pour lui rendre sa ceinture ; une barbe de mousse blanche descend du menton d’une Hébé; le payot croît sur les feuillettes du livre de Mnémomyne: symbole de la renommée passée, et de l’oubli présent de ces lieux. Les flots de l’Égée, qui viennent expirer sous de croulants portiques, Philomèle qui se plaint, Alcyon qui gémit, Cadmus qui roule ses anneaux autour d’un autel, le cygne qui fait son nid dans le sein de quelque Léda, mille accidents, produits comme par les Grâces, enchantent ces poétiques débris: on dirait qu’un souffle divin anime encore la poussière des temples d’Apollon et des Muses; et le paysage entier, baigné par la mer, ressemble à un tableau d’Apelles, consacré à Neptune et suspend à ses rivages » (*Génie* 43-44).

etymological sense) by the convergence of independent forces. In other words, there is nothing of *necessity* about this non-event of reanimation; it exists as a coincidence, a revival that occurs aslant of any programmatic redemptive revivalism.

The accidental quality of this scene of revival has an illuminating analog in Georg Simmel's theory of the ruin. For Simmel, the ruin is defined as a work of art that brings into concrete form the relation between separate forces; namely, the ruin embodies the dynamic struggle between human ambition and natural processes. In his essay "The Ruin" (1911) Simmel theorizes the ruin as the inversion of architecture: while the latter represents "the most sublime victory of the [human] spirit over nature," in the ruin nature "transform[s] the work of art into material for her own expression, as she had previously served as material for art."<sup>28</sup> Thus nature and humanity are conceived as analogous yet competing artistic actors. According to Simmel's account, the ruin represents the dissolution of the balance that architecture achieves between the "upward striving" of the human spirit and the "gravity" of nature (379). This dissolution does not result in the apparent formlessness of "mere" matter, however: the ruin is a unified work of art in its own right. It is the virtue of the ruin as work of art (and by extension, of the aesthetic generally) that it allows us to perceive an ongoing, fluid struggle in unified form.

Yet even as Simmel asks us to conceive of humanity and nature as locked in an agonistic struggle between actors of which the ruin is a beautiful truce, certain elements of his essay remind us that this struggle is a fiction that exists only from the standpoint of human subjectivity. Consider the following:

That the overwhelming of a work of the human will by the power of nature can have an aesthetic effect at all suggests that nature has a never completely extinguished rightful claim to this work, however much it may be formed by the spirit. In its material, its given state, it has always remained nature, and if now nature becomes once more completely mistress over it, she is merely exercising a right which until now has remained latent but which she never, so to speak, has renounced" [*Seinem Stoffe, seiner Gegebenheit nach ist es immer Natur geblieben, und wenn diese nun ganze wieder Herr darüber wird, so vollstreckt sie damit nur ein Recht, das bis dahin geruht hatte, auf das sie aber sozusagen niemals verzichtet*](382).

Here Simmel again characterizes natural decay as an assertion of the will of nature against humanity's efforts at mastery and creation. Nature acts as a (land)lord [Herr] that reclaims the property it had hitherto only rented to humanity. Yet if we are to understand the ruin, as the essay earlier asks us to, as "a unity which is no longer grounded in human purposiveness but in that depth where human purposiveness and the working of non-conscious natural forces grow from their common root" (380), we must in kind understand the personification and attribution of will and purpose in the above passage as merely a conceit granting "non-conscious natural forces" intelligibility in the realm of the human. The image of nonhuman nature vengefully reasserting its sovereignty is itself tempered and contradicted in Simmel's own language: only for the span of a dependent clause does feminine *Natur* take on the cloak of mastery of the masculine *Herr*; the idea of nature exercising its "latent" right is softened by the qualification that it "has never, *so to speak*, renounced" it. Insofar as nature exercises a right, then, that exercise occurs in the act of a demurral, an abstention from renunciation. And, moreover, that demurral only occurs on the level of the "so to speak," in our willingness to project onto the absence of renunciation a *refusal* to renounce.

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<sup>28</sup> Georg Simmel, "Two Essays: The Handle, and the Ruin," *Hudson Review* 11:3 (Autumn 1958): 371-385; 379, 381. Hereafter cited within text.

This same conjectural register of the “so to speak” governs Chateaubriand’s description of the ruins at Tempe, in which one “would say that a divine breath yet animates the dust of the temples of Apollo and the Muses” [*on dirait qu’un souffle divin anime encore la poussière des temples d’Apollon et des Muses*]. The French *encore* contains an ambiguity: would one say that a divine breath *still* animates the temples? Or that it animates them *again*? As with Simmel’s ruin, the scene fractures into a dual perspective; from one point of view—the same one structuring the *Génie* as a whole as a narrative of loss and recovery—this is a scene of death and reanimation. Yet from another angle, the *encore* shifts into the meaning of *still*, as a marker of the ongoing presence, the “undramatic persistence,” of life in the form of nonhuman nature.<sup>29</sup> One might say, following Simmel, that liveliness never renounced its right to this place. Significantly, two chapters later, within the same section on the “harmonies of the Christian religion,” Chateaubriand writes of the persistence of “popular devotions” (e.g. pilgrimages to blessed locales, belief in communication with the dead) that have been “neither enjoined nor absolutely prohibited by the Church [*ni avoués, ni absolument proscrit par l’Eglise*]” (White 474, *Génie* 46). These pagan vestiges, which Chateaubriand valorizes as evidence of the religion’s poetic rapport with nature, are shown to persist outside the revivalist binaries of renunciation and reclamation, disenchantment and re-enchantment.

I stress this latter perspective—one that belies the necessity and value of redemptive revivalism, which the *Génie* on the whole inscribes—as a means of freeing the scene of the ruins at Tempe from the determinacy inherent in the framework of the “epic of redemption.” This conceptual liberation is the same work performed by the “Graces” on the ruins in question; insofar as the latter enchant them, they do so only in a manner definitive of grace: accidental, unannounced, unearned. Enchantment arrives on the scene independent and irrespective of any prior actions that may have been said to bring it about. In the natural enchantment that arises from this scene, the revival of the past remains both elusive and illusory. The graces here extend no promise of recovery; indeed, the scene of enchantment arrives only in the context of the absence of the possibility of any programmatic recovery. In the context of Chateaubriand’s grand historical narrative, the traces of pagan allegory are marked to be irrevocably lost, swept into the dustbin of history—*not*, that is, ruins marked to be triumphantly restored as “ruined” Christianity is.

Irrecoverable ruins in Chateaubriand’s work thus function often as the topos in which the dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment, and any revivalist project that might come with it, is broken down or suspended—often, ironically, to *enchanting* effect. At other times, ruins seem to take a more active role of thwarting all efforts to recuperate the past, asking us to dwell with the *desire* for recuperation precisely as it is revealed as fundamentally unfulfillable, hopeless undertaking. The very possibility of the recovery of the past is repeatedly called into question by the appearance of ruins throughout Chateaubriand’s writing, in which they frequently symbolize an irrevocable loss

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<sup>29</sup> I take the phrase “undramatic persistence” from a study of the history of the traditional religious practices that came to be identified as paganism during the rise of early Christianity. James J. O’Donnell, *Pagans: The End of Traditional Religion and the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 238. O’Donnell argues that there is nothing like a unified or systematized religious belief system analogous to Christianity that antedates the advent of that religion in the West; rather, early Christian institutions and texts invented the catch-all category of the pagan (*paganus*) to designate an Other to Christianity, as that which must be at worst eradicated and at best subsumed within it. Thus from the standpoint of the Christian imagination the habitual and traditional practices of an unconverted populace were always registered as a unified effort at resistance rather than as a casual or undramatic persistence, and those practices were likewise held to be representative of a movement and a unified system of beliefs. In other words, “paganism” was Christianity’s shadow. I point to this framework of imagined antagonism as an analogous with the conjuring of Nature’s assertion of its right in Simmel’s description of the ruin above.

exceeding the particular history of the ruin itself. Two years after the publication of the *Génie*, Chateaubriand writes a letter to Fontanes recounting his trip to Rome. Reflecting upon the ruins of the Villa Adriana, Chateaubriand remarks upon “an interior voice that was repeating to me what had been written a hundred times over about the vanity of human things” [*une voix intérieur qui me répétait ce qu’on a cent fois écrit sur la vanité des choses humaines*].<sup>30</sup> Here Chateaubriand refers to the Revolutionary-era preoccupation with ruins perhaps most famously represented in Volney’s *Ruines* (1791), which celebrates the ephemerality of prior civilizations as the condition of possibility for a new Enlightened Revolutionary society-to-come; countering his rival, in his *Essai sur les révolutions* (1797) Chateaubriand recasts the ruin as evidence of the *vanitas* of all human projects, the Revolution included. If this is all very familiar territory to Fontanes, Chateaubriand continues: “There is even a double vanity in the monuments of the Villa Adriana, since they were, as one knows, but the imitations of other monuments spread throughout the provinces of the Roman empire: the true temple of Serapis at Alexandria, the true Academy at Athens, no longer exist; what you see in Hadrian’s copies is thus but the ruins of ruins”(OR 1486).<sup>31</sup>The double vanity of these ruins includes the inaccessibility of the eroded past (one is reminded of the characterization of the past in *René* as a statue that was “pulled mutilated from the wreckage of the ages”), but also the uncertainty surrounding its inauthenticity: it is a past whose image exists only as a copy. As we will see, Nerval translates this figure of the hopelessness of recovery into his own meditation on the irrecoverable natural of an idyllic pastoral past.

These ruins of ruins are a signifier of desire, the placeholder for a past to which one has no access. Goran Blix argues that in nineteenth-century French culture, archaeology becomes a “modern secular theology” guaranteeing a form of immortality (cultural memory and the capacity for historical reconstruction/restoration) that replaces Christian immortality with its waning force and relevance in the increasingly secular French public sphere.<sup>32</sup> While Blix’s argument may hold weight on the broader scale of cultural history, there is no denying that the figure of the ruin can signify also the vanity of any attempt to replace the loss of religious faith in post-Enlightenment Revolutionary modernity. Blix himself seems to suggest as much when he designates the “ruined ruin” as one of the central tropes by which lost pasts are inscribed in French Romanticism. Pointing to literary instances such as that of the annihilation of the memorial of the bygone monarchy at the royal tombs of Saint Denis (*Genius of Christianity*) and the failed attempt to locate Leonidas’s tomb (*Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*), Blix names Chateaubriand as the foremost writer of the ruined ruin, the paradigmatic signifier of the irreparable ephemerality of the past. As Blix sees it, in Chateaubriand’s writing “[a]n impossible wish to remember emerges from the acknowledgement of loss, and the modern historian is condemned to drawing traces of lost traces, second degree traces, doubly hollow, to counter the material erosion of the record” (PP 178).

The repeated occurrence of “ruined ruins” in Chateaubriand should give one pause in the context of the work of an author whose stated aesthetic agenda rests in the idea that “the Christian religion, by reopening for us—by means of the merits of the Son of Man—the shining paths that death had covered with its shadows, calls us back to our primitive passions” [*La religion chrétienne, en*

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<sup>30</sup> François René de Chateaubriand, *Oeuvres romanesques et voyages*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 1486. Hereafter cited as OR within the text. Translations mine.

<sup>31</sup> « Il y a même double vanité dans les monuments de la villa Adriana, ils n’étaient, comme on sait, que les imitations d’autres monuments répandus dans les provinces de l’empire romain : le véritable temple de Sérapis à Alexandrie, la véritable Académie à Athènes, n’existent plus ; vous ne voyez donc dans les copies d’Adrien que des ruines de ruines. »

<sup>32</sup> Göran Blix, *From Paris to Pompeii: French Romanticism and the Cultural Politics of Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Penn UP, 2009), 7. Hereafter cited in text as FP.

*nous rouvrant, par les mérites du Fils de l'Homme, les routes éclatantes que la mort avait couvertes de ses ombres, nous a rappelés à nos primitives amours*] (*Génie* I, 308). The figures and topoi that represent this passionate original engagement with the world are so unstable and artificial in Chateaubriand's writing as to call into question the intelligibility—indeed the very *existence*—of a primitive orientation to be restored. When we encounter the “primitive” to which Christianity is promised to return us in Chateaubriand's writing, it reveals itself to be merely a supplement for an intangible and unreachable mode of enchantment—the copy of a copy, the ruins of ruins. Thus, even as Chateaubriand conceived of *Atala* as part of his larger project of writing *l'épopée de l'homme de la nature* set in a modern-day Eden of the North American wilderness, in the preface to that work he distinguishes himself from Rousseau, for whom the “savage” of the new world is a figure of desire in its proximity to something like pure nature: “I in no way believe pure nature to be the most beautiful thing in the world... Let us paint nature, but beautiful nature” [*je ne crois point que la pure nature soit la plus belle chose du monde... Peignons la nature, mais la belle nature*].<sup>33</sup> In this sentiment, Chateaubriand very much strays from the preference for untouched, unmediated nature he espouses in the *Génie*. Much to the frustration of his contemporary critics, Chateaubriand maintained a fidelity to artifice in his depiction of North American nature in *Atala*; this despite the role that the same wilderness plays in the *Génie*'s conceptual framework as the locus of pure and immediate communion with Nature and God, the space in which, free from European neoclassical projections, humanity can authentically experience both as a single unity.

In Chateaubriand's writing, the wilderness thus shares with the ruin its status as a Derridean supplement, as that which, in its role as substitute, extends the promise of an originary past at the same time that it marks its absence. And this wilderness too has its ruins. In *Atala* the protagonist Chactas relates that, after having been captured by the Muscogees as a prisoner of war, he is taken to a place called the *Bois du sang* to be sacrificed, at which one arrived “by way of ruins of those monuments of which the origin is unknown, and which are the product of a people now unknown” [*par les ruines d'un de ces monuments dont on ignore l'origine, et qui sont l'ouvrage d'un peuple maintenant inconnu*] (110). The existence of such ruins (most likely those of the Pre-Columbian civilization that have come to be known as the “Mound Builders”) was a point of fascination for Chateaubriand: he mentions them in the *Génie* and later in the *Voyage en Amérique* (1826). As some scholars have noted, Chateaubriand's affinity for the idea of a civilization antedating that of the current Native Americans is relatively progressive for his time in the sense that it undermines the figure of the “savage” American Indian as the symbol *par excellence* of a “state of nature” free from the ravages of history.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> François René de Chateaubriand, *Atala, René, Les Aventures du dernier Abencérage* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 68, translation mine. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text, with all translations mine. Harry Liebersohn reminds us that even for Rousseau the “state of nature” does not exist in the world as something we might access: “From the publication of *Discourse on Inequality* to the present, Rousseau is said to have idealized a state of nature filled with virtuous people called ‘noble savages’” Yet Rousseau's argument was not so simple. The “state of nature” in Rousseau had a double status as thought experiment and historical reality. Using a familiar strategy of modern Western philosophy, he tried to imagine a pure or original state of nature by stripping away later accretions until he arrived at an elementary form. This was, as Rousseau understood it, a humanity so devoid of cultivation that one could only imperfectly conceive of it, since, among other things, it would lack language. “Savages” belonged not to this original state of nature, but to a later historical stage of development” (Harry Liebersohn, *Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 25).

<sup>34</sup> For a thorough study of the topic of Chateaubriand's conflicted relationship to the idea of Native American “primitivity” see Michel Butor, “Chateaubriand et l'ancienne Amérique,” *Répertoire II* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1964), 152-192. Surveying Chateaubriand's various writings on American Indians while also putting them in conversation with his thinking on the whole (especially the *Génie*), Butor argues that in

Chateaubriand's repeated emphasis on the presence of such ruins contests both the idea of native primitivism and that of a pristine, unmodified, and unconstructed North American wilderness. Rebecca Comay argues that "all ruins...[reveal] that the world is constructed. . . .and as such susceptible to unmaking or deconstruction"; "[m]odernity begins with [the] corrosively denaturalizing insight" given form in the ruin.<sup>35</sup> The ruins of the North American wilderness thus detract from that locale's value as an exotic pastoral retreat, a rejuvenating source of respite from "civilized" modernity for world-weary René and his sympathetic European readers. In much of Chateaubriand, then, wilderness, ruins, and ruins *in* wilderness all emblemize the thwarting of Romantic revivalist projects of which the *Genius of Christianity*, of course, has served as a paradigmatic example.

Chateaubriand's enchantment with the figure of the ruin registers an internal resistance to his aesthetic economy of recovery and restoration, as well as the Christian imperative for redemption that subtends it. Against his own inclinations to promote a project of totalistic Christian revivalism, Chateaubriand rejoices in the apparent uselessness of the North American ruins: "Fortunate at least is that nation which has not left behind a name in history, whose possessions have fallen to no other heirs than the deer of the forest and the birds of the air!" [*Heureux du moins ce peuple qui n'a point laissé de nom dans l'histoire, et dont l'héritage n'a été recueilli que par les chevreuils des bois et les oiseaux du ciel!*] (White 127, *Génie* 139).<sup>36</sup> One finds similar moments of revelry at the prospect of abandonment in the letter to Fondanes, in which Chateaubriand praises the fields that lay fallow outside of Rome. Arguing that only an "economist" would view such waste as lamentable, he writes that an artist, a poet or "even a philosopher" would see it for its true value: "The sight of a field of wheat of a vineyard would not provoke as strong emotions in you, as the view of earth of which modern culture has not rejuvenated the soil, and which remains antique like the ruins that cover it." [*L'aspect d'un champ de blé ou d'un coteau de vigne ne vous donnerait pas d'aussi fortes émotions, que la vue de cette terre dont la culture moderne n'a pas rajeuni le sol, et qui est demeurée antique comme les ruines qui la couvrent*] (OR 1478). Here, as in the instances above, the aspiration to revitalize or rejuvenate the past is suspended in the presence of gratuitous uselessness.

And yet throughout his work, the ruin retains its allure precisely in its nature as fragmentary and incomplete, an aesthetic quality that characterizes his best writing (Both *Atala* and *René* are segments of a larger work to come; their early publication as discrete novellas granted Chateaubriand his literary success, while his much later completion of the epic *Les Natchez* went largely uncelebrated, even unnoticed) and that, of course, comes to characterize Romanticism as we know it.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the image of a ruined man, as a site of both damage and raw potentiality, condenses

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Chateaubriand's conceptual framework the New World functions as "le bain de Jouvence qui rajeunira notre civilisation vieillie, qui nous permettra de retrouver la jeunesse de ce que nous ne connaissons, dans notre civilisation, que veilli." (180). He also explores the Americas as a discursive heterotopia in Chateaubriand's thinking, a third space that allows one to think outside the binaries of ancient/Christian and Orient/Occident with which Chateaubriand is so preoccupied. And yet, as Butor also argues, Chateaubriand discovers through his ethnographic writing that the reality of Native American life and culture does not correspond to the symbolic role that he and his predecessors (Rousseau, Diderot) have projected onto it: "[Chateaubriand] a découvert que les Indiens ne pouvaient pas être considérés comme des 'sauvages' au sens ordinaire du mot, mais comme des civilisés d'une autre espèce . . . il est le premier grand poète d'une "civilization primitive" au sens que nous donnons aujourd'hui à ce mot" (166).

<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011), 59.

<sup>36</sup> "Fortunate at least is that nation which has not left behind a name in history, whose possessions have fallen to no other heirs than the deer of the forest and the birds of the air!" (127)

<sup>37</sup> For more on the importance of the fragment to Romanticism as an intellectual and historical movement, see, for instance, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in*

the infinite and intangible desire that served as a source of inspiration for later Romantic writers as they read and re-read *René* and its accompanying manifesto, the “*vague des passions*” chapter in the *Génie*. Chateaubriand would later come to repudiate the Romantic reception and idealization of the character of René, pointing to Père Souël’s speech on the necessity of Christian devotion as evidence of his own endorsement of Christian redemption as the sole reparation for a soul as lost and yearning as René’s. Nevertheless, as his Romantic readers perceived—among them Nerval—as much as Chateaubriand points to Christianity as the quick fix that can patch over the hole in ruined man, the allure of ruination pervades his work to such an extent that redemption reveals itself to be contrived, boring, uninspiring.

Instead of redemption, what the figure of ruin offers in Chateaubriand’s writing is *unredemption*: the possibility of a mode of engagement with nonhuman nature in which the latter is not conceived as the means by which the human subject (either collective or individual) attains completion, self-actualization, or salvation. Under the unredeeming gaze, “Nature” does not appear as a place to which humanity returns in an act of triumphant reclamation or pastoral rejuvenation. If it grants a temporary reprieve to those in search of it as a source of redemption, it does so by declining to present itself as the source of anything in particular. Nature fails to remedy the feeling of ontological incompleteness, but by its beauty it may well show those questing for redemption that the sense of one’s own unredeemable incompleteness may be *worth inhabiting*. Then again, it may not show us anything—as Adorno argues in his *Aesthetic Theory*, natural beauty is not to be counted on, much less sought out. Nature may remind one of the conjectural possibilities of an idyllic past or a naïve mode of engagement with the world, but it will certainly not promise—or even allow for—its restoration. If nonhuman nature brings revival, it does so only conjecturally and temporarily—and never in the service of a programmatic redemptive revivalism. Taking this insight from Chateaubriand, Nerval transposes it at midcentury into *Sylvie*’s self-deconstructing pastoral romance, in which a rural setting associated with a naïve or enchanted “natural” past proves likewise unable to redeem the narrator from the alienation, disillusionment, and sense of incompleteness he experiences in a present *ruined* by political disappointment, urban modernity, and burgeoning industrialization.

### iii) Nerval’s ruined pastoral

*Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.*  
-Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

*I sadly rediscover within myself the fleeting traces of an era when naturalness was affected...*  
-Gérard de Nerval, *Sylvie*

*Sylvie*, considered by Nerval to be the best among his poetic novellas, works both within and against the redemptive standard of the pastoral romance, a genre in which a protagonist departs an urban setting to get “back to nature,” ultimately to return with a refreshed disposition that allows some reconciliation regarding the conflicts that are faced back home. Faced with the ruined present we saw elaborated at the opening of this chapter, the protagonist indeed retreats to the sylvan landscape of his childhood Valois, yet he does not undergo a transformation there, nor does he make the return to his urban life as is expected in pastoral convention. Moreover, the pastoral setting that invites return is in *ruins* in the many senses we have already explored in Chateaubriand: it marks an irrecoverable loss, it invites yet resists narratives of recuperation through redemption, and

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*German Romanticism* (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1988) and Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).



it provides a locus in which nature can emerge in its *non-identity*, as that which escapes, exceeds, or simply exists peripherally to the subject's need for redemption. If Nerval's orientalist writings portray, in Said's estimation, a "world of uncertain, fluid dreams infinitely multiplying themselves past resolution, definiteness, materiality," then so does the Valois of *Sylvie*.<sup>38</sup> The text destabilizes the Valois as the site of the natural and thus frustrates the narrator's quest for self-repair through the recovery of his past—a past that doubles as the "naïve" past of pre-modern enchantment in the form of paganism. This naïve past proves to be always already in ruins, and as the play between nature and artifice, urban and pastoral, past and present, and loss and recovery is continuously maintained, so "nature" is demythologized, as is the idea of a lost naïve or "enchanted" disposition toward it. Each instance that the futility of the narrator's venture of recovering naïve enchantment is revealed constitutes a dilation of the romance form: a suspension, prolongation, or confusion of the quest for self-recovery. *Sylvie* thus makes the impossibility of redemption the condition of possibility for a sustained yet unsystematized mode of engagement with natural beauty.

At its beginning, *Sylvie's* narrator is leaving the theater that he finds himself attending habitually (the reader gleans only a vague sense of his conscious will to appear there). He attends, we learn, in order to see an actress with whom he is entirely captivated and who in her perfection embodies, he tells us, "an answer to my every rapture, my every whim."<sup>39</sup> The narrator knows next to nothing about the woman outside of the context of her appearances, and, in what seems to be an acknowledgement of his awareness that this relationship of projected desire is sustained only by an air of mystery and inaccessibility surrounding the actress, admits that he has refused to pursue further knowledge of her because he "was afraid to cloud the magic mirror that cast her image back at me" (145-6). The actress, whose name, we later learn, is Aurélie, triggers in the narrator's mind the childhood memory of a young girl of the Valois, Adrienne, with whom he fell in love during a pageant in which she was playing the part of an angel. Like this Adrienne, who is rendered doubly inaccessible to the narrator because she is both apparently a child of the nobility *and* enrolled in a convent in which she is set to become a nun, the actress Aurélie remains an unreachable Platonic ideal for the narrator: he will later admit to a friend that he is "chasing after an image, nothing more." (146) The narrator diagnoses his preoccupation with the idea of an ideal, inaccessible woman as a symptom of the historical disease (the *mal du siècle*) that plagues his generation, from the perspective of which "any real woman . . . had to appear a queen or goddess: above all, she had to lie beyond reach" (146). The narrator is drawn back to his personal past, and this by what appears to be a gratuitous and spontaneous lure, the appearance of an announcement about a local traditional festival—the Festival of the Bow, to be celebrated the following day in his childhood Valois—in the journal in which he also receives the news of returns on a long forgotten financial investment. The announcement, in its oblique and coincidental appearance, sets in motion the novella's momentum of retreat from the present to the past, from the city to the country. The narrator, we are told, reads the paper with only limited volition: "On my way out, as I was passing through the reading-room, I absentmindedly glanced at one of the newspapers. I think it was because I wanted to see how the stock market was faring" [*En sortant, je passai par la sale de lecture, et machinalement je regardai un journal. C'était, je crois, pour y voir le cours de la Bourse*] (147). The spontaneous encounter with a reminder of a childhood tradition is perhaps all too apt in that its appearance—as if by magic—offers a vision of plenitude and enchantment as an antidote to the narrator's disenchanting urban present.

Yet even as it presents itself as wholly other from the narrator's current condition, the memory he describes is struck through with many of the characteristics of the contemporary

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 183. Hereafter cited within the text.

<sup>39</sup> Gerard de Nerval, *Selected Writings*, trans. Richard Sieburth (New York: Penguin, 1999), 145. Hereafter cited within the text.

condition. The now famous scene of recollection—the literary predecessor to the madeleine scene that grounds Proust’s exploration of involuntary memory—is worth citing here in its entirety:

As I vaguely ran my eye over the newspaper I was still holding in my hands, my attention was caught by these two lines: “*Fête du Bouquet provincial*—Tomorrow the archers of Senlis will present the bouquet to the archers of Loisy.” These few simple words awoke a whole new series of impressions in my mind: they brought back a memory of country life I had long forgotten, a distant echo of the innocent festivals of my youth. The far-off sound of drum and horn was drifting through the hamlets and woods; the young girls were weaving garlands and tying ribbons around bouquets, singing all the while. A heavy wagon, drawn by oxen, was receiving these offerings as it passed; and we, the children of these parts, were escorting it with our bows and arrows, imagining ourselves knights of old—unaware that we were merely repeating from age to age a Druidic festival that had survived all subsequent monarchies and forms of religion (148).<sup>40</sup>

Central to this passage is the idea of a ritual repeated involuntarily, even unconsciously. The narrator first picks up the newspaper “absentmindedly” [*machinalement*] only to “vaguely” run his eye over the text, thus learning of the festival only accidentally; neither a discovery nor a major revelation, it is more like a moment of minor disclosure. Meanwhile the youthful participants in the festival repeat the tradition “from age to age” in a customary, perfunctory manner, with neither the intention nor the knowledge of the act as one of reenactment. Such moments of automatic and uninterrogated custom occur throughout *Sylvie*, and they call for the narrator to take part in them in a manner that can only be described as involuntary: he is eventually drawn by this particular recollection to return to the Valois and take part in the festival, just as, when we first encounter him, he frequents the theater more out of habitual compulsion than to witness any particular production. Indeed, the sense of accidental yet unsurprising repetition obtains when, in the fourth chapter, the narrator recounts one of the many instances in which, as a young student in Paris, he returned to the Valois countryside to participate yet again in the Festival of the Bow: “I happened to be in Loisy for the annual parish feast. I once again joined the Knights of the Bow, taking my place within their ranks as on former occasions” (153). If earlier the narrator described his historical period as one filled with “dim intimations of renaissance,” [*certaines instincts de renaissance*], so too is the childhood home (and past) permeated by a spirit of vague and noncommittal revivalism.

The Valois of *Sylvie* signifies first and foremost the capacity for revivification and rebirth on a number of varying, even conflicting levels. As Bertrand Marchal points out, the journey to the Valois at the beginning of *Sylvie* may be conceived as a creative reconstruction of the *voyage en Orient*, as the latter is unfailingly represented (in both Nerval’s Orientalist writings and Chateaubriand’s, among others) as a *return to origins*, a journey to discover the roots of Western civilization (and more

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<sup>40</sup> Mon regard parcourait vaguement le journal que je tenais encore, et j’y lus ces deux lignes: “*Fête du Bouquet provincial*.—Demain, les archers de Senlis doivent rendre le bouquet à ceux de Loisy.” Ces mots, fort simples, réveillèrent en moi toute une nouvelle série d’impressions: c’était un souvenir de la province depuis longtemps oubliée, un écho lointain des fêtes naïves de la jeunesse.—Le cor et le tambour résonnait au loin dans les hameaux et dans les bois; les jeunes filles tressaient des guirlandes et assortissaient, en chantant, des bouquets ornés de rubans.—Un lourd chariot, traîné par des bœufs, recevait ces présents sur son passage, et nous, enfants de ces contrées, nous formions le cortège avec nos arcs et nos flèches, nous décorant du titre de chevaliers,—sans savoir alors que nous ne faisons que répéter d’âge en âge une fête druidique survivant aux monarchies et aux religions nouvelles »(175-6).

specifically, of the Christian religion).<sup>41</sup> Thus in the narrator's quest to sort out the secrets of the workings of his desire, he returns to the "Orient" of his own childhood, the place of his birth as a desiring subject. The parallel drawn between the Valois as "ancestral ground" and the Orient as the "cradle" of Western religion and spirituality is emphasized perhaps most clearly in the novella *Angélique* (1850), where the narrator takes a pastoral journey to his origins similar to that of the narrator of *Sylvie*. After meditating on the fact that Watteau drew inspiration for his *Voyage à Cythère* (Cythera being, notably, a locale visited by Nerval in his *Voyage en Orient*) from the Valois rivers of the Oise and Aisne, the narrator remarks: "Tired of all the senseless arguments and sterile hubbub of Paris, I am resting amid these green and fertile fields—regathering strength here in my motherland. Regardless of our philosophical convictions, we are all somehow rooted in our ancestral ground...All the world's religions or philosophies enjoin mankind to worship its memories" (94).

While the Valois is posited as the pastoral "ancestral grounds" of the Nervalian narrator, it also operates within Nerval's oeuvre as a repository for *national* memory and identity. Nerval was indelibly influenced by German romantic aspirations of a national literature rooted in autochthonous folk culture. In 1830, after already having published a translation of Goethe's *Faust* to critical acclaim, Nerval published an anthology of German poetry by Klopstock, Goethe, Bürger and Schiller. In the same year, in his introduction to a collection of poems by Ronsard and other sixteenth-century poets, Nerval argues that modern French poets must imitate neither the greats of French poetry nor foreign contemporary poets, but rather should follow the German example of looking back to the nation's "primitive" poets [nos poètes primitifs] for poetic inspiration. Thus Nerval echoes many of the poetic and philosophical commonplaces of German literary criticism since Herder: "For all early literature is national, having been created to respond to a need, and conforming to the character and mores of a people who adopt it; from which it follows that, as the seed contains the entire tree, the first attempts at a literature contain all the seeds of its future development, of its complete and definitive development." [*Car toute littérature primitive est nationale, n'étant créée que pour répondre à un besoin, et conformément au caractère et aux mœurs du peuple qui l'adopte ; d'où il suit que, de même qu'une graine contient un arbre entier, les premiers essais d'une littérature renferment tous les germes de son développement futur, de son développement complet et définitif*].<sup>42</sup> It is in such a spirit that beginning in 1842 Nerval undertakes the project of collecting all the ballads of his childhood Valois toward what will eventually be published as *Les Chansons et légendes du Valois*, an appendix to *Sylvie* in 1854. The work is presented melancholically as evidence of what is under erasure given the fast-paced developments of modern urban life; as such, it constitutes a reconstruction of a personal past ("les chants et les récits qui ont bercé mon enfance,") as well as a national one, for Nerval emphasizes that the songs originate in a province where an ostensibly pure French came into being and is still spoken ("des vieilles provinces où s'est toujours parlée la vraie langue française.")(66). At the collection's close, Nerval again expresses his desire that modern French poets should follow their German peers in drawing on "the naïve inspiration of our fathers" [*l'inspiration naïve de nos pères*]—folk ballads (66). Thus the elegiac Schillerean manner in which *Sylvie* depicts the extra-urban pastoral "retreat" of his Valois childhood corresponds with a desire to revivify the lost and abandoned forms of a national folk subculture. And that desire is continually thwarted: just as Nerval notes at the beginning of the collection that these songs are "profoundly forgotten" [*profondément oublié[s]*] and thus can only be assembled in fragments, so too is the modern corruption of the idyllic Valois setting of *Sylvie* often

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<sup>41</sup> *Sylvie* p130n1

<sup>42</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Brix and Claude Pichois (Paris : Gallimard, 1989), vol. 1, 283. Translation mine.

made manifest in Sylvie's preference for modern opera and her corresponding lapse in remembering the traditional songs of the region.

Yet a third level on which the Valois constitutes a space of rebirth in Nerval's work is its status in the Nervalian historical imaginary as a prime site of the *Renaissance*. As Nerval frequently notes in both *Angélique* and *Sylvie*, the Valois was the longtime residence of the Medicis, and traces of the architectural, religious, and decorative influences of their reign are to be found throughout the region. As Bertrand Marchal and Jean-Nicolas Illouz argue, for Nerval the "Renaissance" signifies primarily a period that aspires to the literary, philosophical, and artistic revival of the gods of paganism long suppressed (but never extinguished) by medieval Christianity.<sup>43</sup> A more orthodox understanding of the Renaissance as the rebirth of classical culture within Christian Europe must be understood, then, in Nerval's terms, as constituting a *spiritual* rebirth represented chiefly by the return of the relevance of the gods of pagan antiquity. The Medici family was noted for their support for the Renaissance Neoplatonic revival in Florence, a movement characterized by the desire to unite Christian doctrine, classical philosophy, and varied Western(ized) occultisms (alchemy, astrology, kabbalah) into a unified syncretic system of belief—the same desire possessed by the hopeful narrator of *Aurélia*. As Nerval puts it in *Les Illuminés* (1852):

L'aspiration nouvelle aux dieux, après les mille ans d'interruption de leur culte, n'avait-elle pas commencé à se montrer au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, avant même que, sous le nom de Renaissance, l'art, la science et la philosophie se fussent renouvelés au souffle inspirateur des exilés de Byzance ? Le palladium mystique, qui avait jusque-là protégé la ville de Constantin, allait se rompre, et déjà la semence nouvelle faisait sortir de terre les génies emprisonnés du vieux monde. Les Médicis, accueillant les philosophes accusés de platonisme par l'inquisition de Rome, ne firent-ils pas de Florence une nouvelle Alexandrie ?<sup>44</sup>

Nerval's consistent emphasis on the traces of the Medicis in the Valois of *Sylvie* must consequently be understood within this background of his association of the Medicis with Renaissance Neoplatonism, conceived as a movement that liberates ancient gods and imprisoned « génies. » Given this association, it should come as no surprise that in the opening of *Sylvie* in which he characterizes the spirit of the age, the narrator tells of the « renewed fantasies of Alexandria » (147, 174) : in countering the disenchantment of his generation with an allusion to the renewing (and re-enchanting) aspirations of Neoplatonism, the narrator stages the return to the Valois as a return to a historical hotbed of re-enchantment.<sup>45</sup> The Valois thus represents the potential for revival on many

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<sup>43</sup> See Jean-Nicolas Illouz, « Les religions de Nerval » in Jacques Neefs ed., *Savoirs en récit II, Éclats de savoirs : Balzac, Nerval, Flaubert, Verne, les Goncourt* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2010) : 49-69 ; Bertrand Marchal, « Nerval et le retour des dieux ou le théâtre de la Renaissance » in José Luis Diaz ed., *Gérard de Nerval, Les Filles du Feu, Aurélia, « Soleil Noir »* (Paris : SEDES, 1997) : 223-233, and Jean-Nicolas Illouz, « Nerval, poète renaissant », *Littérature* 158.2 (2010): 5-19.

<sup>44</sup> Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Brix and Claude Pichois (Paris : Gallimard, 1989), vol. 1, 1159. Cited in Marchal, « Nerval et le retour des dieux, » 227. « This new aspiration for the gods, after the thousand year interruption of their cult, did it not begin to show itself in the fifteenth century, even before, under the name of the Renaissance, art, science and philosophy were renewed by the inspiring breath of those exiled from Byzantium ? The mystical palladium, which had until then protected the city of Constantine, had then begun to crumble, and already the new seeds had brought forth from the earth the imprisoned genies of the old world. The Medicis, welcoming the philosophers accused of platonism by the Roman inquisition, did they not fashion Florence into a new Alexandria ? » Translation mine.

<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Illouz notes, Nerval's Renaissance Valois must be understood as just one layer in a broader historical context in which the Valois serves as the grounds for an "archaeology of modern disenchantment"

fronts: the renewal of the narrator's urbane and world-weary psyche and the reclamation of his childhood love, but also the return of forbidden and occulted forms of knowledge and spirituality, from druidism to classical paganism to Renaissance Platonism to illuminism (Enlightenment occultism). It is a rich syncretic tapestry of Nerval's personal and literary mythos, a palimpsest that bears the traces of a series of historico-mythical banishments, disenchantments, and revolts.<sup>46</sup>

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[« une archéologie du désenchantement moderne »] (59). Illouz argues that in the Nervalian historical imaginary, the period stretching from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the Revolution constitutes an ongoing exploration of subversive political, intellectual, and religious thought. The Renaissance thus represents the beginning of the end of the breakdown of Christian dogmatism and medieval feudalism, of which the Revolution of 1789 is the culmination. If one considers the Renaissance as the birth of modern critical thought, then, the Valois operates in the Nervalian imaginary as central grounds for the clandestine relay of disenchanting knowledge that emancipates the human mind. Hence also the persistent emphasis on the Valois as a principle site of the Enlightenment in Nerval's Valois writings like *Angélique*, *Sylvie*, and, most notably, *Les Illuminés* (1852). As Illouz also stresses, however, the Enlightenment, just like the Renaissance, bears a double face of disenchantment and re-enchantment for Nerval: just as the Renaissance challenges Church hierarchy on rational grounds while also staging a mystical return to subversive and potentially heretical classical belief systems and modes of thought, so too the Enlightenment battles against the obscurity of the *ancien régime* while also freeing up a number of spiritualities both rational (philosophy) and irrational (pure "illuminism"). In other words, in the Nervalian historical imaginary, disenchantment and re-enchantment occur in a relationship of simultaneity that is not easily assimilated to the dialectical model we saw championed by Chateaubriand.

<sup>46</sup> I have already mentioned that the Valois of *Sylvie* is often conceived as a kind of Orient, in the sense that it designates a mysterious and seemingly enchanted place of origin to which the narrator turns, much as the European Orientalist subject looks to the "mysteries" of the Orient in hopes of grounding an understanding of the self in both a personal and more generic sense (the self *qua* European). I have also highlighted the significance of Orientalism within the context of the varied discourses that inform the epistemological drive of mid-nineteenth century France, a drive to which Nerval certainly succumbs, most notably in his *Voyage en Orient*. Within the symbolic economy of Nerval's obsession with the release of "imprisoned genies," the Orient also plays a central role as the supposed birthplace of freemasonry, an Enlightenment occultist staple whose origin story Nerval traces in "L'Histoire de la Reine du Matin et de Soliman, Prince des Génies," one of two developed narratives in the *Voyage en Orient* (1851). Adoniram, its protagonist, serves as the chief architect for the Biblical Soliman (Solomon), who hires him to design and oversee the construction of the Temple of Jerusalem, which according to Adoniram's vision is to be adorned with bronze statues that "assumed the form of lions, tigers, winged dragons, cherubim, or even of those fantastic, vanquished genii from former ages which have almost passed from the memory of man" [génies étranges et foudroyés, . . . races lointaines, à demi perdues dans la mémoire des hommes] (Gérard de Nerval, trans. Norman Glass, *Journey to the Orient*, [New York: NYU Press, 1972], 125; Henri Lemaitre ed., *Oeuvres de Gérard de Nerval, Tome II*, [Paris: Garnier Classiques, 1966], 567). When the sculptor Benoni, Adoniram's right hand man, resorts to only sculpting figures found in nature, Adoniram chastises him for "coldly copying nature" (127) and succumbing to the "vulgarity of form" (128), exhorting him to instead "seek out unknown forms, unnamed beings, incarnations which long ago made men flinch and withdraw" (128). Adoniram is thus a Blakean figure, the icon of a visionary humanity whose receptivity to the world's enchantment is unhindered by reified conventions of the world; he refuses to see the world as it is presented to him under the guise of "nature." Ignoring the admonishments of Soliman, who, as the representative of Adonai, condemns his representation of such *génie* as idolatry and blasphemy, Adoniram resists the supremacy of monotheistic disenchantment and maintains a fascination with—even a fidelity to—the spirits that have been ostensibly banished by God. As it turns out, Adoniram's affinity goes deeper than his status as an artist: he is later revealed to be a member of the Enochian race, i.e. a descendent of Cain and a "child of fire" who has survived the déluge intended to wipe out this defiant race. Adoniram, thus, is a representative of the Promethean legacy after which *Les Filles du feu* is named and, as such, is portrayed as the founding figure of Enlightenment Freemasonry.

Yet *Sylvie* does not appear to deliver on any of the promises of re-enchantment that saturate the Valois of Nerval's imaginary. For the most part, the novella depicts an irrecoverable loss in the vein of the Schillerian elegy, painting the picture of an idyllic and magical pastoral past while also inscribing that past as indisputably lost.<sup>47</sup> At the novella's end, the narrator's efforts at finding consolation for his nostalgia through seduction have all decidedly failed: he has alienated Aurélie, the actress, by comparing her to Adrienne ("l'idéal sublime"), his aforementioned unattainable childhood crush. Sylvie ("la douce réalité"), the narrative's namesake and the childhood love who the narrator actually *did* court, is meanwhile most closely associated with peasantry and the narrator's humble provincial roots; upon his return to the Valois, however, she turns out to be both engaged and decidedly less peasant-like in her taste for modern literature and opera as well as her current occupation as a cottage-industry glovemaker. As for Adrienne, she is actually revealed to be dead at the narrative's close: the narrative abruptly ends with this revelation of Adrienne's death "around 1832," marking the failure of the narrator's quest to metonymically regain his childhood past by regaining a lost love (177). Thus in the novella's "last leaf," the narrator describes himself as "like Werther, minus the pistols," pathetically clinging to Sylvie by lingering around the family she has formed with her now-husband "Big Curly," (177).

Fittingly, in contrast with the opening's momentum toward the Valois as an enchanting idyll to be recovered and regained, an antidote to urban(e) disenchantment, the narrative ends with a landscape painting of a Valois in irredeemable ruination:

"Ermenonville! . . . What are they to me now, your lakes, your shadowy groves, your desert? Othys, Montagny, Loisy, the poor neighbouring villages, Châalis—now being

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In many respects, Nerval's story is paradigmatic of Orientalism: it aims to reclaim aspects of the Orient for the purposes of transforming the Western subject—here, specifically, by reclaiming the "Oriental" roots of illuminism. Accordingly, although the mythos Nerval constructs in "L'Histoire de la reine du matin" is conceived as championing a kind of Promethean subversion of authority and Christian dogmatism, it is far from subversive of Orientalist conventions in which the Orient is represented as the means by which Europe redeems itself. Edward Said identifies the redemption imperative inherent in the discourse of Orientalism, locating Orientalism's provenance in the Romantic project of redeeming and revitalizing a Europe rendered lifeless by rationalism, materialism, and republican mechanism (all ostensibly products of the Enlightenment) through an engagement with the allegedly mystical cultures of the Orient.

Said, however, also emphasizes the extent to which *Nerval's* particular brand of Orientalism betrays the revivalist, redemptive, and reconstructive logics that characterize Orientalism as a whole. In my aim to bring into relief the unredeeming aspects of Nerval's writing, then, I draw on Said's critique of Nerval's Orientalist writing. When discussing Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, Said contrasts Nerval's literary Orientalism with predecessors such as Chateaubriand, for whom, Said argues, the Orient fits squarely into "the Romantic redemptive terms of a Christian mission to revive a dead world, to quicken in it a sense of its own potential, one which only a European can discern underneath a lifeless and degenerate surface" (172). According to Said, Nerval (along with Flaubert) offers a different type of Orientalist text, one that contrasts sharply with both earlier Romantic literary Orientalism as well as the scholarly Orientalism that comes to replace it at mid-century. Thus Nerval's ego "never absorbed the Orient, nor totally identified the Orient with documentary and textual knowledge of it (with official Orientalism, in short)" (181). Instead, Nerval's Orient arises as a "world of uncertain, fluid dreams infinitely multiplying themselves past resolution, definiteness, materiality" (183), an "endlessly decomposing cavernous element" (183), and a discursive space "identified with commemorative *absence*" (184).

<sup>47</sup> Ross Chambers goes as far as to read *Sylvie* is an act of textual suicide, an expression of absolute "letting go" that "asks us to reflect what it means to disengage, and on whether disengagement can be a positive act" ("Suicide Without Pistols" in *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 83).

restored—you have retained nothing of this past. Every now and then I feel the urge to revisit these scenes of solitude and reverie. There I sadly rediscover within myself the fleeting traces of an era when naturalness was affected; I occasionally smile when I read certain lines of Roucher that had once seemed so sublime to me chiseled into the granite rocks—or else philanthropic maxims inscribed above a fountain or a grotto dedicated to Pan. The ponds, dug at such expense, are now stagnant expanses, shunned by swans. The times are gone when the hunting parties of the Condé would sweep through these parts with their proud equestriennes, their horns calling to each other from afar, multiplying with every echo. These days there is no direct route to Ermenonville.” (176)

Here the narrator’s nostalgic desire is revealed as the metonymic echochamber it has always been: the Valois has lost its allure as the repository for an idyllic past, but this decay is attributed at least in part to its having lost its “one and only star, the one that sparkled for me with a double splendor”—that is, the mystical presence of Sylvie and Adrienne (176). Sylvie, however, has lost her allure precisely because the Valois has “retained nothing of this past”: upon the narrator’s return, she has proven too modern, corrupted by the region’s susceptibility to industry and mass culture. Ermenonville is rendered here as abandoned, deserted, completely inaccessible. Restoration, meanwhile—the ostensible aspiration driving the narrative’s movement—reveals itself to be, in its literal form as the restoration of Châalis, a threat to the authenticity of the (ruined) past. These developments lead the reader to wonder: *what* exactly is “this past” [*ce passé*] that has not been retained, if it ever truly existed? And *where* was it, if it ever had a locale? The answer lies both in the symbolic significance of “Ermenonville” as well as in this passage’s ironic idea of the narrator’s rediscovery of “the fleeting traces of an era when naturalness was affected.”

For Ermenonville, it seems, has always been in ruin. After finally arriving back in the Valois and attending the ball at Loisy where he first reunites with Sylvie, the narrator revisits Ermenonville, the chateau and estate that includes the “Temple of Philosophy” where the ashes of Rousseau had once been housed. The ashes, however, are no longer there: they have been moved to the Pantheon, a sign, for the narrator, that humanity has abandoned the lessons of Rousseau. The narrator gets lost because the signposts along the way have been effaced. The temple has been overgrown with ivy, and the rose-bushes and laurels of the narrator’s childhood memories have apparently been removed. Only “Virgil’s privet” remains, which, along with his words “*Rerum cognoscere causas*” written above the temple, provokes a meditation on the apparently eternal thirst for knowledge that persists despite the erosion of history and the indifference of nature.

At the same time, though, we gain some critical information about the Temple that prompts to us to consider the idea that revival and decay may not be as opposed as it would seem. The proprietor of Ermenonville, a lover of Enlightenment philosophy, has revived [*ressucités*] the memories of classical philosophy by erecting this sacred site, and the narrator remarks that the temple is in the same form as the Tiburtine sibyl, reinforcing the relationship between Enlightenment philosophy and neoclassical revival. And yet the owner died and the temple has never been finished, marking the impossibility of full-fledged revival and the homology (if not shared identity) between futural non-fulfillment and historical erosion, a homology famously evoked (to cite it yet again) by Chateaubriand in the image of the past and present as “two incomplete statues.” Nerval reiterates this formulation in writing that “*Cet edifice inachevé n’est déjà plus qu’une ruine, le lierre le festonne avec grâce, la ronce envahit les marches disjointes*” [“This unfinished edifice is *already* no more than a ruin, the ivy festoons it with grace, the bramble invades its loosened steps” – translation mine, emphasis mine]. The seeming prematurity of the ruination of this site undoes our typical understanding of ruin as the signifier of a lost and distant past. In the idea that ruin can “already” occur lies buried the idea that neoclassical revival is bound to slip into the ontological status of the

ruins by which it has been inspired. The ruins of Ermenonville are thus not merely “already” ruined—in a sense they have *always already* been so. The past, in other words, has always already been under erasure, rendering even the idea of return unintelligible. We are now in the familiar terrain of Baudelairean modernity, defined as an era acutely aware of its own transience—if we were not *already* there with Chateaubriand’s figuration of the present as ruin.

Nerval thus writes the Valois as an idea itself in ruins, under erasure—the idea of a “nature” of pre-modern enchantment. In doing so, he adopts a characteristic that Walter Benjamin identifies as fundamental to baroque allegory: “Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.”<sup>48</sup> The baroque passion for allegory, Benjamin argues, is the “polar opposite to the idea of transfigured nature as conceived by the early renaissance” (*OG* 179); in baroque allegory, both nature and history lose their organicity and are juxtaposed in a relation of mutual transience, as “it is fallen nature which bears the imprint of the progression of history” (*OG* 180).<sup>49</sup> By the end of *Sylvie* it is clear that the Valois has slipped into a fallen state, losing its status as a locus of the continuity of the past and the persistence of nature’s enchantments. The “nature” to which the narrator flees proves to be a fantasy mediated by a historically specific cultural construct—linked to the social environment of the 1830s—and itself a repetition of prior efforts of retreat. The narrator laments, “Rousseau said the spectacle of nature provides consolation for everything. Sometimes I go looking for my groves of Clarens, again, lost to the north of Paris in the mists. Everything has so changed!” (176). Rendering his pastoral retreat as generic, a copy of that of French Romanticism’s forefather, the narrator reveals nature to indeed be a “spectacle,” the repository of the “fleeting traces of an era when naturalness was affected,” which is to say every era, since the natural has only ever manifested itself as an affectation. If the Valois is desired as an alternative to the endless repetition of historical disappointments, it only offers in its stead the melancholy record of the repeated efforts to simulate such an alternative. As Proust responds to critics whose praise for Nerval was rooted primarily in his status as a writer of pastoral naïveté, “*Cette histoire que vous appelez la peinture naïve, c’est le rêve d’un rêve, rappelez-vous* ».<sup>50</sup> Its fallen state is emphasized precisely by the fact that it bears the imprint of history, to use Benjamin’s phrase—specifically, the history of a succession of failed renewals and rediscoveries. The Valois may be inextricably linked to the Renaissance revivalism in the Nervalian imaginary, but it is also always already, following Benjamin, baroque, a space where nature is neither the object *nor* the source of “transfiguration.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1963), 178. Hereafter cited as *OG*.

<sup>49</sup> For a masterful elucidation of Benjamin’s theory of baroque allegory as it relates to ruin and decay, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), a text to which my own interpretation is greatly indebted. Hanssen comments that “as a historico-philosophical category, allegory . . . testified to humanity’s profoundly altered relationship with nature. Insofar as allegory stood for semantic overdetermination and oversignification, it was responsible for what Benjamin, alluding to the mystical tradition, described as nature’s mourning” (77). Thus to write nature, in the baroque sense, is to write (in) ruins. Writing in ruins, Hanssen goes on to argue, is the writing of the conditions in which history “entwine[s] with nature to become nature-history,” where each term serves to reinforce the transience of the other.

<sup>50</sup> Marcel Proust, *Contre Saint Beuve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 192. “Remember: this story that you call a naïve painting is a dream of a dream.” Translation mine.

<sup>51</sup> It is impossible here not to think of De Man’s “Rhetoric of Temporality,” itself greatly influenced by Benjamin’s theory of baroque allegory (Paul De Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983], 187-228). De Man identifies allegory as the ironic counterpoint to the Romantic symbol: while the latter aspires to transcendence and reinforces the coherence of the subject by simulating a profound connection with its other (often nature), the former expresses



By staging the unraveling of the pastoral fantasy of a natural or “enchanted” past that one can return to and be transfigured by, *Sylvie* also models what it might look like to meet nature without the expectation of permanence, of fulfillment, or of some elusive authenticity. It makes peace with the disappointments of both human and natural history by indulging what might be called an aesthetics of ruin, characterized by an embrace of the beauty of both transience and artifice. This, in fact, may have been the secret behind Nerval’s rendition of “revival” all along: the enchantment associated with the pre-modern may be nothing more than the product of an improvised *re-enactment*, in which the emergence of something like magic is predicated both on illusion and ephemerality.

Take, for instance, the narrator’s most moving and indelible memory of Adrienne. As the narrator rides through the Valois countryside en route to Loisy, he is reminded of the time he traveled with Sylvie’s brother to the ruins of the abbey of Châalis to see Adrienne acting in a mystery play there—a play, he notes, which dates back to the reign of the Valois. Implicitly drawing an analogy between this dramatic revival and the Renaissance revivalism he associates with the Valois, the narrator reminds us that “isolated from the bustle of cities and high roads, religion [here] has retained” some of the traces of the influence of the Medicis. Indeed, “the Renaissance still breathes” in this space, and the figures of saints and angels on vaulted church ceilings exhibit an “allegorical pagan demeanor” that evokes that “mythical mysticism of a Francesco Colonna” (161). While the ghost of Renaissance revivalism haunts the Valois, Adrienne performs her own act of mystical revival: she portrays an angel in the debris of the devastated earth—the ruins of Chaâlis providing the perfect backdrop—who challenges death and summons the others to admire the glory of Christ, vanquisher of hell. The narrator describes Adrienne’s performance as “a kind of allegorical dramatic presentation” [*une sorte de représentation allégorique*] (161), a qualification linking Adrienne’s performance to the “allegorical pagan demeanor” [*airs d’allégorie païenne*] of the saints painted on the ceilings of nearby Valois chapels. Adrienne constitutes a redeeming figure in both the play itself and the narrator’s memory thereof, and yet she is, of course, the character least redeemed from oblivion in *Sylvie*: not only is she lost to the world in the novella’s close, but she also risks fading from memory as the narrator struggles to maintain whether this performance—his most striking recollection of Adrienne—was an actual occurrence or a dream. The most pivotal scene of the narrator’s desirous imaginary—the one that drives his return to the Valois after Aurélie’s performance triggers its recollection at the start of the novella—thus models a “revival” that is at once illusory and transitory.<sup>52</sup>

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finitude, difference, and fragmentation. Following De Man, we might say that *Sylvie* dramatizes the tension between these two axes of symbol/allegory—the desire to transcend and the surrender to immanence and thus decay. If, for De Man, the writing of allegory is indeed the mode most proper to Romanticism, then we might say that *Sylvie* comes to the same conclusion; crucially, it enacts the Romantic subject’s reflection on its own history. By setting itself in the eras of high French Romanticism (the 1830s), the 1855 text both distances itself from the desires for transcendence and pastoral reconciliation of that period while also making clear that the *literary resistance* to such an urge was present all along. For a reading of *Sylvie* as a work of Romantic historical self-reflection (albeit one that does not highlight the De Manian problematic I have just mentioned) see Jean-Nicolas Illouz, “Une Théorie critique du romantisme,” in *Variations Critiques pour Béatrice Didier* ed. Christine Montalbetti and Jacques Neefs (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), 219-227.

<sup>52</sup> Elsewhere Nerval makes clear his association between theatricality—like music, an art predicated on the ephemerality of performance—and the “*resurrection du passé*.” In an 1844 letter to *L’Artiste*, he reviews a production of *Antigone* which, he muses, bears the religious character of ancient Greek theater. The theatre is transformed into a temple, and thus threatens the religious order of the present: « peut-être l’Église . . . a-t-elle trembler davantage de cette mystérieuse invasion des idées païennes qui s’accroît depuis quelque temps. . . . Qui sait si l’inspiration et l’enthousiasme des hommes s’appliquant de nouveau à des solennités éteintes,

The chapter titled “A Voyage at Cythera” in *Sylvie* offers perhaps the most striking example of the poetics of ruin, of the baroque allegory, a poetics defined by transience, repetition, and illusion. Benjamin describes the baroque writing process as follows: “[I]t is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification. The baroque writers must have regarded the work of art as just such a miracle” (OG, 178). There is perhaps no better way to characterize the chapter entitled “A Voyage to Cythera,” one of the vignette-like recollections that follows the opening of *Sylvie*. In this memory the narrator “once again [joins] the Knights of the Bow” to join the rustic procession at Loisy that he has hitherto described as the “mere” (and apparently inadvertent) repetition of past Druidic tradition. This procession is followed by an organized voyage to an island on one of the lakes fed by the rivers Nonette and Thève; the participants are ferried to the island in small boats decked with flags in order to attend a banquet on the island. As the narrator remarks, “the crossing of the lake had perhaps been devised to recall Watteau’s *Voyage to Cythera*,” repeating the idea of a vaguely inadvertent repetition of an image of antiquity which is of course its own form of reproduction—a fact highlighted by the chapter title’s indefinite article, a marker of the generic quality of the event in question (153). The narrator observes that “this graceful *theory*, reviving the days of antiquity, was reflected in the calm waters of the lake” [*cette gracieuse théorie renouvelée des jours antiques se reflétait dans les eaux calmes de l’étang*] (153, 181), equating once again the act of revival with an ephemeral re-enactment, an enchanting effect that leaves no permanent trace. “Revival” here is metaphorized as a fleeting reflection, the wake of a boat.

The double to this image is the site of the banquet, which, unsurprisingly, lies in ruins:

Here, as at Ermenonville, the countryside is dotted with airy constructions dating back to the end of the eighteenth century, when millionaire free-thinkers drew their architectural inspirations from the reigning fashions of the day. I believe that this particular temple had originally been dedicated to Urania. Three of its columns had collapsed, carrying along with them a portion of the architrave; but the interior had been cleared of debris and garlands had been strung between the columns, thus rejuvenating this modern ruin—a remnant of the paganism of Boufflers or Chaulieu rather than that of Horace. (153)

Akin to the process by which Benjamin’s baroque writers pile up fragments and repeat “stereotypes” in an undirected process of miraculous creation, so here Nerval adds yet another ruin to the pile of

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n’iront pas réveiller, dans quelque astre lointain, des puissances aujourd’hui méconnues, mais capables encore d’influence heureuse ou fatale ? » (Gérard de Nerval, *Œuvres complètes de Gérard de Nerval* (Paris : M.J. Minard, 1961), 563. Here Nerval presents theater as necromancy, drawing a connection between theatrical restaging and the summoning of the ancient subdued gods of paganism. In a follow-up letter in response to apparent accusations of heresy from a certain M. Merle, Nerval justifies the idea of paganistic theatrical-religious revivalism by defending the pantheism of Quinet (who predicts the eventual alliance of all religions and symbols) and the neopythagoreanism of Leroux. The introductory letter to Dumas in *Filles du feu*, meanwhile, grounds the practice of theatrical and literary creation in the recollection of past lives, endorsing Leroux’s belief in the transmigration of souls. The association between the resurrection of past modes of pantheistic spirituality and theatrical revival is consistent throughout much of Nerval’s writing, even as the question of such resurrections’ (direct, lasting) effect often remains open and questionable, as it does in the above appeal to the potential influence of “quelque astre lointain.”

transient reproductions comprising this scene. The “modern ruin” may itself be the most appropriate aesthetic category to describe a text like *Sylvie*, according to whose logic the re-enactment of a scene from a Watteau painting is as “natural” as the repetition of a local “Druidic” tradition, and the “paganism” of two (now largely forgotten) neo-classical eighteenth century poets is as good as that of the ancients. The garland “rejuvenating” the ruin in question emphasizes that even the most recent or “modern” of revivals are in need of restoration, exposing Nervalian revival as nothing more than this process of provisional renovation.

In Nerval’s ruined pastoral, to return to “nature,” then, is to experience the impossibility of such a return; to restore “paganism” is to become acutely aware of the futility of any attempt to achieve a systematic and lasting restoration of such a religious disposition, whether it goes by the name of the “naïve” or “natural religion” or even, according to Chateaubriand’s logic, “Christianity.” Like the “graceful theory” occurring in the Voyage to Cythera scene above, the poetics of nature theorized in *Sylvie* occurs at the threshold of appearance and disappearance, of dreams and reality. Nerval thus demythologizes the concept of nature as a source of *hope*, releasing it from a fantasy in which it is permanently and reliably “there” at our disposal, rendering it no longer a resource for transforming, negating, or escaping from a world we know to be unbearable.

## CHAPTER TWO Dickinson's Companions

### i) introduction : "Hesitating Fractions"

*Another great design in the affair of redemption was to gather in one all things in Christ in heaven and on earth, i.e. all elect creatures . . . This is to bring all elect creatures in heaven and earth to an union one to another, in one body under one head, and to unite all together in one body to God the Father. This was begun soon after the fall and is carried on through all ages of the world and finished at the end of the world.*

-Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*

*I could suffice for Him, I knew –*

*He – could suffice for Me –*

*Yet Hesitating Fractions – Both*

*Surveyed\* Infinity –*

*\*delayed—deferred*

-Emily Dickinson, fascicle thirty-three, sheet six (F712)

If redemption is indeed to be conceived as the unification of a fragmented world, the drawing together of souls into a divine whole, as Jonathan Edwards describes it, then we may characterize these opening lines from Emily Dickinson's 1863 poem as decidedly non-redemptive. Fully aware of their complementarity and the adequacy of their pairing, the poetic voice and her masculine counterpart nevertheless refrain from joining together, retaining their status as discrete entities. Yet the parties in question are willing and able to keep apart not because of an alleged state of wholeness or completion in themselves, as a radical solipsism would have it: the poetic "I"'s description of the two as "Hesitating Fractions" concedes that both beings are partial, incomplete. In this sense, Dickinson's poem does little to contest the idea of a world that is fragmented and fallen; this is decidedly not the world-affirming voice of repletion we will see in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The poem posits redemptive integration as an option, if not a necessity, on the horizon. The first quatrain refers to an "Infinity" in which these fractured parts may be brought together. Dickinson's variants of "delayed" and "deferred" both confirm that "Infinity" may be read as the eternal world-to-come that not only unifies all "elect creatures," to use Edwards' term, but also draws all of time together into an apocalyptic moment of fulfillment.<sup>53</sup> By settling on "Surveyed," however, Dickinson softened the idea that union is preordained for the personages in question: rather than the delay of the inevitable, the hesitation of both parties could thus be understood as a sustained assessment of the prospect of unification represented by the infinite. Perhaps to "survey infinity" looks like permanent hesitation, the likewise infinite deferral of unification. In other words, the pair may have the freedom to hesitate in the face of unification not just temporarily, but *infinitely*. As Sharon Cameron shows in her seminal *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre*, Dickinson's poetry often juxtaposes time and immortality in order to bring the latter into relief as the negative of

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<sup>53</sup> As Edwards not so succinctly puts it, "The Work of Redemption with respect to the grand design in general as it relates to the universal subject and end of it, is carried on from the fall <of man to the end of the world> in a different manner, not merely by the repeating and renewing of the same effect on the different subjects of it, but by many successive works and dispensations of God, all tending to one great end and effect, all united as the several parts of a scheme, and altogether making up one great work." Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 121.

the former, privileging it as an “absent or invisible order” that is not subject to the deprivation and incompleteness of the temporal world.<sup>54</sup> Inverting Cameron’s formulation, we might think of this “Infinity” instead as the background against which these “Hesitating Fractions” maintain the discreteness that they apparently desire, however ambivalently.

As this chapter will show, such questioning of unification or communion as an unqualified good occurs in much of Dickinson’s writings. In certain Dickinson poems about mortality, for instance, souls remain separate from each other even in death. In P449, a person who “died for Beauty” and “One who died for Truth” are buried next to each other. Despite the latter’s eager Keatsian pronouncement that these values “Themselves are One,” the two parties are posthumously confined to talking “between the Rooms” until they are permanently silenced (and thus annihilated?) by a moss that grows over their lips and gravestones. In another well-known poem (F124), the dead remain sealed “Safe in their Alabaster chambers – / Untouched by Morning – / And untouched by Noon—”; the mention of a “Resurrection” that might liberate the dead from their current constraints to reunite them is evoked more as a source of contrast than consolation. The poem suspends the dead in a state of impassivity in which the changes in the world around them go unregistered, “Soundless as dots – on a Disc of snow – .” Notably in both poems, the absence or deferral of redemptive unification is depicted in decidedly nontragic terms. In the same spirit, this chapter dwells with elements of Dickinson’s writing where the idea of individuals keeping their distance and maintaining their separateness is treated as necessary or even desirable. This amenability to separation extends to realms outside the human, such that Dickinson’s writings may be said to model a version of the world in which a being’s value or meaning does not depend on its connection to a larger whole. Crucially, this does not mean that such beings do not maintain valuable connections between each other; to the contrary, Dickinson portrays the setting aside of any theoretical totality as a reinforcement of the meaningful connections that beings establish with one another.

Those connections, however small and local, are paradoxically global, even cosmic in significance, as in the remainder of F712:

“Would I be Whole” He sudden broached –  
My Syllable rebelled –  
‘Twas face to face with Nature – forced –  
‘Twas face to face with God –

Withdrew the Sun – to other Wests –  
Withdrew the furthest Star  
Before Decision – stooped to speech –  
And then – be audibler

The Answer of the Sea unto  
The Motion of the Moon –  
Herself adjust Her Tides – unto –  
Could I – do else – with Mine?<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 1.

<sup>55</sup> Unless otherwise specified, Dickinson’s poems are cited as they appear in Christanne Miller ed. *Emily Dickinson’s Poems as She Preserved Them* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). I will refer, however, to the number they were assigned by Ralph W. Franklin, as they are also cross-referenced in Miller’s edition.

Here Dickinson deploys her characteristic “‘Twas” to describe an abstract or allegorical situation taken out of any concrete point of reference. We learn, first, that the masculine counterpart has ceded the standstill established between the two parties in order to propose unification, and, second, that this offer of unification “forces” the lyric subject into yet another existential confrontation, this time with Nature and/or God. The situation seems remarkably similar to that of the first stanza, though now the lyric subject faces new iterations of “Infinity” alone. As we come to learn, the lyric “I” keeps up her end of the prior arrangement—though perhaps unwillingly, as her “Syllable” may be understood to rebel against her *own* wish for communion as much as it does against that of her masculine counterpart. Though the “Syllable” may be understood to be “no,” the word denotes at the same time the “least portion or detail of speech or writing”, thus suggesting that the subject declines unification by means of a stubborn insistence on the fractional even at the level of speech.<sup>56</sup>

Indeed, the last two quatrains go on to model a crucial aspect of what it means to remain a “Hesitating Fraction”: namely, the lack of direct communication that functions paradoxically as the condition by which two separate entities remain connected. The transparency of a direct and decisive answer, whether it be yes or no, would in this instance nullify the indeterminate *raw potential* for unification, the quality that defines the very essence of the relationship in the first quatrain. The last two quatrains thus emphasize the understanding that the subject’s response to the offer of wholeness is qualitatively different from that of a firm negation. As time rolls on and the sun sets “to other Wests” (an image that recalls the standstill of F124’s “Grand go the Years, /In the Crescent above them –/Worlds scoop their Arcs –/and Firmaments – row –”), the absence of an audible response comes to look very much like its own decision, an answer in itself, though not one that “stoops to speech.” Crucially, this answer, barely distinguishable from silence (what does it mean for a sound to be audible?), is not merely an implied “no,” nor certainly is it an implied “yes.” Rather, it is likened to the passive adjustment of the sea to the movement of the moon, a figure of intimacy between two bodies attained through, rather than in spite of, an unbridgeable distance.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the poem posits not coming wholly together as what it means for two entities to *be* together. The lyric subject thus crafts a solution to the problem of maintaining distance even when communion is portrayed as tempting or perhaps the path of least resistance.

Confronted with such an enigmatic poem, the reader may feel she has been left out of the loop: Is there an actual “decision” or “answer”? Yet if these lines baffle us, it is for good reason. Just as the lyric “I” seems to keep her male counterpart suspended in an intimate mystery, so too the reader is kept in a state of unknowing. Non-knowledge is in fact what structures the particular appeal of the poem, what colors our relation to it as readers. To use one of Dickinson’s own formulations, it is what keeps us wondering and thus full of *wonder*:

Wonder – is not precisely knowing  
And not precisely knowing not –  
A beautiful but bleak condition

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<sup>56</sup> "syllable, n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196145?rskey=UEEhx4&result=1&isAdvanced=false> (accessed September 01, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> In my parsing the nature of this “answer” I am inspired in part by Anne-Lise François’s idea of “reticent assertion” theorized in her *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), a project defined in part as “an attempt to consider, at least for a moment, never-acted-upon passions and uncounted experiences not as *nos* disguising incipient, concealed, or denied affirmatives but rather as aimless, innocent, minimal, all but negative contented affirmations” (33).

He has not lived who has not felt – (F1347)

Non-knowledge, or “wonder,” is not the same as total ignorance: it does not provide the comforting certainty that one absolutely does *not* know. Like feeling pain, it is “a beautiful but bleak condition” that is also how we know we are alive.

“Non-knowledge” (*non-savoir*, alternately translated as “unknowing”), is a term central to the work of Georges Bataille and I use it here to highlight convergences between Bataille’s atheological mysticism and Dickinson’s writings about her relationship to God, Nature, and others. For Bataille, non-knowledge is defined primarily as an *experience*, as a painful intimacy with the world outside the self as ungraspable or unfathomable. Bataille writes that in the experience of non-knowledge, I am myself in a world which I recognize as deeply inaccessible to me, since in all the relations I have sought to establish with it, there remains something I cannot conquer, so that I remain in a kind of despair.<sup>58</sup> In the framework of Christian religious experience, Bataille equates the despair that follows non-knowledge with the realization that there is no hope for salvation, and even likens it to death itself. Crucially, though, and somewhat paradoxically, the world’s resistance to being grasped or appropriated by knowledge contributes to a stronger sense of one’s immanence within it, for as Bataille also writes, “When one reaches this sort of despair but continues to exist in the world with the same hopes, the same instincts, one realizes suddenly that one’s possession of the world has greater depth than others. These possibilities are, in effect, more open to him who has relinquished knowledge. Each time we relinquish the will to knowledge, we have the possibility of a far more intense contact with the world” (83). Bataille’s non-knowledge is, like Dickinson’s wonder, a “beautiful but bleak condition,” a painful intimacy with the unfathomable world outside the self, in comparison to which even the prospect of absolute knowledge is rendered relatively insignificant: “Non-knowledge attained, absolute knowledge is no longer anything but one knowledge among others.”<sup>59</sup>

As religious scholar Amy Hollywood puts it, Bataille’s mysticism is characterized by “the desire to be all and [the] recognition that one cannot be everything”; it renounces fantasies of wholeness and nostalgia for lost plenitude even as it recognizes the desirability of fulfillment.<sup>60</sup> In the apophatic theology central to Christian mysticism since Dionysius the Areopagite, God is utterly unknowable, and experience of the unknowable is the condition of union with God as the transcendent principle of Being.<sup>61</sup> Bataille transposes this apophatic principle of mysticism into the framework of his radical atheism, in which all hope of salvation is renounced. Within this hopeless context, mystical non-knowledge rests within the irredeemable realm of the mortal flesh. Rather than prizing non-knowledge as the means for communion with the transcendent, Bataille values it in its painful inconsequentiality. Though it would be foolish to assert that Dickinson shares in Bataille’s radical atheism, it is fair to say that she holds a similar regard for non-knowledge. If absolute knowledge brings things together into the static coherency of holistic understanding, Dickinson favors non-knowledge as what keeps relations vital and dynamic, suspended in the state of fragmented indeterminacy.

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<sup>58</sup> Georges Bataille, “Un-Knowing and Its Consequences,” in *October* 36 (Spring 1986): 80-85; 82. Here after cited parenthetically within text.

<sup>59</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson ed., *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 84.

<sup>60</sup> Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 35. Hereafter cited within the text.

<sup>61</sup> See Bernard and Patricia Ferris McGinn, *Early Christian Mystics: The Divine Vision of the Spiritual Masters* (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 171-191.

Dickinson thus departs significantly from the Emerson of *Nature*, for whom thinking can and must bring together the disparate parts of a fragmented cosmos:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited...But when a faithful thinker, resolute to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.<sup>62</sup>

Like Edwards, for Emerson redemption and unification are synonymous acts, but they are to be actively carried out by the individual poet-thinker rather than by the will of God alone—apocalypse becomes a poetic vision that in itself “transforms” the world. When the “faithful thinker” sees beyond things in the particularity of “personal relations,” both nature and the thinker himself will be redeemed—that is, united, made whole. Likewise, God and nature will be unified in the cosmic triumph of redemptive perception. For Dickinson, meanwhile, a vision of unity may flash up as it does in “I could suffice for Him, I knew,” but only as a theoretical and disembodied ideal, a point of contrast with the fragmented world. There is no promise that thought or knowledge can bring that vision into being. Indeed, we may read the lyric subject’s non-affirmative response to the question “Would I be whole” not only as hesitancy to unite, but also as a refusal to speculate about the means by which wholeness might be attained.

This chapter explores a number of instances of sustained separation like those of poem 712’s “Hesitating Fractions” to illustrate Dickinson’s break with a unifying and thus redemptive impulse in much of transatlantic Romanticism, epitomized by Emerson’s above pronouncement about the transformative capacities of “the light of thought.” One claim of this chapter is that Dickinson’s poetry poses a challenge to redemptive modes of thought by disrupting the notion of a correspondence between God, Nature, and the self on which Transcendentalism is based. Another more radical claim is that Dickinson’s writings perform the *opposite* of redemption, Christian or otherwise: if redemption is conceived (following Edwards and Emerson—but also Leo Bersani<sup>63</sup>) as the creation of a text that sees a fragmented world anew through its unifying lens, then Dickinson’s poetry does precisely the work of *unredeeming* that world, seeing it as populated by discrete and autonomous entities such as humans, God, and “Nature”—this last likewise often breaking down into its composite parts of dogs, hills, sunsets, bees, flowers, and the like. As it suspends or even resists the aspiration of unification, Dickinson’s unredeeming poetics of nature affirms the connections between entities as valuable in themselves, however limited they may be. One of those limits—perhaps *the* limit—is epistemological, and the following section investigates Dickinson’s embrace of the limits of knowing others, in which those limits constitute the grounds rather than the impediment of relation. Drawing on Dickinson’s own terms, I will call this mode of relating *companionship*.

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<sup>62</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 38.

<sup>63</sup> Readers of *The Culture of Redemption* will recall Bersani’s critique of Proust’s *Recherche* as a text that is at heart a “redemptive replication of damaged or worthless experience” made up of “sublimations [that] integrate, unify, and restore” (Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990], 21).



ii) **knowing but not telling**

*You ask of my Companions Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a Dog – large as myself, that my Father bought me – They are better than Beings – because they know – but do not tell –...*  
—Emily Dickinson, letter to T.W. Higginson, 25 April 1862

*Naming close forms of friendship, familiarity, and erotic entanglements, and also naming an intrinsic psychic inwardness, “intimacy” crystallizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities. The term designates, and thus to a degree attests to, a confidence that individuals can and do disclose to one another thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but it also pertains to, and thus intimates the foreboding or wish for, an inward region of irreducible privacy, a fated or perhaps willed withholding.*  
—Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy*

A fundamental problem explored in Dickinson’s poetry is the nature of the relationship between knowing others and being with them. This problem is reflected upon in a wide range of thematic contexts across Dickinson’s work: in poems about love, friendship, faith, religious and intellectual community, naturally, but also in poems about nature, poetry, and the essence of writing itself. Likewise, one encounters a wide variety of modes of being with and knowing others across Dickinson’s poems: accompanying them, bearing witness to them, giving space to them, as well as longing for them and ignoring them—sometimes all of these within the space of one poem. At the center of these reflections about being with and knowing others are questions about the limits of communication: what kinds of knowledge are beings able to share with one another? What is the nature and medium of such communication? And what kinds of knowledge are better left uncommunicated?

As Nancy Yousef notes in the above epigraph, such questions are at the heart of the definition of “intimacy,” and any sincere attempt to answer them will involve grappling with the tensions that inhere in what it means to be intimate. According to Yousef, our understanding of intimacy with others entails the revelation—or at the very least, the *potential* for revelation—of knowledge contained within the deepest part of the self. And yet to maintain that sense of intimacy means to preserve the idea of elements of the self that might continue to exist as enclosed. Offering an alternative to the paradigm of sympathy so thoroughly explored in the criticism of Romantic-era literature and thought, Yousef’s *Romantic Intimacy* explores the theory of intimacy elaborated in the same era. Intimacy, unlike sympathy, she argues, “involves asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of relation, attention, and appreciation”; in its commitment to exploring the paradoxes of intimacy, Romanticism “soften[s] the hard opposing edges of solitary inwardness and interpersonal exposure.”<sup>64</sup>

Emily Dickinson’s poetry performs precisely this theoretical work of exploring the edges of disclosure and enclosure, revelation and concealment, being together and being alone. Notably, for Dickinson these questions extend beyond the realm of the human, as there is a profound relationship between Dickinson’s modes of intimacy and the poetics of nature found in her writings. Dickinson’s reflections upon the limits of knowing others are central to the way she conceives of the possibility of a connection between humanity and nonhuman nature. “Nature” is one among many others in Dickinson’s writings, and it presents quite the same limitations to knowledge and reciprocity as any of the rest.

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<sup>64</sup> Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 3, 4.

Consider the following poem (c. 1864), in which “Nature” is one of two “others” who, though they both bear knowledge that defines the very essence of the lyric subject, refrain from revealing it:

Nature and God – I neither knew  
Yet Both so well knew me  
They startled, like Executors  
Of My identity.

Yet Neither told – that I could learn –  
My Secret as secure  
As Herschel’s private interest  
Or Mercury’s affair – (FR803)

Both Nature and God function in this poem as the ideal companions that Dickinson describes in the above epigraph from her letter to Higginson—that is, as entities that know something but will not tell it. The poem forecloses the possibility of the transparency of identity, both to the self and to others, as the nature of this secret, the apparent key to understanding the poetic subject, remains undisclosed to both the poetic subject and the reader. The poem treats the externalization and withholding of this profoundly intimate, perhaps transformative knowledge as a welcome source of security.<sup>65</sup> The sense of mystery further proliferates in the second quatrain when the lyric “I” relates that she is ignorant not only of the content of this secret, but also whether it has indeed been preserved: “Yet Neither told – that I could learn –” calls into question whether the secret has been kept, as well as whether one could ever learn of its disclosure. This ambiguity leaves the reader wondering whether such a secret is the sort of knowledge that is capable of being conveyed to anyone—especially to the lyric subject.

The second quatrain likens this intimate secrecy to unknown aspects of faraway planets. As Renée Bergland notes, “Herschel” may designate any of the following: the astronomer William Herschel, the discoverer of the planet Uranus; his sister Caroline Herschel, a fellow astronomer who provided all the calculations that were vital to her brother’s discoveries; or the planet Uranus itself, as it was often referred to by its discoverer’s name in Dickinson’s day.<sup>66</sup> In keeping with Bergland’s

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<sup>65</sup> Here one is reminded of Jacques Lacan’s idea of *extimacy* which, as Jacques Alain Miller defines it, “is not the contrary of intimacy” but rather the idea that “the intimate is Other—like a foreign body, a parasite.” Further, Miller reminds us that “There are several covers of this point of extimacy, one of which is the religious cover. Thus Saint Augustine speaks of God as *interior intimo meo*, “more interior than my innermost being.” God here is thus a word which covers this point of extimacy which in itself has nothing likeable.” Jacques Alain Miller, “Extimacy,” <http://www.lacan.com/symptom/extimacy.html> (Accessed May 8, 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Bergland’s analysis of “Nature and God—I neither knew” provides an account of the poem as both a product of Dickinson’s scientific education during her time at Mount Holyoke Seminary in the 1840s as well as an index of the period’s shifting politics with respect to women’s role in scientific inquiry. Science, Bergland argues, was deemed appropriate for women to study in the first half of the nineteenth century because it remained compatible with natural theology, in which the secrets of nature reveal the manifest will of God. By the time Dickinson begins saving her poems in the 1860s, however, scientific inquiry had taken on a more destabilizing if not adversarial role with respect to Christian doctrine (culminating, one might say, in Darwin’s *Origin of Species*) and was less liberally included in the education of Anglo-American women. Bergland thus reads the poem as a reminiscence of Dickinson’s now-subversive scientific education, arguing that the poem expresses an epistemological queerness as it blurs the boundaries between gendered realms of knowledge, positing the female scientist as a kind of “Uranian” (a sexual invert). Thus Dickinson’s disavowal

reading, I find that the poem poses a threat to the paradigm of natural theology, though not only because it gestures toward astronomy, or science generally, as a form of knowledge that questions the correspondence between God and Nature. Such discontinuity between the realms of divinity and nature might also be read in the trope of the planet itself, which evokes the idea of bodies that orbit (or *wander*, to invoke the word's etymology in *planasthai*) but never meet. Dickinson names two separate planets as alternate figures for bearers of withheld secrets in the second quatrain, a rhetorical move that on its face seems like a mere redundancy. The paratactic doubling of "Herschel's private interest" and "Mercury's affair," however, suggests that "Nature and God" in the first line are likewise two independent entities on separate orbits. Nature and God, then, are like Mercury and Uranus: two beings that keep secrets not just from the lyric "I", but also from each other.

The absence of convergence (or collision) between such entities, however, does not imply the absence of a relation—indeed, quite to the contrary, as the relation depicted in the first stanza is uneven, nonreciprocal, and yet nonetheless profound in its implications. Nature and God can know the lyric subject so well as to act as executors of her identity, i.e. to carry out or act on behalf of whatever it is that constitutes her being. "Startled" certainly implies shock here—the surprise that one might experience at the revelation that a strange entity can exert such a power over us—, but another meaning of the word resonates with the poem's planetary metaphors: "To cause a sudden disturbance in an inanimate thing (as the air, the calm of night, a landscape, etc.)".<sup>67</sup> Nature and God, in other words, can act as a disruptive force on the lyric subject much like the pull of a foreign body that newly enters into the gravitational field. Such entities may run their separate courses—they may even remain unseen or unknown to the poetic subject, if not to each other—but they nonetheless act on her in surprising and essential ways.

A central idea in Dickinson's writings is the notion that even the most vital and self-sustaining relationships—with Nature and with God, for instance—are limited to this planetary mode of co-existence, in which entities affect each other while setting aside the promise of ever *communing* to share knowledge, experience, or a common path. Dickinson's letters and poems propose *companionship* as a limited yet vulnerable mode of being with others, one that aims neither to expand the boundaries of the self nor to secure them entirely against incursions from an outside world.

Dickinson's companionship offers a mode of remaining open to the presence of others without subsuming them, without assimilating their alterity into one's own framework for understanding the world. At the moment where the potential to relate to and connect with others verges on an opportunity to experience an interconnectedness with "the world," to integrate into something like universal consciousness, Dickinson's poetic subjects repeatedly insist on reinforcing the boundaries of selfhood and receding from the scene of encounter. The retreat from the prospect of the idea of communion with universal being, however, does not indicate a desire to preserve a sense of individuality or maintain a coherent sense of the poetic self, as some critics have suggested; rather, Dickinson's hesitant poetic subjects repeatedly perform a mode of being with others in which

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of knowledge in the poem constitutes a form of gender subversion: "When Dickinson writes—as a woman—that she never knew Nature or God, she is simultaneously adhering to the gender conventions of the mid-nineteenth century (which prescribed humility for women) and flouting them, since the same conventions linked women with both the natural and the divine" (Renee Bergland, "Urania's Inversion: Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and the Strange History of Women Scientists in Nineteenth-Century America" *Signs* 34.1 [Autumn 2008], 75-99; 89).

<sup>67</sup> "startle, n.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/189193?rskey=k2iyb2&result=1> (accessed May 05, 2017).

a sense of community that transcends the encounter in question is not on the horizon.<sup>68</sup> Dickinson's poetry insists instead on tarrying with the limits of being with and knowing others, including nonhuman others. These limits are conceived not as the obstacle to relation, but rather as the grounds in which relational forms can be established, challenged, and renegotiated.

As a theory that extends beyond the bounds of interpersonal intimacy, friendship, or romance, Dickinson's companionship represents an ecological mode of reflection, an interrogation of what it means to inhabit a world populated by beings whose identity is fundamentally different from the self, and who, when encountered, do not readily yield knowledge—or at least any knowledge that is continuous with the poetic subject's understanding of itself. In the above letter to Higginson, Dickinson includes both human and nonhuman entities among her companions while also broaching the subject of an “unconveyed” form of knowledge:

You ask of my Companions Hills – Sir – and the Sundown – and a Dog – large as myself, that my Father bought me – They are better than Beings – because they know - but do not tell - and the noise in the Pool, at Noon - excels my Piano. I have a Brother and Sister - My Mother does not care for thought – and Father, too busy with his Briefs – to notice what we do - He buys me many Books – but begs me not to read them - because he fears they joggle the Mind. They are religious - except me - and address an Eclipse, every morning - whom they call their “Father.” But I fear my story fatigues you – I would like to learn – Could you tell me how to grow - or is it unconveyed - like Melody – or Witchcraft?<sup>69</sup>

Dickinson's second letter to Higginson offers a capacious understanding of what might constitute potential “Companions”: hills, sunsets, dogs, but also, by extension, noises, God (or the “Eclipse” that marks his absence), and, of course, people. At the same time, though, the letter very carefully characterizes companionship by its reticence or withdrawal, its willingness to withhold certain forms of knowledge, to not disclose too much. Such companions are not merely “Beings” but are “better than Beings,” perhaps exceeding the category, perhaps excluded from it altogether. Though Dickinson distinguishes herself from her “religious” family in the letter, to have a relationship with an other who knows but does not tell is, as we have seen, not altogether different from what it is like to “address an Eclipse,” an entity that, like God in so many of Dickinson's poems, recedes from perception.

At the level of the letter's mode of address, too, Dickinson expresses her desire for companionship that resists full disclosure between parties. Dickinson's initial letters to Higginson self-consciously perform the persona of a sheepish yet mysterious ingénue, and here she does not disappoint: coyly asking Higginson for a knowledge of “how to grow” as a poet<sup>70</sup> while also

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<sup>68</sup> Perhaps the most influential account of Dickinson as a poet of retrenchment into a coherent version of the self is Albert Gelpi's *Emily Dickinson: The Mind of the Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965). Joanne Feit Diehl's *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) follows in Gelpi's footsteps by positing that in Dickinson's poetry “the self perceives nature as an adversary and seeks to go beyond it into an anti- or post-naturalistic environment, pursuing questions in a self-dominated sphere that rejects the province of a communal, natural life” (163). Both of these works offer vital interpretations of the relationship between Dickinson's writing and the Romantic poetics of nature. Ultimately though, this essay is in fundamental disagreement with the idea of Dickinson as a poet of the “self-dominated sphere.”

<sup>69</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), letter 261 (404). Letters hereafter cited as “L” followed by letter number from this edition.

<sup>70</sup> Hyatt Waggoner claims that Dickinson's “Could you tell me how to grow” is an allusion to Emerson's “So to be is the sole inlet of so to know” in “Circles”: “She knew that the secret of growth could not be conveyed

conceding that such knowledge might likely go “unconveyed,” Dickinson invites Higginson into the very relationship of companionship she prizes with her dog, the sunset, and the hills.<sup>71</sup> “Unconveyed” here may designate something that does not lend itself to communication through language, as in the example of “Melody,” but may also describe an occulted knowledge like “Witchcraft” that is transmitted despite a prohibition against its explicit dissemination.<sup>72</sup> In any case, Dickinson’s strange use of the term seems to revel in the shortcomings of communication, accepting that even the most personally valuable of knowledge may remain intransmissible between friends.

Conversely, Anne-Lise François’s theory of the open secret provides us with a framework in which a lesson’s going “unconveyed” need not mean that something has not been received. François reflects on the story of God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exodus, in which Moses is placed behind a rock, his eyes also covered over by God’s hands as he passes him by, allowing Moses a glimpse of himself only in passing. Rather than understanding this “near-miss as a cheat,” François argues that this scene occasions “an imageless intimacy” between God and Moses and in doing so “illustrates...[that] the ellipsis by which experience remains below the threshold of representation and unavailable to discursive knowledge is constitutive of experience itself.”<sup>73</sup> When François notes immediately following that “Dickinson admits, only to leap over, the impasse of our incapacity to verify or judge reception (54),” she provides us with a more capacious understanding of what it might mean for the lesson of “how to grow” to go “unconveyed”: namely, that this knowledge might be absorbed in such a way that, to its recipient at least, is indistinguishable from its having been missed. We might also note that, whether we interpret this reference to growth as poetic or physical, it is true both that 1) Dickinson seemingly “grew” without direct instruction (from Higginson or anyone else) and 2) if the knowledge of how to grow nevertheless *was* conveyed, we too would have no way of knowing, as the nature of such growth as a principle of organicity is that *it would have happened anyway*. Dickinson’s formulation of an unconveyed knowledge is thus remarkably similar to François’s notion of the open secret as “a gesture of self-canceling revelation” that neither constitutes nor results in a perceptible event (3), bearing a “message...of little or no communicative content, one that to receive is to be left free to take up” (50).

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because she knew her Emerson. He had said that God kept it hidden, that it was incalculable—like melody or witchcraft, she added to his thought. And she knew too that it ought not to have been necessary, at a time when Emerson’s reputation was at its highest point, to state explicitly the connection between wanting to *learn* and asking for the secret of *growth*. To one who knew his Emerson, the connection surely was sufficiently clear: the growth of the soul, he had said, was the only way to apprehend and bear new truths which the smaller or less valorous soul would find unbearable.” While this reading is a intriguing one, I am not so convinced that Dickinson is referring to the “growth of the soul” since she is actually inquiring here about poetic acumen. Hyatt H Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), 196.

<sup>71</sup> As if to reinforce the connection Dickinson draws between companionship and unconveyable knowledge, after an eighteen-month lapse in communication, in late January 1866 Dickinson wrote to Higginson with the following: “Carlo died—/E. Dickinson/ Would you instruct me now?” Three years later the loss of her canine instructor is still felt, and Higginson writes that “It is hard for me to understand how you can live s[olo]ne, with thoughts of such a [quali]ty coming up in you & even the companionship of your dog withdrawn”. Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Letters of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), letters 314 (449) and 330a (461).

<sup>72</sup> The OED further complicates our understanding of Dickinson’s use of the word, since it reminds us that “to convey” can mean “to transmit or transfer secretly or furtively.” “convey, v.1”. OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40805?> (accessed April 27, 2017).

<sup>73</sup> Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 51. Hereafter cited in the text.

There are at least two reasons why this resonance should not come as a surprise. The first is that François turns to Dickinson’s poetry, along with Wordsworth’s and Hardy’s, to construct the idea of a subgenre, “the lyric of inconsequence,” in which causal and sequential orders are set aside in favor of representing (insofar as such a thing is possible) modes of experience characterized by the lightness of having no perceptible or actionable significance. This theory of the lyric contests the understanding of the genre as one that necessarily aims to make private experience intelligible to others, thus freeing the lyric from the burden of self-accountability and self-transparency that François associates with Enlightenment thought and secular modernity. In her careful readings of Dickinson’s poems, François illuminates how “the reception of experience in Dickinson often includes its own deflection, and contact recedes as informally, unceremoniously, as it occurs” (153). Insofar as this mode of reception extends to our own experience of reading Dickinson, François provides us with an understanding of the Dickinsonian lyric as itself modeling companionship as a mode of relating without “conveying.”

The second reason for the resonance between Dickinson’s idea of un conveyed knowledge and François’s theory of the open secret is the shared image of nature as a bearer of secrets. Her study takes for its point of departure Goethe’s maxim about the “open secret” [*offenbares Geheimnis*] of nature. François asks us to think of the casual availability inherent in the Christian idea of the “Book of Nature” nature in relation to the fleeting glimpse of God in Exodus, thus positing the open secret “as a trope for...naturalized revelation—revelation that one is free to take for granted” (47). If, in the context of Romantic natural supernaturalism, nature absorbs the spiritual significance of God, it borrows, too, God’s self-canceling mode of revelation. Dickinson herself connects both nature and divinity to the idea of a barely perceptible revelation in F1404:

In many and reportless places  
 We feel a Joy –  
 Reportless, also, but sincere as Nature  
 Or Deity

It comes, without a consternation –  
 Dissolves – the same –  
 But leaves a sumptuous Destitution –  
 Without a Name –

Profane it by a search – we cannot –  
 It has no home –  
 Nor we who having once inhaled it – thereafter roam.

The poem describes the coming and going of a feeling that announces itself only in the lack that it leaves behind. And yet, if this Joy was “reportless” in the first place when it was felt, it is hard to characterize it as any more reportable after it has dissolved, since the “sumptuous Destitution” it leaves behind is itself “Without a Name –.” The first quatrain instructs us that the elusiveness of the feeling renders it no less sincere by equating its sincerity to that of “Nature/or Deity.” In doing so, it invites us to think of Nature and God, too, as “reportless,” a word that, idiosyncratic to Dickinson’s poetry, appears to designate something that it is impossible to know whether one has noticed.

### iii) “A Wiser Sympathy”

*We must travel abreast with Nature if we want to know her, but where shall be obtained the Horse?*  
—Emily Dickinson, prose fragment 119 (from *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*)

*A person who accompanies another; a person who is with another on a particular occasion, a journey, etc.; a member of the same group or company; (also) a fellow soldier, a comrade.*  
—“Companion,” Oxford English Dictionary

On many occasions, Dickinson pronounces that God and Nature are inaccessible, hidden, or elusive: “Who knocks not, yet does not intrude is Nature” (L555); “I know that He exists./Somewhere – in Silence –/He has hid his rare life/From our gross eyes.” (F365); “Divinity dwells under seal (F1057).<sup>74</sup> For Dickinson, as for the Transcendentalists, Nature and God may indeed be bearers of universal Truth, but, as we have seen, in Dickinson’s case that does not mean either will ever be able to convey the truth they possess to the poet or philosopher—at least in a way that one would know the difference. Moreover, we come to learn, the types of truth that Nature offers may not be the same as those truths offered by God. These unsettling and discontinuous aspects of Dickinson’s writings<sup>75</sup> posit a profound challenge to redemptive frameworks for

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<sup>74</sup> Here in part I have Karl Keller to thank, who performed the work of assembling some of Dickinson’s pithiest remarks—in her poems, prose fragments, and letters—and presenting them under the category of “aphorisms” in *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 180.

<sup>75</sup> In pointing to the pronounced sense of discontinuity in Dickinson’s writing, I am in accord with a number of contemporary scholarly voices. Among them is Shira Wolosky, for whom Dickinson’s “skepticism [about the correlation among differing levels of experience] dominates and intrudes directly into the figural construction.” Remarking upon the frequency with which, in Dickinson’s poems, “correspondences slip, or break apart, or contradict, or misalign,” Wolosky argues that Dickinson’s “analogical slips...textually enact a kind of cultural slippage in which a female gender complicates or contradicts assertions of an American or Romantic selfhood” (Shira Wolosky, “Emily Dickinson: being in the body,” in Wendy Martin ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Emily Dickinson* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 129-141). For Sabine Sielke, meanwhile, Dickinson “strongly resists the notion that nature gains its significance primarily through the perceiving consciousness, that words are directly fastened to visible things, and that the business of the philosopher or poet is to leap over the chasm of the unknown” (Sabine Sielke, “Natural sciences” in Eliza Richards, ed., *Emily Dickinson in Context* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 236-245) According to Sielke, who reads “Nature and God—I neither knew” as evidence of Dickinson’s skepticism about the ability of both natural science and philosophy to grasp the truths of nature, it is Dickinson’s focus on the workings (and limits) of her own physiological processes of perception that contribute to her characteristic moments of slippage and breakdown.

Elizabeth A. Petrino makes a similar claim when she marks Dickinson apart from Emerson and Whitman, who, she holds, maintained a continuity with philosophical elements of the British Romantics: “Although Dickinson admired the Romantic poets, she distanced herself from the prophetic voice that animated nature and asserted a sympathetic connection between the natural and the human. Even more deeply than the British Victorians, she embraced the body and nature as her ultimate laboratory of sense” (Elizabeth A. Petrino, “British Romantic and Victorian Influences” in Eliza Richards ed., *Emily Dickinson in Context* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 98-108; 107. Such “assertions,” however, are certainly contested in many a British Romantic text. One might look, for instance, to Coleridge’s “Dejection: an Ode” (cited hereafter in the text) for the troubling of the idea of such sympathy, and the work of Paul De Man has bestowed scholars of Romanticism with an awareness of how British Romantic texts stage the disjuncture between the scene of their own writing and the nature with which they aim to connect. Nonetheless, I concur

understanding the world dominant in Dickinson's age: the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening and Transcendentalism.<sup>76</sup> In many of Dickinson's works, one cannot count on the transformative and salvific relationship with God that one might hope for in the context of evangelical revivalism, nor on the regenerative relationship with Nature that one might desire in the context of Transcendentalism and Romantic culture more broadly.

Likewise, the circumscribed modes of relation explored in Dickinson's companionship offer an alternative to the most totalizing aspects of American Transcendentalism's engagement with the natural world. As we will see at the end of this chapter, Dickinson departs from Transcendentalism's reception of Coleridge's faculties of Reason and Imagination, which understands these faculties to be upheld as the means by which a subject encountering "Nature" comes to experience its connectedness to a greater whole. Resisting the ideal of Reason's integration of finite pieces into universal and absolute consciousness, Dickinson's poetry offers instead a vision in which definite parts keep their distance and thus also their definition—much like the planetary parataxis we saw in "Nature and God – I neither knew." Rather than grasping toward Imagination's ever-expanding and all-encompassing poetic vision—one in which nature, God, and humanity blend into systematic harmony—her poems frequently stage the impasses of such integration. As such, they model the receptivity to the natural world prized by Romantic poets while also warding off the totalizing outcome of a literary aspiration to lay claim to the outside world as coextensive with the self—what Keats referred to as the "egotistical sublime" in his criticism of Wordsworth.<sup>77</sup>

As Dickinson suggests in the first epigraph to this section, to "know" nature at all would mean to "travel abreast" of it—to be adjacent to it, on a parallel trajectory with it.<sup>78</sup> Dickinson's figure of traveling alongside nature inflects "to know" with its meaning of "to be familiar with" rather than "to possess information"—*connaissance* rather than *savoir*. Given the theory of

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with Petrino insofar as the philosophical privileging of the poetic faculty of Imagination is a central element of transatlantic Romanticism from which Dickinson makes a distinctive break.

<sup>76</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between these two cultural movements see, Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004). Hankins shows how revivals, which peaked in the 1850s (moving from the evangelical countryside to the urban centers), often corresponded with social movements and provided a kind of template in which Americans could feel themselves transformed into a new life and a new way of being. These aspects of revivalism often coincided with the transformational aspirations of Transcendentalism. Remarking on Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands community, for instance, Hankins notes: "The differences between revivalist theology and Alcott's ideas were very real, especially in the Transcendentalist conception of God as the world spirit rather than the creator God of the Old and New Testaments. Still, notions of sin, salvation, and renewed life were common to both movements" (37).

<sup>77</sup> From the October 27, 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse in John Keats, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, ed. Clarence DeWitt Thorpe (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1935), 576. The full quotation is as follows: "As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se, and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated."

<sup>78</sup> Here I am reminded of a recent call by philosopher Frédéric Neyrat: "let us consider Earth neither as an ob-ject nor a sub-ject but as a trans-ject (*un trajet*), a cosmic trajectory whose history began before the too narrow human history." This perspective may be the most sound one for the Anthropocene era, Neyrat argues, since it would direct humanity to regard the earth as a fellow "singular, eccentric, wandering trajectory that does not meet any preestablished pattern" (Frédéric Neyrat, "Planetary Antigones: The Environmental Situation and the Wandering Condition," *Qui Parle* 25.1-2, "Special Issue: Ethics Outside the Human" [Fall/Winter 2016], 53-54).



Dickinsonian companionship I've traced here, we might interpret "traveling abreast" as the very act of knowing itself. Such a provisional and contingent form of knowing is reflected in the definition of companionship also cited as an epigraph above: "a person who is with another *on a particular occasion*" (emphasis added). But indeed, if to travel alongside Nature is to know her, "where shall be obtained the Horse?" And what would joining Nature as a travel companion look like, feel like?

To attempt to answer this question we might turn to "The Birds reported from the South –" (F780, c. 1863), a poem that articulates a theory of reciprocal withdrawal as the grounds for cohabitation with Nature—a theory concisely defined by Dickinson at the poem's end as "A Wiser Sympathy." The poem hinges on the trope of dwelling rather than traveling, and the "particular occasion" that serves as the context for companionship is not a journey but rather a state of bereavement. Nevertheless, the poem theorizes "knowing" Nature just as much as the fragment above. Its particular form of knowing, though—in this case more like "becoming aware of"—is predicated on a marked disinterest toward Nature, nearing the territory of Bataille's *non-knowledge* as that which follows from the relinquishment of the will to know :

The Birds reported from the South –  
A News express to Me –  
A spicy Charge, My little Posts –  
But I am deaf – Today –

The Flowers – appealed – a timid Throng –  
I reinforced the Door –  
Go blossom to the Bees – I said –  
And trouble Me – no More –

The Summer Grace, for notice strove –  
Remote –Her best Array –  
The Heart – to stimulate the Eye  
Refused too utterly –

The first three quatrains of the poem introduce a classic Dickinson topos: the changing of the seasons. Like Coleridge's "Dejection: an Ode," the poem thematizes the disjuncture between the poetic voice and the natural world with which it would ostensibly wish to correspond. The disconnect between the external world of nature and the feelings of the lyric "I", however, is not treated as tragic or even lamentable as it is in Coleridge's poem ("A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear,/A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief" [21-24]).<sup>79</sup> Here instead Nature courts the poetic subject, seeking attention only to be repeatedly rebuffed. The lyric "I," moreover, even seems to take pleasure in this role reversal of the paradigm of the dejected poet: whereas the first stanza merely indicates the state of the poet's deafness, the second stanza expresses her complicity in this state as she "reinforced the Door" against the calls of the natural world.

The poem thus begins as nothing more than the occasion for the lyric "I" to express its casual indifference to the coming of summer. The lyric subject's directive to the Flowers to "blossom to the Bees" stands in sharp contrast to an 1861 poem by Dickinson, "I Taste a liquor never brewed" (F207) which recycles Emerson's metaphor in "the Humble-Bee" for the poet-philosopher as a drunken bee, an ecstatic vessel for the beauty of the natural world (Emerson's

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<sup>79</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode", in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 114-118. Hereafter cited within the text.

poem itself recalls Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret not at Their Convent's Narrow Room"). Here the bee serves instead as an index of the refusal of the notion that the poet should be inspired by Nature—or even *wish* to be inspired by it. Regardless of the poet's seemingly conscious refusal of receptivity to external stimuli, the third stanza reveals a resistance to receptivity that comes from deeper within, beneath the self that reinforces the door: "The Heart – to stimulate the Eye/Refused too utterly –". As a countermeasure to the flowers and the birds, the heart here sends out an internal stimulus that is also an anti-stimulus. In contrast again with Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode," it is not that the heart refuses to be stimulated by what the eye sees ("I see, not feel how beautiful they are!"; says the poet of the stars and moon [38]), but rather that the heart refuses to provide the condition of possibility for sight. The disconnection between the lyric subject and Nature thus intensifies.

The remaining three quatrains, however, transpose this problem of distance and disconnection into a scene of mourning *shared* by Nature and the lyric subject:

At length, a Mourner, like Myself,  
 She drew away austere –  
 Her frosts to ponder – then it was  
 I recollected Her –

She Suffered Me, for I had mourned –  
 I offered Her no word –  
 My Witness – was the Grape I bore –  
 Her – Witness – was Her Dead –

Thenceforward – We – together dwelt –  
 She – never questioned Me –  
 Nor I – Herself –  
 Our Contract  
 A Wiser Sympathy<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This is the version that Christianne Miller settles on, with variants marked. Consulting the manuscript (viewable at [http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image\\_sets/236098](http://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/236098)), though, one can conceive of a number of alternate possibilities for the third line given Dickinson's annotations. The manuscript appears as follows:

"Thenceforward – We – Together  
 + Dwelt +Walked  
 +I never questioned Her  
 +She never questioned Me—  
 Nor I—Herself (?)—  
 Our +Contract +Compact—  
 A +Wiser Sympathy + Wordless  
 --Silent—Speechless—

From this one might devise an alternate version of the poem that preserves the metrical regularity. I offer, as an example:

Thenceforward—We—Together dwelt  
 I never questioned Her  
 She never questioned our Contract  
 A Wiser Sympathy

In the poem's second half, the lyric "I" and Summer Grace are both transformed into mourners, allowing the poem to deliver the pithy revelation of a truth about loss: namely, that one does not even *perceive*—let alone appreciate—what one possesses until it (in this case, summer) is gone. This is an idea expressed quite commonly in Dickinson's poetry, in poems such as F1103 ("Perception of an object costs/Precise the Object's loss") and F1734 ("Eden is that old-fashioned House/We dwell in every day/ Without suspecting our abode/Until we drive away.") Crucial to the poem's reflection on its connection with Nature is the idea of a loss mutually shared between the lyric "I" and the female personification of the seasons, whose identity has shifted from Summer Grace to autumn and then winter.

But what, precisely, is the shared object of mourning in these lines? "Summer" seems like one possible answer, although to accept it one would have to allow that "She" mourns a prior version of the self. Mourning, though, is proleptic on the part of the lyric "I", since the latter draws away as a "Mourner" before she even "recollects" what has ostensibly been lost. An alternative possibility—that the object lost is a prior correspondence or connection between the lyric "I" and the natural world, one that precedes nature's "austere" withdrawal—is likewise doubtful, given that such a relationship was thoroughly disavowed in the first three quatrains. We are left, then, with a mutual sense of melancholia, of longing for an object strangely unspoken for. The poem accordingly shifts its focus away from the topos of the changing of seasons in order to reflect more deeply on the question of the possibility of a relationship between two entities with no clear sense of connection *other than their shared lack of one*. The unspoken object of mourning in question is perhaps the very placeholder, the signifier for this lack.

Central to the mode of dwelling "together" articulated in the poem is an absence of direct communication, as the "Contract" between the lyric subject and feminized nature is at most a tacit mutual understanding. As such, it exists not as a verbal agreement but rather as an understanding instantiated and renewed through performative gesture: the wearing of a "Witness," whether it be the mourner's "Crape" or the "Dead" itself, the lifeless trappings of winter. "Witness" here functions as both the evidence of loss as well as a kind of compromise in the face of the absence of direct communication about what the loss *is*: rather than acting as the "witness" (observer, testifier) to each other's loss, the two parties merely exchange signifiers-- "witnesses" (proof, evidence)—of the loss in question. As the two parties stand "at length" from each other, bonded only by the loss of an object whose identity remains in question (is it even the same object?), the sign of each's own suffering is the only unit of exchange, an idea reinforced by the internal half-rhyme of "suffer" and "offer." The theory of tenuous reciprocity rehearsed in the poem inheres especially in the idea of asymmetrical offerings exchanged only obliquely and without explicit acceptance or acknowledgement of receipt.

What I have referred to as Dickinson's companionship with Nature might also go by the name of this "Wiser Sympathy" in which what connects is also what divides, what is known (sensed) is also what is unknown (unexplained), and what is communicated is also what goes un conveyed. Such intimacy does not anticipate or long for the revelation of a shared secret; indeed, to complete the prose fragment cited above, to know Nature means that "A something overtakes the mind—we do not hear it coming." Nor does this intimacy treat its provisional—even *precarious*—mode of relation as the precondition for unification or communion, as Emerson's *Nature* often does. Rather, in Dickinson's writings, the poetic subject's separation from an entity called "Nature" is the very ground—though always a shaky one—for relating to it at all.

Christopher Benfey comes to a similar conclusion in his *Dickinson and the Problem of Others*, identifying in Dickinson's writings a skepticism toward the possibility of knowing that which is other to the self, whether that otherness is God, the natural world, or other people. Yet this lack of certainty, as Benfey sees it, does not preclude relation but rather reinforces it. Benfey sees

Dickinson, like Thoreau, as a theorist of “neighboring”: “To ‘neighbor’ a person, a thing, or God is, for Dickinson, a metaphorical account of our *intimacy*, an intimacy that is somehow closer (though that is simply to repeat the metaphor) than the concept of knowledge expresses.”<sup>81</sup> Not only that, but such intimacy may actually have an inverse relationship to knowledge. Drawing on F1433 (“What mystery pervades a well!”) as a philosophical commentary of sorts, Benfey calls our attention to a pronouncement that Dickinson makes about nature: “those who know her, know her less/The nearer her they get.” “Our relation to what neighbors us,” Benfey writes, “may be [for Dickinson] so intimate as to preclude that mode of relation, ‘objective’ or objectifying, we call knowledge” (67).

This chapter shares much in common with Benfey’s study, especially its attention to figures of adjacency in Dickinson’s writings and its focus on Dickinson’s stance toward philosophies of knowledge—Emerson’s in particular. Crucially, though, I wish to stress that Dickinson’s pronouncement at the end of F1433, rather than amounting merely to a description of the inverse relationship between nearness and knowledge, as Benfey sees it, may be instead interpreted as a caveat against getting too close to nature. To repeat the distinction I made earlier, “to know” may designate a familiarity with the presence of another entity, which is not the same as *possessing knowledge* about that entity. Dickinson reflects on such knowing without knowing in the opening quatrains of F773:

Conscious am I in my Chamber –  
Of a shapeless friend –  
He doth not attest by Posture –  
Nor confirm – by Word

Neither Place – need I present Him –  
Fitter Courtesy  
Hospitable intuition  
Of His Company –

Such lines meditate on the possibility of being aware of the presence of someone—in this case, probably God, giving the final quatrain’s reference to “Immortality”—without knowing much else, if *anything* else, about him: his shape, the sound of his voice, or his exact location in the room. The presence of the “friend” in question rises to the level of consciousness but not to the level of positive knowledge: “Hospitable intuition” functions as the faculty by which the lyric subject both senses his presence and makes room for it (albeit only metaphorically, as he need not be “presented” with “Place”). Again we detect something of apophatic mysticism in Dickinson’s writing: the presence of this Godlike figure is *made known* (sensed) only by a list of what is not known about Him.

Perhaps, then, Dickinson’s pronouncement from F1433 (“those who know her, know her less/The nearer her they get”) is not assigning positive value to nearness and thus a negative value to knowledge, but is rather showing us that to know nature in the sense that one might know a companion or a “shapeless friend” is less possible the more one tries to close one’s distance to them—whether it be by “knowledge” or by other means. In the section that follows, I explore Dickinson’s desire to maintain a fundamental separation from her companions—in this case, other people—as the very means by which she can relate to them. As we have seen, if knowledge can be conceived as a salvific and redeeming force that can counter disunity in a fragmented world,

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<sup>81</sup> Christopher Benfey, *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 75. Hereafter cited within the text.

Dickinson favors non-knowledge given its respect for the epistemic boundaries between beings. In the context of some of her most intimate relationships, however, it is often religious salvation *itself*, rather than merely knowledge construed as salvific, that threatens to erase the boundaries that Dickinson cherishes. For Dickinson, the idea of joining a community of the faithfully redeemed proves to be a prospect of questionable value, as it threatens to close the gap that is the condition of possibility for her to dwell in loving contiguity to others.

iv) **“alone with the winds and you”**

*...and as I sit here Susie, alone with the winds and you, I have the old king feeling even more than before, for I know not even the cracker man will invade this solitude, this sweet Sabbath of our's.*

*--Emily Dickinson, Letter to Susan Gilbert (Dickinson), February 1852*

*Being able to enjoy being alone with another person who is also alone is in itself an experience of health.*

*--D.W. Winnicott, “The Capacity to Be Alone”*

In her earliest letters to her childhood friend Abiah Root, Dickinson repeatedly expresses anxiety about a perceived lack of togetherness with others or, alternately, the threat of a separation on the horizon. These anxieties are inextricably tied to the phenomenon of evangelical religious revivals, no fewer than eight of which swept the region between 1840 and 1862. In a letter to Abiah, written from Mount Holyoke Seminary in South Hadley and dated January 17, 1848, Dickinson writes “It seems a long time since our last meeting and I long to see you once more. There is a great deal of religious interest here and many are flocking to the ark of safety. I have not yet given up to the claims of Christ, but trust I am not entirely thoughtless on so important & serious a subject” (L20 [60]). Dickinson’s movement from one subject (missing Abiah) to another (the prospect of participating in religious revival) may seem random and unmotivated, but it speaks to a common preoccupation in Dickinson’s psychic life at the time: the relationship between, on the one hand, the resilience of her bonds with discrete individuals and, on the other, her sense of belonging to something like a homogeneous community of faith. The letter implies both a positive and negative relationship between these two forms of connection. The image of believers “flocking together” may echo and thus reinforce the act of reunion with Abiah that Dickinson so desires; the idea of lost sheep coming back together in the embrace of Christ is, after all, the governing image of evangelical movements of that time, implied in the very designation of “revival.” At the same time, the revival in question is of course occurring in the place where Dickinson is and Abiah is not, thus marking a point of contrast with the desired reunion with her friend, further emphasized by the image of “the ark of safety” that equates joining the revival with enclosing oneself to the world outside.

The irony in Dickinson’s tone when she writes of the “ark of safety” implies that the reason to join the revival is conformity, even cowardice. In a letter to Abiah (at that time attending Miss Campbell’s School in Springfield, MA) two years prior, Dickinson recounts a revival in the town of Amherst and observes that “it seemed as if those who sneered loudest at serious things were soonest brought to see their power, and to make Christ their portion” (L10 [27]). Though Dickinson spins this remark into an expression of her wonder at the moving power of Christ, it retains nonetheless the snarky implication that joining the religious revival is the path of least resistance, the refuge of the simple. If, in her later letter, religious devotion is “so serious and important a subject” for Dickinson, we might accordingly surmise that Dickinson would be among the *last* to join the mass of worshippers. Indeed, as we now know, she never did come around to it. Even in this early letter (Dickinson was but fifteen years old at the time), she writes that “I am continually putting off

becoming a christian [sic]" despite being "almost inclined to yield to the claims of He who is greater than I" (L10, 27-8). She confesses to having tried and failed to sustain such spiritual surrender, which has left her in a state of existential longing: "I feel that I shall never be happy without I love Christ. When I am most happy there is a sting in every enjoyment. I find no rose without a thorn. There is an aching void in my heart which I am convinced the world never can fill" (L10, 27). This, of course, is the Dickinson we have come to know and love, the Dickinson who writes of "Hesitating Fractions" who dwell, however painfully, in the suspension of fulfillment. Indeed, this early letter is particularly rich in its clear articulation of the themes with which Dickinson will be preoccupied in her poetry to come: the phenomenological and ontological nature of death, the impossible and even unbearable aspects of the idea of immortality, the perpetual state of yearning for others, and the pain that comes with the persistence of desire.

To return to the relationship between Dickinson's desire for individual companions—in this case, Abiah Root—and the stifling temptation to join the religious revivals, we can observe that the salvation that comes with surrendering to a community of believers represents at once the force that can unite Dickinson with her friends as well as that which threatens to separate them from her. In the 1846 letter to Abiah, she writes:

I cannot realize that the friends I have seen pass from my sight in the prime of their days like dew before the sun will not again walk the streets and act their parts in the great drama of life, nor can I realize that when I again meet them it will be in another & a far different world from this...I wonder if we shall know each other in heaven, and whether we shall be a chosen band as we are here...Perhaps before the close of the year now swiftly upon the wing, some one of our number will be summoned to the Judgment Seat above, and I hope we may not be separated when the final decision is made, for how sad would it be for one of our number to go to the dark realms of wo, where is the never dying worm and the fire which no water can quench, and how happy if we may be one unbroken company in heaven. (L10, 28)

Earlier in the same letter, Dickinson states that the prospect of Eternity—including even that of Heaven—seems "dreadful" in its interminability. Questioning further the idea that an afterlife is consolation for the inevitability of death, Dickinson struggles to accept the notion of a Heaven that is radically different from the life at hand. If Heaven is indeed a "far different world from this," Dickinson concludes, how can one be sure that the afterlife will constitute a reunion with those we loved in life? The same selves that will ostensibly meet in the afterlife will, given these new conditions, naturally not be the same as the mortal versions of those selves. Dickinson prizes the formation of her "chosen band" so much that Hell *per se*, with all its fires, is no worse than the prospect that one of them might go to it while the others do not (this sentiment is later echoed in F706's famous lines "And were You – saved –/ And I – condemned to be/ Where you were not/ That self – were Hell to me –"). Heaven is thus defined simply as any place where she and her friend(s) can maintain an "unbroken company," which means it is a paradox according to Dickinson's logic: it would mean to stay together, yet only in such a way that preserves the separate identity of each at the level that she associates with the concreteness of being an embodied, mortal being.

Joining a community of religious faith thus threatens to undo social bonds even as it ensures them for eternity. These two acts prove to be identical according to the logic of communal salvation, such that *not* joining the community of believers comes to look just as viable—though no less painful—an option for Dickinson. Among the "unbroken company" to which she refers is undoubtedly Abby Wood, whom Dickinson frequently includes along with Abiah Root in the "we

three” of other letters. In 1850, after Abby has undergone conversion at one of the revivals, Emily will proclaim to Abiah that nonetheless “we three *are* friends, and shall meet in bliss together, because the golden links, though dimmed, are no less golden” (L39 [105]). Yet in the same letter Dickinson rejects the ostensibly guaranteed means of “meeting in bliss” even as she laments that Abby’s newfound faith distances them from each other: “I am one of the lingering bad ones, and so do I slink away, and pause, and ponder, and ponder, and pause, and do work without knowing why—not surely for *this* brief world, and more sure it is not for Heaven” (L36 [99]). Here again Dickinson chooses non-knowledge—doubt rather than belief. The latter choice is seemingly the easier, the less “serious” option—and thus the more deadening one for the mind and spirit. To live without total commitment to either Heaven or earth is, like the indeterminate status of wonder, a “beautiful but bleak condition.” But, perhaps more important, settling on the state of uncertainty is also the means by which Dickinson retains her own capacity for companionship with others. Joining the community of the redeemed means being subsumed into a greater whole, whether that whole be the collective of the elect or the disembodied (re)union that is Heaven. To do so would mean forfeiting the separateness that gives identity its boundaries and contours, which are, after all, what make companionship possible.

In his series of lectures *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, Roland Barthes proposes a theory of *idiorrhymy*, a mode of living together in which participants retain their individually improvised and changeable patterns of living even as they come together in a limited yet regular fashion. Barthes grounds his theory—or as he often refers to it, his “fantasy”—in a study of anachoresis, an early Christian form of monasticism that differs from the “excessively assimilative” orders of coenobitic monks, those who live in highly regulated monasteries, and the “excessively negative” eremitic monks, who live in utter solitude.<sup>82</sup> Idiorrhymy, as Barthes describes it, is “something like solitude with regular interruptions: the paradox, the contradiction, the aporia of bringing distances together—the utopia of a socialism of distance” (6). Over the course of the lectures, Barthes will also refer to idiorrhymy as an ethics, a physics, an erotics, and a poetics of distance, all of which aptly describe the mode of companionship we have seen in Dickinson’s writings. Perhaps more striking, idiorrhymy resembles also the way that Dickinson reportedly related to her loved ones for much of her life, meeting with friends sparingly and only for limited periods at her home and prizing written correspondence (even with her brother and sister-in-law in the house directly adjacent to) as the means of bridging distance while also maintaining it. Dickinson, it seems, aimed to keep the world at a distance, which is not to say that she renounced it altogether.

When young Emily envisions herself and her friends in an “unbroken company in heaven,” she dreams of the preservation of particular, embodied bonds that endure and resist the structuring pressures of the community of the elect or even the kingdom of Heaven itself. She wishes, in effect, for idiorrhymy. Barthes writes that idiorrhymy requires “a diffuse, vague, uncertain Cause, a floating Telos, more a fantasy than a belief” and even that idiorrhymy may actually entail a group utterly without a telos (46). When coenobitic monks posit the perfection of sainthood as the telos of their organization, they do so in a manner in which “the individual subject is governed by a hierarchically structured power” (44). Taken to an extreme, this means that the telos of perfecting the Christian faith entails the erasure of the individual identities that come together to effectuate it. If another formulation of the fantasy of idiorrhymy is “as *homeostasis*, as the everlasting preservation of the pure pleasure of sociability,” we might see something idiorrhymic in Dickinson’s repeated insistence on keeping formations of groups or pairs intact *as is* in their original

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<sup>82</sup> Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 9. Hereafter cited within the text.

form, which is to say not integrated into a larger governing structure and not subordinated to a predetermined telos (48). As we have seen, as strong as Dickinson's famous commitment to solitude is her belief that the presence of particular individuals is indispensable. To maintain that presence is to maintain a fidelity to idiorrhythmy as a utopia of distance.

The ethics and erotics of distance permeates even a Dickinson love poem—one of her most famous—that ends with the promise of a “New Marriage” in the afterlife:

There came a Day – at Summer's full –  
Entirely for me –  
I thought that such – were for the Saints –  
Where Resurrections – be –

The Sun – as common – went abroad –  
The Flowers – accustomed – blew –  
As if no Soul the Solstice passed –  
That maketh all things new.

The time was scarce profaned – by speech –  
The symbol of a word  
Was needless – as at Sacrament –  
The Wardrobe – of Our Lord –

Each was to each – the sealèd church –  
Permitted to commune – this time –  
Lest we too awkward – show –  
At “Supper of the Lamb.”

The hours slid fast – as hours will –  
Clutched tight – by greedy hands –  
So – faces on two Decks – look back –  
Bound to opposing Lands –

And so – when all the time had failed –  
Without external sound –  
Each – bound the other's Crucifix –  
We gave no other bond –

Sufficient troth – that we shall rise –  
Deposed – at length – the Grave –  
To *that* New Marriage –  
Justified – through Calvaries of Love! (F325)

The poem is remarkable for its delayed revelation of the situation it describes: for three stanzas, the reader is suspended in the fullness of the summer day in question without knowing what, exactly, stands in apparent contrast to the ordinariness of its passing. As Mary Loeffelholz notes, the word “we” does not occur until the poem's fourth quatrain, and not until the fifth quatrain do we fully ascertain that the poem concerns a romantic couple. We might thus read the first three expository quatrains as building toward the revelation of the poem's climax, the silent exchange of two crosses



between lovers— quite fitting for a poem whose central images hinge on references to the Book of Revelations. As Loeffelholz also observes, though, “the same simile that finally reveals them as a couple also announces their separation”—namely, the figure of “faces on two Decks – /Bound to opposing Lands – .”<sup>83</sup> The naming of the coupling is thus also the naming of its undoing. Meanwhile, what I have referred to as the poem’s climax—the silent exchange of two crosses—is anticlimactic in the sense that it is, at its core, a mere gesture toward a proleptic union, a marriage in the world-to-come. As Helen Vendler puts it, “this Day is one of both marriage and separation,” as the vow of the two lovers, expressed by the silent exchange of two crucifixes, represents not only the bond of fidelity but also their mutual sacrifice—the renunciation of a worldly union.<sup>84</sup> The poem thus features a union enacted only through the sign of separation and an action whose significance is its deferral of action.

One might contest, however, that an act of communion *does occur*, as the fourth quatrain makes clear. Wedged between the crescendo of the first three quatrains and the decrescendo of the last three—between the coming of the Day and the sliding away of its hours—the couple is “permitted to commune,” if only for “– this time,” a qualification that indicates both “on this occasion” and “for this period.” Even at the moment of attainment it is clear that this union is provisional, a rehearsal of what is to come, a preparation for the actual union that will occur in the apocalyptic “Supper of the Lamb” prophesied by the Book of Revelations. As if to reinforce the idea that this communion is attained preemptively and on time stolen by “greedy hands,” the two syllables “this time” occur before the line where they would seem to belong, disrupting the trimeter and anticipating the tetrameter of the following line (Dickinson preserved the metrical deviance in lineation in the fourth and seventh stanzas in each manuscript variant of the poem).

I propose that we read this poem as an idiorrhymic meditation: even as it deploys the quintessential teleological framework of Christian apocalypse to provide a vision of eternal unity, this telos, following Barthes, is “more a fantasy than a belief,” an invisible utopia against which a mortal bond can take shape. To take Loeffelholz’s and Vendler’s observations about the synchrony of separation and unity to an extreme, we might understand separation and unification not as two competing or mutually exclusive actions, but as one and the same action. In the line “Each was to the each—the sealèd church,” Dickinson confers on the union the divine seal from the Book of Revelations guaranteeing the elect status of institutions of worship, but she also conjures an image of two bodies sealed off from one another, as if the boundedness of these two bodies were itself the guarantor of divine favor. In other words, the lovers are sealed *for* each other because they are sealed *from* each other. One might also note the recurrence of “bound,” first used to portray the specter of separation (itself haunting the poem just as much as the potential for communion) in “Bound to opposing lands,” and then to communicate the act of a promise that binds: “Each – bound the other’s Crucifix/– We gave no other bond – .”

When the final quatrain promises that the two lovers will rise to a “New Marriage / – Justified – through Calvaries of Love!,” it provides a fantasy of telos that renders what comes before meaningful and intelligible, just as the meeting of the two lovers confers meaning on a seemingly indifferent, ordinary Day. But to echo Dickinson’s internal slant rhyme, the poem makes clear that to be *bound* together and *bound* to part is the only *bond* that can exist between the two in the temporal realm. Unity through separation is what defines the erotics of the poem, rendering the afterlife almost an afterthought as the type (the meeting of the two lovers) exceeds the antitype (the Marriage Supper of the Lamb) in its embodied poetic complexity. Indeed, there is even a touch of blasphemy

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<sup>83</sup> Mary Loeffelholz, *The Value of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 44.

<sup>84</sup> Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 131.

in the idea that “Calvaries of Love” have “justified” this posthumous union, as if the lovers’ sacrifice is equivalent to Christ’s: it is “sufficient troth” in itself to bring about a new existence after death.

There is something blasphemous, too, about the 1852 letter to Susan Huntington Gilbert cited in this section’s epigraph, a text which likewise deploys the paradoxical image of unity through separation. In this letter to her closest friend and future sister-in-law, Dickinson contrasts the conditions and quality of their companionship with a scene of collective worship. On a snowy February Sunday, she writes:

Thank the dear little snow flakes, because they fall *today* rather than some vain *weekday*, when the world and the cares of the world try so hard to keep me from my departed friend—and thank you, too, dear Susie, that you never weary of me, or never *tell* me so, and that when the world is cold, and the storm sighs e’er so piteously, I am sure of one sweet shelter, *one* covert from the storm! The bells are ringing, Susie, north, and east, and south, and *your own* village bell, and the people who love God, are expecting to go to meeting; dont *you* go Susie, not to *their* meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love—shall intercede there for us!

They will all go but me, to the usual meetinghouse, to hear the usual sermon; the inclemency of the storm so kindly detaining me; and as I sit here Susie, alone with the winds and you, I have the old *king feeling* even more than before, for I know not even the *cracker man* will invade *this* solitude, this sweet Sabbath of our’s.<sup>85</sup>

As indicated by the epigraph with which I have paired it, this letter depicts something very much like the sharing of solitude that psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott describes in his essay “The Capacity to be Alone.” Asserting that the capacity for solitude is the hallmark of an emotionally sophisticated person, Winnicott argues that the basis of this capacity’s development is paradoxical: it is first learned by a child in the presence of the mother, meaning that it is first known as “the experience of being alone while someone else is present.”<sup>86</sup> If, for Winnicott, this is the very image of wellbeing, it also seems to be the case for Dickinson: contentment is being with Susie to the exclusion of all others, such that she paradoxically shares her solitude with her.

Crucially, this companionate solitude is predicated on a number of separations, not the least of which is the fact that Susan is actually *not* present at all, as she is in Baltimore working as a teacher. By Dickinson’s logic, what keeps her from going to church—the snowstorm—is what allows her to share this imaginary solitude with Susan. Were Susan in Amherst, however, it would seem that the conditions of shared solitude would be the same, as the snowstorm would likewise preclude a visit from Susan at the Homestead (Susan is not yet married to Austin Dickinson and living at the Evergreens). Finally, Dickinson stresses that it is the separation of the Sabbath itself from all the other days of the week that facilitates this fantasy of accompanying Susan as they go to worship in the “church within our hearts.”

Equally crucial to this fantasy of accompaniment in solitude is the poetics of enclosure. The figural means by which Dickinson includes Susie in her solitude is this same “church within our hearts,” itself a double enclosure; it shuts out the world in order to secure the sanctity of this solitude which none shall “invade.” Moreover, Dickinson rhetorically constructs that space as a

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<sup>85</sup> *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), v. II p. 181 l. 77.

<sup>86</sup> D.W. Winnicott, “The Capacity to Be Alone,” in *The Child, The Family and the Outside World* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 1987), 29-35; 30.

means of reinforcing and protecting what she has already figured as the “one sweet shelter” of her loving relationship with Susan, the “one covert from the storm” of the coldness of the outside world. Figures of enclosure thus create the rhetorical space in which “our solitude” becomes intelligible as a mode of being alone together.

Virginia Jackson points to this letter as an early moment in which Dickinson reconceives the idea of solitude as a condition with room enough for two, as an “intersubjective space” made possible only by the act of solitary writing and reading.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, there remains much to be said for Dickinson’s fascination with the idea of accompanying others while also preserving the conditions of solitude, a problem that, as we have seen, is of prime importance not only to theories of epistolary and lyric address—Jackson’s particular focus—but also to theories of intimacy and epistemology (Benfey, Youssef, François), of utopian sociality (Barthes), and of psychoanalysis (Winnicott). Given that my particular focus here has been the pressures that the horizon of a community of believers put on Dickinson’s modes of companionship, I wish to stress that this letter to Susan pits this shared solitude against the specter of communal worship.

Dickinson’s idea of a “sweet Sabbath” with Susan constitutes, if not a rejection of the idea of “community” itself, then certainly a rejection of the community offered by the Congregationalism of the Connecticut Valley. When Dickinson invites Susan into a scene of private worship, she does so by offering it as an alternative to “*their* meeting,” her fantasy predicated on both of them preserving their mutual solitude by neither of them attending church. Thus Susan and Emily will keep their distance from a religious community that would subsume them while nonetheless practicing the faith, as the latter conjures “a preacher called Love” as the intercessor between themselves and God. (This withdrawn form of worship prefigures the eventual 1860 poem “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church,” in which the lyric subject instead practices a kind of natural religion in her home “With a Bobolink for a Chorister—And an Orchard, for a Dome” [F236].) Yet even in evading integration into a larger structure in order to come together, the two maintain a fundamental distance from each other—to borrow a phrase from F706 (“I cannot live with You –”), rather than attending “*their* meeting”, the two of them will “meet apart.” Dickinson reinforces the idea that this fantasy of union hinges on a fundamental separation when she writes of being “alone with the winds and you”: in this image, what unites the two parties is a shared experience of the very force that would keep them from coming together. This ethics of distanced relation carries over into the elaboration of Dickinson’s poetics of nature as they resist an Emersonian aspiration toward communion with nature—and by means of that communion, with God.

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<sup>87</sup> Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 82. Hereafter cited within the text. Jackson also notes that the letter itself is analogous to the snowstorm as the sign of a separation that also unites: “That letter substantiates the otherwise purely metaphorical relation between writer and reader. It embodies the separation between their two bodies....The early letters to Susan allow Dickinson to displace the plane geography of here and there, outside and inside, self and other, with the more complex discursive field available to reading and writing because they begin in a pathos of distance or isolation that they then revise by revising the very conditions or media of address” (134-5).

v) “the name of the nearest friend”

*In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.*  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (emphasis mine)

*Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –  
Without Design  
Or Order, or Apparent Action –  
Maintain –*

*The Sun – upon a Morning meets them –  
The Wind –  
No nearer Neighbor – have they –  
But God –  
—Emily Dickinson, fascicle thirty-seven, sheet one (F778)*

Those seeking points of convergence between Emerson’s early philosophy of nature and Dickinson’s poetics of companionship will find many.<sup>88</sup> As Christopher Benfey has noted, Emerson’s *Nature* lays the critical groundwork for the problem that Dickinson’s poetry so often addresses: namely, the problem of the relationship between the self and all that which it is not.<sup>89</sup> The treatise begins by defining its namesake, declaring that “strictly speaking, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE”.<sup>90</sup> Emerson thus vacillates between the “common” definition of nature as “the essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” and the broader “philosophical” definition as all that which is other to the self (4), or to “the Soul,” to use Emerson’s exact term (3). The problematic of the ME vs. the NOT-ME is a transatlantic Romantic intellectual inheritance: though it originates in the post-Kantian German philosophy of Fichte and Schelling, Emerson adopts this framework secondhand from his varied readings of Thomas Carlyle, Victor Cousin, Frederick Henry Hedge, and, most notably, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.<sup>91</sup> As we will see, Emerson’s approach to this divide closely resembles Coleridge’s, and indeed Coleridge is directly quoted in *Nature* (“every object rightly seen, unlocks a new faculty of

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<sup>88</sup> Scholarly opinions about Emerson’s influence on Dickinson’s poetry and thinking have varied greatly. What is certain is that Dickinson had read much of Emerson’s poetry along with *Nature*, both series of *Essays*, *Representative Men* and *The Conduct of Life*. Karl Keller refutes the idea of a strong influence on Dickinson in his *The Only Kangaroo Among the Beauty: Emily Dickinson and America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Hyatt Waggoner, meanwhile, counts Emerson as one of Dickinson’s greatest inspirations in *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968).

<sup>89</sup> See *Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others*, 9-11.

<sup>90</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 1-39; 4. Hereafter cited within the text.

<sup>91</sup> See David Greenham, *Emerson’s Transatlantic Romanticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 70-81. Hereafter cited within the text.

the soul” [18], though it goes unattributed), reflecting an influence with profound implications for how Emerson thinks about the relationship between nature, God, and the self.

Emerson begins *Nature* by imposing a limit on one’s knowledge of all beings that fall under the category of the NOT ME while also positing something akin to non-knowledge as the means by which its “influence” is sensed. Here, too, we can see a commonality with Dickinson, as Emerson’s stance toward nature advocates a delicate balance between concealment and revelation, knowledge and ignorance:

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood (5).

Like the stars whose allure consists of their inaccessibility, so, for Emerson, is all of nature, which does not readily reveal its secrets to those who pursue them. In this sense, his philosophy of nature is much in line with Dickinson’s, for whom, as we have seen, nature knows but does not tell, its secrets not perceptible to those who seek them—and barely discernable to those who receive them. As Richard E. Brantley puts it, “Dickinson’s Nature, in one sense, keeps intriguing distance, and, in another, lies gloriously at hand.”<sup>92</sup> The limits of knowing nature do not frustrate Emerson’s inquiring mind but instead allow him to orient himself toward harmony with it, to adopt a non-instrumental position toward the natural world that ultimately facilitates an “open” state of mind qualitatively different from the active seeker of knowledge. Like Wordsworth’s “wise passivity,” Emerson’s mode of receptivity to Nature advocates for a position in which Nature is not conceived as an object of knowledge but rather as a kind of interlocutor, the bearer of “kindred impressions” that occasionally indulge the poet-philosopher’s higher faculty of perception.

It is the means by which this openness of mind is attained—and thus how that higher faculty is conceived—where Dickinson’s poetics of companionship and Emerson’s philosophy of nature diverge quite considerably. As Emerson writes in the famous “transparent eyeball” passage that serves as the epigraph to this section, receptivity to the gentle and reparative presence of Nature means not only that the “mean egotism” of the self dissolves, but also that *others*, too, lose their selfhood for the poet-philosopher: their particular identity, whether as “brothers,” “acquaintances,” “master[s] or servant[s],” is rendered “a trifle and a disturbance.” For Dickinson, as we have seen, such subsumption spells the end of one’s relation to others, even and especially to an other called “Nature.” As such, total union is, paradoxically, not union at all in Dickinson’s view, as her figurations of coming and staying together are so consistently also figurations of staying apart. Meanwhile, Emerson’s desire to see across the gap between ME and NOT ME, to see behind the mere phenomenon of nature in order to participate in its transcendent essence, means that one begins to see nothing in its particularity—that is, nothing in particular. In the section on Idealism, Emerson further develops the notion of philosophical vision as a secondary faculty that overrides a baser form of vision:

[T]he animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces. When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression.

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<sup>92</sup> Richard E. Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 79.

These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher power, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God. (25)

The dissolving power of the “eye of Reason” renders discrete objects invisible and thus, for the purpose of the philosopher, inconsequential, even inexistent. This passage expands upon the dynamic established in the passage on the transparent eyeball, in which the “transparency” of the contours of the self means that the presence of others, too, is nullified in the service of communion with “Universal Being.” Emerson here also takes the striking turn of staging the “withdrawal” of nature, not to reinforce its autonomy or independence from the knowing subject, as withdrawal often does in Dickinson’s poetry, but rather as an expression of deference to its “Original Cause,” the creator God, who Emerson’s thinker emulates in his momentary access to the insight yielded by Reason.

Thus, despite the text’s most famous figure for a philosophy renewed by its openness to nature—the transparent eyeball—and despite Emerson’s pronouncement at the outset that his poet is “he whose *eye* can integrate all the parts,” the *vision* promoted throughout the work is conceived largely in contradistinction to actual *sight* (5, emphasis mine). In the section on Language immediately following that on Beauty, Emerson makes clear that the domain of the visible must be relegated to the status of symbols, so that the greater cause that lies beneath them may be understood: “A Life in harmony with Nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause” (18). To gain true insight about the truth of Nature—to see it clearly—means, paradoxically, to stop *seeing it*, at least in its empirical form, to treat the sensory perception of natural objects as something to be overcome. Nature thus becomes a split object, both the thing that is meant to be discovered and the source of distraction from the true object of knowledge it represents, its “Original Cause” (16).

There is consequently a certain paranoia about the visual field present in *Nature*: in the section titled “Beauty,” Emerson writes that “The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality” (10). Here, of course, Emerson characteristically stresses that the suspension of the individual will is necessary in order best to perceive the beautiful—a category itself defined by the absence of volition since Kant’s “purposiveness without purpose.” But he is warning, too, against the dangers of a greedy eye, as this admonition appears in a subsection on “simple perception of natural forms,” from which Emerson moves to “spiritual” and then “intellectual” perception.

It would almost seem that Dickinson takes part in the “mockery” of such illusions when she writes playfully of vision as artifice in F1102 (c. 1865):

Dew – is the Freshet in the Grass –  
‘Tis many a tiny Mill  
Turns unperceived beneath – our feet  
And Artisan lies still –

We spy the Forests and the Hills  
The Tents to Nature’s Show

Mistake the Outside for the in  
And mention what we saw.

Could Commentators on the Sign  
Of Nature's Caravan  
Obtain "admission" as a Child  
Some Wednesday Afternoon.

Casually conceding that an entire world lies below the threshold of our perception in the first quatrain, the poem indulges in the conceit of nature as, precisely, a *mere show* in the last two. Or, to read Dickinson's metaphor to the letter, it is *not even* "Nature's Show" that "we" see, but rather its exterior. With the flattest of affects, the lyric subject relates that "we" deceive ourselves in thinking we see anything more than Nature's surfaces, left only to merely "mention what we saw." The last quatrain, resting ambiguously between the interrogatory and the optative, assigns those who would seek the reality behind surfaces to the status of "Commentators on the Sign," resonating with a line from a poem on the adjacent sheet of the same fascicle: "So I must baffle at the Hint/ And cipher at the Sign (F1107)."<sup>93</sup> Those wishing for access to the show behind the Sign can but produce more signs about it, as much as they might hope for " 'admission' as a Child " (perhaps akin to Emerson's "wise spirit" for whom the natural world reflects "the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood"). In F1433, written twelve years later, Nature is likened to a well "Whose limit none have ever seen,/ But just his lid of glass –/ Like looking every time you please/ In an abyss's face!" Though more solemn in tone, this poem too asserts that what the eye sees thwarts our desire for a vision that extends beyond it; moreover, being blinded by sight, rather than the obstacle to the encounter with Nature, *is* what it means to encounter Nature.

By asserting the opacity of the natural world and the inscrutability of the "Sign[s]" of Nature, Dickinson departs not only from Emerson's *Nature*, but also—at least according to many scholars since Perry Miller—from natural typology, a tradition of thinking with deep roots in American Puritanism.<sup>94</sup> Jonathan Edwards, recognized as the innovator of this theological method, extended

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<sup>93</sup> Hyatt Waggoner, who finds Emerson to have had a very strong influence on Dickinson, sees the butterfly of F1107's lyric "I" as an endorsement of Emerson's idea of a knowledge that is at once intuitive and embodied. Thus F1107 could be seen as transcending the situation of opacity portrayed in F1102. I disagree, given that the butterfly-speaker makes this very pronouncement at the end of the poem. Its transformation thus does not except it from the conditions of encryption/decryption described in these lines. Moreover, that condition need not be seen as the impediment to the euphoria named in the first two quatrains; indeed, they are perhaps the very conditions of possibility for the euphoria. See Waggoner, *American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*, 202.

<sup>94</sup> In a recent and provocative study, *Knowing, Seeing, Being: Jonathan Edwards, Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, and the American Typological Tradition* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), Jennifer Leader makes a compelling case against the scholarly consensus, since Miller, that Transcendentalism is essentially a permutation of Edwards's natural typology. It might equally be conceived, she argues, as a deviation from that tradition of thought. Unlike Transcendentalism, which ultimately collapses the natural world and the divinity that lies behind it, Leader argues that natural typology is in fact committed to a simultaneity of relation and distinction, such that "the boundaries between natural type and supernatural antitype are held in a tension that ensures both their separateness and their continues 'desire' for each other" (59). Dickinson, she assesses, tends toward the latter approach to natural symbols. If we accept Learner's assessment as sound, it would mean that in departing from Emerson's approach to nature-as-sign she is siding with Edwards. Yet if Dickinson deploys typological method in *writing* about nature, it does not mean that she advocates typology as a mode of *deciphering* it as an object of observation and study. Furthermore, As

the Reformed Protestant hermeneutic of Biblical typology to the interpretation of natural phenomena. If Biblical typology saw in people or events of the Old Testament a *type* that prefigured the *antitype* of the New Testament, Edwards's natural typology in turn rendered natural phenomena symbolic of divine truth, revelations of the final destiny of man and nature in the workings of redemption. To quote the title of one of his most influential works, nature became for Edwards a collection of "images or shadows of divine things." In his "Circles," meanwhile, Emerson writes that "we learn that God IS; that he is in me; and that all things are shadows of him,"<sup>95</sup> a characteristic attitude that led Sacvan Bercovitch to characterize *Nature* as "an important adaptation of natural theology to post-Kantian Romantic thought."<sup>96</sup>

In stark contrast to Dickinson's acceptance of the presence of boundaries and surfaces in the visual field, *Nature* thus posits the "eye of Reason" as the visionary faculty that can "abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects" in order to authentically experience the presence of its namesake. In his postulation of that higher faculty of perception, Emerson shows most clearly his indebtedness to Coleridge. From Coleridge, Emerson inherited a commitment to theorizing harmony between nature, humanity, and divinity as well as an aspiration toward a comprehensive philosophy that would encompass literature, science, theology, and ethics. Perhaps most conspicuously, though, Emerson took from Coleridge the distinction between the faculties of Reason and Understanding. Presented to Emerson and his fellow American intellectuals most notably in James Marsh's 1829 edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, the distinction boils down to this: Understanding is the faculty that concerns itself with the material world and its properties, while Reason is concerned with the transcendent matters of the mind and spirit; Understanding sees the nature of things in their individuality and particularity, while Reason strives to apprehend the unity that exists within and beyond the world of the visible; Understanding processes empirical data in order to grasp the causes of the physical world, while Reason strives to comprehend the Original Cause, the conditioning ground for all that exists—that is, divinity.<sup>97</sup> As a great deal of Emerson

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Michelle Kohler points out in a review of *Knowing, Seeing, Being*, "Jonathan Edwards's use of typology of course ultimately does privilege the divine antitype, which is regarded as the teleological fulfillment of the lesser material types" (*The Emily Dickinson Journal* 26.1 [2017]: 95). In contrast, as I have attempted to show many times here, what might be described as the antitype in Dickinson's poems often functions to bring its type into a vivid relief, thus positing it as more desirable, even superior in nature.

<sup>95</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles", in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 252-273; 256.

<sup>96</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 153. Readers further interested in the continuity between Puritan typology and American Romantic philosophy should refer to Conrad Cherry's *Nature and Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). Though the focus of Cherry's argument is the Romantic theologian Horace Bushnell rather than Emerson, it makes a compelling case for this connection that reinforces and expands upon Bercovitch's. Alan D. Hodder's *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), meanwhile, makes the more radical argument that Emerson's *Nature* is not about "nature" at all, but rather is a rewriting of the apocalyptic structure of the Bible in which the textuality of the former subsumes anything like "nature" to which Emerson would allegedly refer.

<sup>97</sup> In Coleridge's thought, the distinction between Reason and Understanding (along with the parallel poetic faculties of Imagination and Fancy) constituted a philosophical justification of theological precepts—albeit with a more conservative motivation than Emerson's. As Thomas McFarland argued in *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), one must understand Coleridge's desire to theorize the hierarchy of faculties within the context of the poet-philosopher's internal struggle about the pantheistic aspects of Spinozist philosophy, aspects that undermine the supremacy and independence of the conscious mind and thus pose a challenge to the transcendent personhood of God. One might point to the poet's



scholarship has pointed out, the intervention of Coleridge's version of the faculty of Reason in Emerson's philosophical system allowed him to advocate for the primacy of religious faith and spiritual intuition against the fixation on rationalism and empiricism among his theological and philosophical contemporaries.<sup>98</sup>

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Eolian harp and Sara's "mild reproof" at the "shapings of the unregenerate mind" as an iconic allegorization of the internal struggle that Coleridge faced between his pantheistic poetic rapture in the presence of "one intellectual breeze," on the one hand, and his desire, on the other, to preserve the coherence of the thinking ego along with the corollary tenets of Trinitarian religious orthodoxy.

There remains much to be said—to do so requires another essay entirely—regarding the relationship between Emerson's reliance on Coleridgean categories of the faculties of the mind and Dickinson's poetic engagement with the nature of visual phenomena. Pertaining to Dickinson's relationship to Coleridge, for instance, a case could be made that there is, however, in Dickinson's writing the "phenomenophilia" that Rei Terada finds in Coleridge's journals in *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). Terada's rich account of Coleridge's fascination with "spectra,"—optical illusions, hallucinations, and sensory oddities—makes the case that the root of this fascination is a desire for the "merely phenomenal," i.e. appearances free from any relationship to a verifiable truth.

If Terada reads Coleridge against the version of himself that aims above all to apprehend the unifying conditioning ground behind phenomena (that of the *Biographia Literaria* as well as *Aids to Reflection*), so too does Jeffrey Robinson in *Unfettering Poetry: The Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Fancy, the faculty which, according to Coleridge, concerns itself only with "fixities and definites," receives its materials "ready made from the law of association," while Imagination invents and unifies, constructing something new out of the varied materials of experience. Fancy, in Robinson's words, "leaves the world as it found it" (3). Robinson argues that the desire for Imagination to synthesize the various stimuli presented to it and create something new is fundamentally conservative: in its aim to preserve the transcendence and coherence of the perceiving subject, it privileges continuity over discontinuity, identity over contradiction, control over chance, order over excess, and unity over multiplicity. Arguing for a reevaluation of Fancy "such that the negativity associated with chaos takes on the positive implications of liberation," Robinson urges us to think of the lineage of Romantic poetry outside the "Fanciphobia" canonized by Coleridge.

Imagination being essentially philosophical Reason's poetic analog in Coleridge's schema, this chapter is allied with Robinson's approach; one might say that Dickinson's assertion of the necessity of particularity and the stubborn persistence of visual opacity constitutes a rebellious commitment to the faculty of Understanding, just as the poets championed in Robinson's study tarry with the unruliness of Fancy. It is thus quite fitting—and no coincidence—that Robinson places Dickinson (along with her contemporary, Whitman) squarely within the lineage of the experimental poetry of Fancy, while he is joined by Julie Ellison in associating fanciful poetics with the work of women poets from the Romantic period forward (see Julie Ellison, "Female Authorship, Public Fancy" in *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999], 97-123). I thank Ivan Ortiz for many of these insights and resources.

<sup>97</sup> For more on the transatlantic intellectual history of the faculties of Reason and Understanding, see Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), and David Greenham, *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Philip F. Gura's *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) provides the most detailed history of the textual dissemination of post-Kantian philosophy in the American context, and shows how Marsh's own intellectual and religious commitments influenced the reception of Coleridge's ideas. As all of these texts make clear, Coleridge's distinction between the faculties is derived from Kant's in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but departs from it most notably in its spiritualization of the faculty as a mode of apprehending God as a conditioning conscience and will.

<sup>98</sup> For more on the transatlantic intellectual history of the faculties of Reason and Understanding, see Samantha C. Harvey, *Transatlantic Transcendentalism: Coleridge, Emerson, and Nature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), and David Greenham, *Emerson's Transatlantic Romanticism* (London: Palgrave

Emerson's inheritance of the idea of the faculty of Reason from Coleridge is what provides his poet-philosopher with a holistic and consequently redemptive vision of the world. To summarize while returning to where this chapter began, such vision will overcome the "ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature...[that in fact] is in our own eye"; accessing it will amount to the unification and thus the "the redemption of the soul," which will bring about in turn the "restor[ation] of the world [to its]...original and eternal beauty." Coleridge states outright this same relationship between Reason's eye and redemption in *Aids to Reflection*, albeit in much more vigorous terms: "I do not hesitate to assert, that it was one of the great purposes of Christianity, and included in the process of our redemption, to rouse and emancipate the soul from this debasing slavery to the outward sense, to awaken the mind to the true *criteria* of reality, namely permanence, power, will manifested in act, and truth operating as life."<sup>99</sup> Coleridge assigns sovereignty over the diffusive contingencies of sensation to divine personhood and its analogue, the reflective mind. We hear echoes of such language in *Nature* when Emerson describes "Reason's momentary grasp of the scepter" as "the exertions of a power which exists not in time or space, but an instantaneous in-streaming causing power" (38), or when he writes of the "despotism of the senses which binds us to nature as if we were a part of it" (25). In *Nature*, as we have seen, this redemption from the senses also entails redemption from the presence of others, or at the very least from *sensing* the presence of others as discrete beings with whom one has a particular relationship.

F778, with its tableau of distinct and contiguous entities, stands in stark contrast to the workings of Emerson's Reason, merging Dickinson's poetics of companionship with an unredeeming philosophy of nature in which humanity, God, and nature are neither continuous nor necessarily in need of being unified:

Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –  
 Without Design  
 Or Order, or Apparent Action –  
 Maintain –

[Apparent] signal – notice  
 Do reign –

The Sun – upon a Morning meets them –  
 The Wind –  
 No nearer Neighbor – have they –  
 But God –

The Acre gives them – Place –  
 They – Him – Attention of Passer by –  
 Of Shadow or of Squirrel, haply –  
 Or Boy

What Deed is Theirs unto the General Nature –  
 What Plan

[Deed] they bear

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Macmillan, 2012). Philip F. Gura's *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) provides the most detailed history of the textual dissemination of post-Kantian philosophy in the American context, and shows how Marsh's own intellectual and religious commitments influenced the reception of Coleridge's ideas. As all of these texts make clear, Coleridge's distinction between the faculties is derived from Kant's in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but departs from it most notably in its spiritualization of the faculty as a mode of apprehending God as a conditioning conscience and will.

<sup>99</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection* (New York: Tibbals & Son, 1872), 318.

They severally – retard – or further –  
Unknown –

[severally –] promote –or hinder –

Helen Vendler aptly describes this poem as “a meditation on nature as a permanent withholder of meaning” (326). Thomas Johnson, meanwhile, declared that the poem “may be said barely to exist: it speaks in a soft monotone at the very edge of silence, able only to sketch the lack of order in nature, to suggest the speaker’s lack of knowledge, and to haunt the reader with its own ghostly yet profound uneasiness.”<sup>100</sup> Johnson’s remark that the poem barely comes into existence is itself profound, but I find myself at odds with the idea that the non-knowledge present in this poem generates “profound uneasiness”—even if there is indeed something “haunt[ing]” or “ghostly” about it. I am more in accord with Christopher Benfey’s description of the poem as “a statement of radical acceptance [of the lack of knowledge]” though I am not so sure it is consequently “one of Dickinson’s fullest and happiest expressions of the relation between nature and the human knower”: acceptance need not entail fullness or happiness, and the “human knower” is, strikingly, just one of the beings put into relation in the constellation of the poem (113). Indeed, if the poem “may be said barely to exist,” it is because of its minimal sense of a human presence that would apprehend the scene in order to write a poem about it (much like Chateaubriand’s ruins in the second chapter). The poem is not only characterized by a distinct lack of a lyric “I” that reflects upon the scene, but it also suggests that the human presence in the scene it describes is fungible if not negligible: the third quatrain refers to its random “Passer by” as a shadow, a squirrel, *or* a boy, suggesting that it does not matter which.

Just as the scene cannot be said to have a human witness who draws it together into coherence—like Emerson’s poet “whose eye can integrate all the parts”—, the poem depicts noticing not as an individual’s act but rather as the product of multiple entities’ haphazard convergence. “Attention of Passer by” is given to the Acre (if the Acre is taken as the “Him” of the second line of the quatrain—this is Vendler’s reading and my own), and yet it is not the passerby but “They” who bestow it—that is, the Four Trees. Or is it? The immediate antecedents in the previous quatrain are in fact the Sun and the Wind, suggesting perhaps that rays of light and rustlings of leaves are what draw the attention of the Passer by, a scene of affective dispersal and distributive agency if there ever was one. The presence of these other parties complicates what Vendler calls “the mutually beneficial symbiosis of Acre and Trees” (in which the Acre likewise gives “them – Place”), as it is not so much dual reciprocity but a scattered and collective collaboration that conjures the scene of noticing into being (327). If there is any “Apparent Action” in the poem, it is this convergence of multiple entities, both stationary and mobile. There is, however, an unapparent action: although the Trees appear to do nothing, their mere persistence and existence in space holds the scene together. As commentators have consistently noted, the first quatrain uses a transitive verb, “Maintain,” to describe this seemingly intransitive activity on the part of the trees.

The poem is the clearest articulation of Dickinson’s poetics and philosophy of nature, for it models relations without telos as well as an acceptance of the unknown in the Trees’ minimal or ambiguous consequentiality, announced in the opening and closing stanzas. The lyric subject (if we can call it that) conveys indifference to the significance of the scene’s assemblage coupled with a calm acknowledgement of that significance’s unknowability. The Trees sit upon the Acre “Without

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<sup>100</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 37-38. Cited in Richard Brantley, *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 93. Brantley’s gloss on the poem (93-96) provides a remarkably thorough survey of the wealth of critical commentary this poem has presented.

Design/ Or Order”; whether they “retard – or further –” the “General Nature” or “Plan” remains “Unknown –,” as does whether a General Nature or Plan indeed exists. Benfey is correct to note this poem’s resonance with the following pronouncement from *Nature*: “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them (6, cited in Benfey 115). And yet Emerson writes of *an* occult relation while also figuring that relation as a dual reciprocity between the poet and nature; Dickinson’s poem, meanwhile, presents us with something more like a field of multiple actors who interact without the symmetry associated with reciprocity. Moreover, Emerson’s gesture of the nod characterizes this “occult relation” as necessarily affirmative, while Dickinson’s poem posits mere adjacency as the grounds for coexistence. The poem evokes just as much, by point of *contrast*, the woods of the “transparent eyeball” immediately preceding the one that Benfey cites: in these woods, we recall, the poet becomes “part and parcel of God” as “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him].”

While Emerson’s eye of Reason renders “the name of the nearest friend...foreign and accidental,” rendering in turn the nature of the poet’s relationship to that friend “a mere trifle and disturbance,” Dickinson’s poem shows us neighbors who keep their names, their identities, and the specific qualities of their relations to each other. The poem accentuates the singularity of beings who “maintain” without integrating into a larger whole. Rather than woods, it shows us simply “Four Trees,” who remain distinct and separate upon a likewise “solitary” Acre. If by the end of the poem the Acre appears less solitary than is first announced, the companions that surround it preserve their own singularity as they keep the Acre’s, too, intact. At the poem’s end, we are reminded that if the Trees (as well as perhaps the other parties) act in concert, they do so nevertheless “severally,” retaining the independence that makes neighboring possible. Another “Neighbor” is God, who, strikingly in light of his apparent nearness, keeps His own distance and position in the scene. God is then not the means to a self-dissolving unification, nor is unification posited as the means to accessing divinity. Redemption is thus indefinitely suspended.

F1370, a late poem of Dickinson’s (c. 1875), likewise dwells in the unredeeming suspension of integration while also addressing directly the Transcendentalist aspiration to attain wholeness with “Universal Being”:

Unto the Whole – how add?  
 Has “All” a further Realm –  
 Or Utmost an Ulterior?  
 Oh, Subsidy of Balm!

These four lines succinctly refute both the desirability and the possibility of communion with divinity as the absolute, the total, and the universal. The first line challenges integration with the Aristotelian insight that if the Whole is indeed already such, there is neither the need nor the possibility of adding to it. The second two lines, meanwhile, transpose the first rhetorical question into an overtly theological discourse: if indeed one could add oneself to the “Utmost” of divinity, there would be no “further Realm” to go.<sup>101</sup> If, as it does for Emerson, the redemption of the individual entails its integration into a universal state of salvation, this poem challenges the

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<sup>101</sup> Bataille writes that “Salvation is the summit of all possible project and the height of matters relating to projects. Moreover, by virtue of the very fact that salvation is a summit, it is negation of projects of momentary interest. At the extreme limit, the desire for salvation turns into the hatred of all project (of the putting off of existence until later): of salvation itself, suspected of having a commonplace motive” (*Inner Experience* in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson ed., *The Bataille Reader* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1997], 77).

possibility of such redemption, consigning the individual to the status of the “Hesitating Fractions” we saw at the beginning of this chapter.

Yet the final line posits a possible solution to the problem: the “Subsidy of Balm,” that is, Christ’s sacrifice (the famous “Balm of Gilead”). The poem offers a retort to Emerson’s philosophical aspirations for attaining universality: it is Christ’s sacrifice alone, and not one’s striving toward spiritual and intellectual enlightenment, that can offer the “subsidy” that would facilitate a seemingly impossible unification. Accordingly, one can also understand the emphatic last line as mocking the idea that one can “subsidize,” i.e. aid, the process of salvation.<sup>102</sup> This assertion carries with it another implication: namely, that if there *is* indeed a whole, one will always have been a part of it, yet one will never know or experience that integration as such. If redemption is indeed at hand, it is out of touch, offering no assurance that the fragmented nature of one’s being will be canceled or overcome in the realm of the flesh.

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<sup>102</sup> Here we might detect, too, something like the laughter that Bataille characterizes as the direct result of the experience of non-knowledge.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Limp Whitman

#### i. introduction: “a little wash’d-up drift”

Sometimes for Whitman, to be a poet is to go limp. This may come as a surprise regarding the poet who, in “I Sing the Body Electric,” writes enthusiastically of “love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,” who in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” declares that the greatest of poets “incarnate[es] this land,/ attracting it body and soul to himself, hanging on its neck with incomparable love,/ Plunging his seminal muscle into its merits and demerits.”<sup>103</sup> But “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” regarded by critics as a rare moment of self-doubt on Whitman’s part, offers an account of poetic inspiration (the poem was titled “Bardic Symbols” when first published in the April 1860 *Atlantic Monthly*, before its inclusion in the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*) that departs significantly from what Eve Sedgwick referred to as Whitman’s frequent “male-exalting afflatus of phallic worship,” depicting instead a world devoid of firmness and turgidity, and a poet who nonetheless writes through that deflating absence.<sup>104</sup>

The poet is depicted on the shores of the Paumanok of his birth (Long Island, that “fish-shaped island”), contemplating his vocation: “I musing late in the autumn day, gazing off southward,/ Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems,/ Was seiz’d by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot,/ The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the land of the globe” (5-9). In this schism of the poetic persona, the lyric “I” is estranged from the vatic “electric self” readers of the prior two editions of *Leaves of Grass* know so well. Ironically, the aspirations of the “electric self” are fulfilled for this *other* self, the one who ostensibly forgoes the thrills of electricity to attend instead to what lies beneath him. Thus as the poem goes on, the speaker’s attention is drawn toward “those slender windrows,/ Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten,/ Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by the tide” (17;11-12). The detritus, interpreted as an offering by the island itself, provides the occasion for lyrical reflection, yet the revelation it yields counters the poet’s self-representation as “seiz’d,” amounting to an experience that comes up quite short of electrifying: in the second canto the speaker concludes that “I too but signify at the utmost a little wash’d-up drift” (22).

The aim of this chapter is to understand the ecocritical implications of this likening of the poet to an image of surrender and failure (“*wash’d-up*”), an image, as we will see, that is decidedly absent of the romance of total abjection and devoid of the *jouissance* certain strains of queer theory have associated with self-erasure. In exploring this figure, I will pull the focus away from an aspect of Whitman championed in contemporary eco-criticism and queer theory alike: the poet who intensifies and multiplies the erotic and affective charges that traverse boundaries and connect bodies, both human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate. The body of theories that now go by the name of “new materialisms” stresses the ecological value of affective affiliations across species lines and living/nonliving distinctions.<sup>105</sup> Its underlying presumption is that appreciating those affective ties and

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<sup>103</sup> Lines 59 and 289, respectively. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* are from the 1891-1892 version of the text presented in Michael Moon ed., *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* (New York: Norton, 2002). Hereafter all citations are cited parenthetically by line number in the text.

<sup>104</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 1985), 205

<sup>105</sup> Among the most prominent examples of this theoretical disposition is Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010). Bennett has pointed to Whitman as an inspiration for her theory of vital materialism, and I engage with her writings on Whitman (“Whitman’s Sympathies” and “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman”) below.

experiencing the feelings they transmit—feelings often understood to be “queer”—could serve as the basis on which humanity can ground a much-needed ecological ethics. In certain variants of “queer ecology,” faith is thus placed in the image of the world as an affective network, a mass of vital entanglements, or “an infinitely connective machinery of desire.”<sup>106</sup> In what follows, I show how this worldview resonates deeply with Whitman’s own poetic goal of maximizing attunement as a mode of redemption, a means of reconciling humanity with the wonders of the natural world and the divinity it represents. Given the gendered, biopolitical, capitalistic, and ecologically deleterious nature of the nineteenth-century discourses undergirding this redemptive program, I map an alternative ecopoetics traceable in *Leaves of Grass*, one in which an innate connection between humanity and the earth is challenged or such a connection, when established, yields nothing like the pleasure of an electrifying erotic “charge.” Like the speaker of “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” in other words, this chapter will walk alongside the “electric self,” holding it at bay in favor of exploring other, less vibrant dimensions of the poet.

Erotic-electric charges have been conceived as both the product and the source of Whitman’s poetry, such that Whitman is understood as a conductor of natural energies. Critics have shown the interrelationship of Whitman’s gender, his sexuality, and this role as an electrical conduit to be a complex one. Harold Aspiz writes of “[*Leaves of Grass*’s] persona’s astonishing phallic electricity,” noting that Whitman reiterates an idea common to contemporaneous scientific thought that “the male is the sole transmitter of the electric spark of life and that the female is the source chiefly of the life-giving sustenance.”<sup>107</sup> For Aspiz, heteromascularity is thus central to Whitman’s conception of himself as a poet, as this “phallic electricity...relates him to the sexual-creative force of the universe and to the cosmic drama of electrical intercourse” (148). For Mark Maslan, meanwhile, “what makes Whitmanic inspiration distinctive is, above all, the way it fuses the invasive, automatic nature of the poetic impulse...with the involuntary nature of the sexual drive.”<sup>108</sup> Maslan shows how Whitman embraces the Romantic trope of the male poet’s submission to the inspiration of divinized nature, turning that trope toward what seems like its logical erotic analog: being penetrated. As Maslan subtly argues, if Whitman likens poetic inspiration to penetration, it is not to abandon masculine poetic authority, but rather to claim it while also valorizing homosexual sex.

While Whitman’s poetry is certainly rife with images of phallic self-aggrandizement as well as self-dissolving erotic surrender, there are select—indeed, exceptional—moments in Whitman’s poetry

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<sup>106</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen and Todd R. Ramlow, “Pink Vectors of Deleuze: Queer Theory and Inhumanism,” *rhizomes* 11-12 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006), <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/cohenramlow.html>. For further examples of queer materialism with a similar orientation, see Dianne Chisholm’s “Biophilia, Creative Involution, and the Ecological Future” in Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson ed. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 359-382; Stacy Alaimo’s *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), and; Eileen Joy’s contribution to the “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms” dossier in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, nos. 2-3 (2015): 209-248. In a polemical refutation of affect-based ecological theory, Clare Colebrook argues that “[b]y declaring that the man of reason, in his representational, cognitive, calculative, individual, and disembodied comportment is a fiction that we have now overcome, and by insisting that we are already affectively attuned to the earth, we enclose the world and ourselves in a myopic bubble of happiness. We refuse to face a future in which humans will literally not exist, a posthuman future that will be precipitated by our current sense that we have easily cast off the worst of the human” (“The Once and Future Humans: Between Happiness and Extinction,” *Against Life*, ed. Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016], 63-85; 76).

<sup>107</sup> Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 148, 147.

<sup>108</sup> Maslan, *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 5.

where one encounters a mode of surrender that brings with it a genre of sensation that does not fit into the economies of pleasure of which Whitman is rightfully famous for having sung. This sensation deflates and neutralizes any form of masculine eros, regardless of whether it is conceived as phallic or anal, homo or hetero. As we will also see, the same genre of sensation challenges paradigms in queer and ecocritical scholarship that seek to valorize Whitman's poetry as a factory of pleasure, conceived either positively as Deleuzian transpersonal affect or negatively as Lacan's self-annihilating *jouissance* (*unpleasure*). In both cases, eros often functions as a redemptive force: it chastens the hubris of anthropocentrism or cures the excesses of the "phallicized ego."<sup>109</sup> As an alternative to conceptions of Whitman as a prophet of pleasure, I will explore moments in his poetry where, instead of the self being scattered or undone by erotic energies, the pressure to *be* a self is relieved by a source of indifference so neutralizing that it undoes the erotic, leading to both sexual and poetic dysfunction.

*Limpness* is the central term with which Whitman attempts to grasp this sensation. Limpness poses the threat of interrupting or thwarting a project pervasive in Whitman's work and oft-championed by his critics: to push the embodied self to increase its capacity for enjoyment, both sexual and sensual. As we will see in the first section of this chapter, the Whitmanian demand to derive more and more pleasure from the body and the earth is part of a larger redemptive program in which the expansion of the capacity of the senses restores humanity—and with it, nonhuman nature—to its originary splendor. This program both relies upon and valorizes male potency, as revealed in Whitman's recently discovered male health guide, *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body*, first published under a pen-name ("Mose Velsor") as a thirteen-part column in the *New York Atlas* in 1857.

As a counter to the imperative to increase the capacity for enjoyment and to augment one's "manly vigor," the second and third sections of this chapter highlight the ecopoetics of a "limp Whitman" *malgré lui*, an iteration of the poet who dilates or surrenders the self not to take in or to amplify pleasure, nor to masochistically dissolve the self, but rather to attenuate the demands he places on the earth and on his own body. In addition to limpness, two new terms emerge for the sensation that halts or short-circuits the will-to-pleasure: neutrality and incapacity, both associated with the calming indifference of the planet in the 1856 edition's "A Song of the Rolling Earth." In the last part of the chapter, we return to "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" to explore the difficulties (psychological, rhetorical, and philosophical) that come with slackening one's hold on nonhuman nature. Comparing himself to a "limp blossom" floating in the waves, the pliant poet-speaker experiences anhedonia facing the realization of his own insignificance. As he feels himself dissolve into the meaningless "writings" of seadrift, states of inanimacy and even death become his only point of comparison. The loss of self in this instance, however, exhibits none of the "shattering" *jouissance* that certain strains of queer theory have come to associate with the death drive—although the speaker at times seems wishful for such exuberant annihilation. Instead, the poem offers a dedramatized account of death as *going limp*, attaining a state of banality devoid of pain, pleasure, and meaning. Whitman's ecopoetics of limp surrender challenges our investments in him as a poet of virile sexuality, while also prompting us to reconsider the role of pleasure in theories of the ethical relation between humanity and nonhuman nature.

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<sup>109</sup> I take the idea of the "phallicizing of the ego" from Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3-30; 25.



ii. “ministering to delight”

*“To spring up in the morning with light feelings, and the disposition to raise the voice in some cheerful song—to feel a pleasure in going forth into the open air, and in breathing it...—none of that dreary, sickening, unmanly lassitude that, to so many men, fills up and curses what ought to be the best years of their lives, without good works to show for the same—but instead of such a living death, which, (to make a terrible but true confession,) so many lead, uncomfortably realizing, through their middle age, more than the distresses and bleak impressions of death, stretched out year after year, the result of early ignorance, imprudence, and want of wholesome training—...instead of that, to find life one long holiday, labor a pleasure, the body a heaven, the earth a paradise, all the commonest habits ministering to delight—and to have this continued year after year, and old age even, when it arrives, bringing no change to the capacity for a high state of manly enjoyment—these are what we would put before you, reader, as a true picture,...the sum of all...and the main object which every youth should have, in the beginning, from the time he starts out to reason and judge for himself.” (70-71)*

—Walt Whitman, *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body* (1858)

*Be assured, my young friends, the human system is constructed entirely upon principles of benevolence, and perfectly adapted to an end of utility and enjoyment...it is a deeply humiliating consideration, that of all the animals which inhabit this beautiful sphere, where everything, in uncontaminated nature, is so benevolently fitted for enjoyment, proud, rational man is the only one who has degraded his nature, and, by his voluntary depravity, rendered this life a pilgrimage of pain, and the world one vast lazar-house for his species, and the earth a mighty sepulchre, for those who prematurely fall the victims of the innumerable diseases which result from the violation of the laws of life. How important, then, is it, that man should understand his nature and relations, that he may know and perform his duties consistently with the constitutional laws of his life.*

—Sylvester Graham, *Lecture to Young Men, on Chastity* (1848)

For the Whitman of the 1850s, as for his contemporary Reverend Sylvester Graham, to live properly is to maximize one’s enjoyment. It should come as no surprise to us that the exuberant author of *Leaves of Grass*, a poet who writes of “countless immortal lives with countless embodiments and enjoyments”<sup>110</sup> would argue that pleasure is the *summum bonum* of our life on earth. It is perhaps more surprising, though, in the case of Graham, the dietary reformer now perhaps best known for his crusade against an epidemic of pleasure in America—the scourge of apparently widespread male masturbation. As the quote above indicates, however, Graham represented his movement in favor of chastity (often referred to now as the “sexual hygiene” or “sexual continence” movement) as the means by which the human species could recalibrate its behavior with respect to a natural world “benevolently fitted for [its] enjoyment.” Graham, in other words, was writing about nothing less than restoring humanity to a state of prelapsarian contentment. As we will see, Whitman shares in this redemptive vision regarding the spiritual, political, and indeed material transformation he aims to bring about by writing and disseminating *Leaves of Grass*; it is in the recently discovered series “Manly Health and Training,” a weekly serial self-help column published in the *New York Atlas* in 1858, however, that one can observe the most illuminating convergences with Graham’s ideas. By putting these texts into conversation, we come to understand how, for Whitman as for Graham, the redemption of a fallen world is all but synonymous with a process of augmenting the human capacity for enjoying the natural world. For both writers, a constantly (re)invigorated male eros reveals itself to be the key to that augmentation.

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<sup>110</sup> “I Sing the Body Electric”, line 100.

Graham's lecture is a redemptive call to readjust human reason in a manner that regulates the body and its appetites, thus counteracting the sexual excess generated by the perverse, sinful dimensions of the human psyche that, ironically, are rooted in reason itself. In one pithy sentence from his lecture, Graham sketches at once the condition of the Fall and the means for redemption, situating his campaign for "sexual continence" within a legacy of progressive Protestant theology:

But I mean to assert that, as the lower orders of animals have no rational and moral powers to govern the exercise of their sexual appetite, so have they—in a pure state of nature—no artificial means of destroying the government of the law of instinct, which simply incites them to fulfil the purposes of their organization ; while man, who has the power and means to destroy the government of the law of instinct, and of inducing a depraved appetite, which prompts him to go beyond the purposes of his organization, and thus violate the laws of his constitution, and injure his system, (always in proportion to the excess,) is also endowed with rational powers to *ascertain* those constitutional laws, and moral powers *to prevent* that excess.<sup>111</sup>

Like the knowledge gained by Adam and Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Graham's "rational powers" designate a pharmakon, a substance that at once brings a sickness—the split from humanity's inherent harmony with the order of the natural world—and extends its only cure. What necessitates salvation is also the means by which it can be attained. This split makes itself known by its result, namely the "depraved appetite" that seeks sexual excess. In the cruel irony of the Fall, what marks humanity as superior to animals is also what subjects it to the possibility of self-sabotaging abasement: "By all that reason, therefore, renders man capable of elevating himself above the brute creation, by so much the deeper does he sink himself in degeneracy below the brutes" (39). Though he does not identify reason as its cause, Whitman too bemoans this fallen state of a humanity riddled by desire, expressing an Adamic nostalgia for the contented state of nature still inhabited by animals, who, "placid and self-contain'd...do not sweat and whine about their condition,/ do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins"; not a single animal "is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things" (36).

Whitman's redemptive solution is not to *renounce* this desire, but rather to dissipate it by awakening the mind and body to the bounties of the natural world, to the plentitude of delights naturally at one's fingertips. As for Graham, this means realigning man (I use the male chauvinist designation for humanity intentionally) with his natural constitution, a feat which, as we will see, requires a great degree of discipline and vigilance. It is, as he puts it in the epigraph above from "Manly Health and Training," a fantasy of restoring an Edenic life that renders "the body a heaven, the earth a paradise" in which "all the commonest habits [minister] to delight."<sup>112</sup> Whitman's poetry aims for the maximalization of attunement as a mode of redemption, a means of reconciling humanity with the wonders of the natural world and the divinity it represents. The opening of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* promises to channel "Nature without check with original energy," in effect representing its poetry as the enactment of Edenic paradise in the present:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the  
origin of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are

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<sup>111</sup> Graham, *Lecture to Young Men, on Chastity* (Boston: George W. Light, 1839), 38. Hereafter all citations are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>112</sup> Whitman, *Manly Health and Training: To Teach the Science of a Sound and Beautiful Body* (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), 71. Hereafter all citations are parenthetical within the text.

millions of suns left),  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor  
look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the  
spectres in books.  
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things  
from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them for your self. (5)

Whitman announces his work as the poem that will end all poems by returning us to poetry's beginning, to the scene of the sensorium's immersive contact with the world—before the event of poetic writing that would translate it into speech. He thus disavows his own authority as poet, offering to readers their own experience of the world as the very stuff of poetry, extending to them a world of plenitude (“millions of suns left”) that they may themselves “possess,” “filter” and feel at home in.

Like Emerson, Whitman aspires to be an agent of both physical and metaphysical regeneration, promising the reader the power of an unmediated experience of the universe.<sup>113</sup> The opening lines of *Leaves of Grass* seem nothing less than a direct response to the opening of *Nature*, in which Emerson declares that “The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face: we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”<sup>114</sup> This experience, a reenactment of one's first contact with the world, will restore an originary plenitude, dissolving the alienating reification of tradition and, with it, the idea of a fallen world as well as the concomitant desire to transcend it. As R.W.B. Lewis put it in his classic study of Whitman's “Adamism,” Whitman takes Emerson's call of a return to origins so seriously that he often presents his poetry as if it were the “the first poem ever written, the first formulation in language of the nature of persons and of things and the relations between them.”<sup>115</sup> By opening his readers' senses to the present in its immediacy, Whitman hopes to lead them effectively to Eden itself, and in turn to the primitive Adamic act of naming the world and its inhabitants.

Yet as more recent scholarship has noted, Whitman differs from Emerson in his embrace of sexuality as a means of awakening to the world. Indeed, the mentor who wrote to Whitman “I greet you at the beginning of a great career” upon his reading of the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* condemned the 1856 edition for its overt sexuality, an element he apparently deemed both shameful and extraneous to the poetic-philosophical project he had laid out in *Nature* and “The Poet”.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, in Michael Warner's assessment, Whitman effectively advanced Emerson's project by integrating the volatile energy of sexuality: “by breaking the frame of ordinary reality, heightening the senses, and dissolving public selfhood, [sexuality] restores a primordial, undifferentiated self, fully embodied and in contact with the world” (xxxii). In a similar vein, Elisa New writes that Whitman uses “the ministering power of an unregulated sexuality” to “redeem the wakened sinner by restoring him to a sanctified realm,”—the realm of the flesh.<sup>117</sup> As Whitman puts it in “I Sing the Body Electric,” “There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,/ All things please the soul, but these please the soul well” (50-51).

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<sup>114</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 3

<sup>115</sup> Lewis, *The American Adam: innocence, Tragedy and tradition in the nineteenth century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 44.

<sup>116</sup> See Jerome Loving, *The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 220-222.

<sup>117</sup> New, *The Regenerate Lyric: Theology and Innovation in American Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 129; 127.

Inextricably tied to the sensorium, erotic life is in turn inextricable from Whitman's redemptive project.

In this respect, and perhaps surprisingly, here is where Whitman resembles Reverend Sylvester Graham more than Emerson, for in Graham's *Lecture to Young Men* a great and overwhelming power is assigned to sexuality, and the dulling of erotic sensation amounts to damnation in the temporal realm.<sup>118</sup> Graham distinguishes his study from antecedent writings on masturbation in asserting that its deleterious effects are not due to the loss of an alleged vital force in semen that departs with ejaculation; rather, it is sexual pleasure *per se* that threatens to disrupt the body's functioning: "the peculiar excitement of venereal indulgence, is more diffusive, universal and powerful, than any other to which the system is ever subject...it more rapidly exhausts the vital properties of the tissues, and impairs the functional powers of the organs... and consequently...it, in a greater degree than any other cause, deteriorates all the vital processes" (56). The old adage that masturbation causes blindness is due to Graham's opinion that among the plethora of ailments brought about the repetitive shock to the system of this "peculiar excitement" is a "great deterioration and wasting of the nervous substance," such that all the senses, especially sight are dulled. Due to such incapacitating pleasure, vision becomes "feeble, obscure, cloudy, confused" before finally giving way to an "utter blindness [that] fills the rest of life with darkness and unavailing regret" (114-115, 116). It perhaps goes without saying that Graham lists sexual impotence as another condition brought about by sexual excess.

Readers familiar with *Leaves of Grass's* celebration of erotic pleasure may bristle at my comparison, given the contrast between Graham's moralistic condemnation of sexual excess and Whitman's general embrace of human sexuality; Whitman's "Manly Health and Training," however, exhibits Graham's peculiar rhetorical mix of recognizing the vital power of sexuality and yet guarding it, like a prized and fragile possession, against the self-dissipating and incapacitating effects of overindulgence. Moreover, for both Graham and Whitman, the preservation of male sexual potency and the capacity for pleasure is indispensable to their respective redemptive visions, requiring an array of regimes (strict diets, abstinence and/or moderation regarding both sex and alcohol, fitness routines, mental rest) that bring to mind Foucault's account of sexuality as a biopolitical mechanism (*dispositif*) much more than New's appraisal of sexuality in Whitman as "unregulated." Foucault's description of one aspect of institutional biopower as "centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" indeed perfectly describes Whitman's health guide, the aim of which, to quote again from the epigraph above, is to implement a lifelong regime "bringing no change to the capacity for a high state of manly enjoyment."<sup>119</sup>

Indeed, if *Leaves of Grass* expanded the scope of Emerson's project by adding to it a body and libido, it brought with it a slew of responsibilities, as "Manly Health and Training" best illustrates. Its author promises us that his regime has the power to "to revolutionize life, and change it from a scene of gloom, feebleness, and irresolution, into *life indeed*," in which one lives in sync with "the beneficent processes of nature always at work, the sun shining, the flowers blooming, the crops growing, the waters running, with all else that is wanted," but *only* if "man should be *rightly toned* to partake of the universal strength and joy" (26-7). If such toning is not maintained, one risks slipping into a kind of hell on earth, a life "without vigor, without attraction, without pleasure, without force, without love, without independence, buoyance, spirit, or pride" (84). The maintenance of the beautiful body requires sacrifice and vigilance, and a man "must be willing to place *health, sound internal organs, and perfect condition, at the head of the list of the objects of his whole life, here on earth*" (147 Whitman's emphasis). These sacrifices

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<sup>118</sup> See Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

<sup>119</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 139.

are of course worth it, since their reward is—once again--“the *capacity* of bliss [that] the simple sensation of ‘feeling well’ is able to produce” (187, my emphasis).

The high stakes—spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional—of maintaining this capacity, accompanied by the intense discipline required to do so, results in a paranoia about male vigor and phallic integrity rivaling today’s oft-diagnosed “male fragility.” He who wishes to preserve his “virile power” must guard against a slew of modern evils, including excessive food and drink, the melancholy induced by over-intellectualization, and the “pestiferous little gratifications” of modern life, including the urban prostitutes whose presence brings about “the curse of an insane appetite” (182, 163). What Eve Sedgwick described as “[e]arly Whitman’s unrelenting emphasis...on *incarnating* a phallic erethism” is alive and well in the 1858 series, and phallic figures dominate (205). The organ designated as the center of male erotic life is privileged in a discourse that synonymizes health with the capacity to experience pleasure: the body is a “machine calculated to produce...an outpouring of subtle force” (83), which one should direct toward “prolific growth” (79); one must ensure that even the feet are “allowed to grow up” such that one may traverse the world “firmly, manfully” (129). As if to directly address the specter of impotence and incapacitation conjured in Graham’s lecture, Whitman’s health guide stresses that for all who follow his regime, “all the senses, all the functions and attributes of the body, become altogether renewed, more refined, more capable of conferring pleasure in themselves, with far more delicate susceptibilities” (128). It promises that by regulating the self “the sexual passions are far less morbid than under a stimulated course of life,” resulting in “a different, more wholesome and more salutary habit of feeling and practice” (126). At stake for Whitman is the wearing-out of the sexual and the sensual: an excess of either can compromise the functioning of the other. Masculine eros must accordingly be defended and protected at every turn—including against the enervating and deflating effects of sexual excess.

Despite our inherited image of Whitman as non-conformist apostle of sex positivity, then, he shares in some of the more common phobias circulated in discourses about sexuality in the nineteenth-century United States. The last few decades of Whitman scholarship, which has done the invaluable work of situating Whitman within varied fields of discourses pertaining to sexuality (sexual hygiene, sensationalist fiction, temperance propaganda, phrenology, Real Womanhood, free love, Harmonialism, spiritualism, and Swedenborgianism, to name but a few), has yielded much insight into the complicated views Whitman held regarding the healthiness of sexuality, both for the body and in the spirit.<sup>120</sup> In reviewing it, one comes to find that if sexuality is indeed a redemptive force in

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<sup>120</sup> David S. Reynolds’ *Walt Whitman’s America* (New York: Knopf, 1995), in my estimation, remains the most illuminating of these studies. Situating Whitman’s views on sex within the context of nearly all of the discourses listed above, Reynolds shows how Whitman navigates his conflicting views on sexuality, capturing the confusing mix of prudery and “frankness” that permeates his statements on sex. Reynolds shows how “Whitman had a deep-seated belief in the sacredness and purity of sex when rightly treated” and that he was “opposed to the desacralization of sex in popular culture, and...hoped to reinstate sex as fully natural, the absolute center of existence” (210). Both Peter Coviello’s *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005) and Michael Warner’s essay “Whitman Drunk” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005) (269-291) capture some of Whitman’s ambivalence about sex while attending to its relationship to political and social formations; the former focuses on sexual hygiene and phrenological discourses, while the latter draws our attention to Whitman’s strategic use of temperance propaganda to imagine a sexual-affective “counter-public.” The first two chapters of Michael Moon’s *Disseminating Whitman: Revision and Corporeality in Leaves of Grass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991) shows how “Whitman was enabled to write about officially proscribed forms of sexual behavior by employing the vague, capacious, and flexible vocabulary which came to hand from the recklessly metaphorical public discourse of his time” (55). In *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Popular Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), Mark Maslan provides a compelling account of how Whitman manipulated

Whitman, *it is also itself in need of redeeming*. Crucially, when Whitman redeems sex, he does so according to the attitudes of the discursive resources available to him at the time—which would include, much to our dismay, not just the moral panic of evangelical writing but also the nascent eugenics witnessed in pseudo-scientific movements like phrenology. According to the logic of seemingly all of these discourses, a central aspect of redeeming sex (and redeeming the world through sex) is the biopolitical imperative of separating the good from the bad, the healthy from the pathological. Even up until the end of his career, Whitman upholds such distinctions: in his 1892 article “a Memorandum at a Venture,” he asks, regarding sexuality, “might not every physiologist and every good physician pray for the redeeming of this subject from its hitherto relegation to the tongues and pens of blackguards, and boldly putting it for once, at least, if no more, in the demesne of poetry and sanity—as something not in itself gross or impure, but entirely consistent with highest manhood and womanhood, and indispensable to both?”<sup>121</sup> According to Whitman, redemption comes about not by affirming sex, but by translating it into the proper discourses, bringing it into the cleansing light of day, the world of “sanity.”

Though Elisa New’s approach to Whitman overlooks the biopolitical valence of the redemption of sex, she teaches us much about Whitman’s redemptive project by situating his poetry within the legacy of Puritan theology. In New’s reading, if Whitman integrates the body into the regenerative philosophical-poetic framework that Emerson provided for him, he brings with it the fallenness inherent in corporeality—a body subject to wounding as much as healing, death as much as birth, and shame as much as pride:

[D]etermined as he was to displace inherited sin with self-taught seeing, and the boon of grace with an energetic self-reliance, Emerson promulgated a law that had perforce to avert its (transparent) eye from that suffering Body whose density, vulnerability, and final expendability manifests how decidedly unfree we are, how determinate our possibilities, how limited our knowledge. It is not only out of a more liberal sexual frankness that Whitman restores to the body its full weight and dimension, but also out of a considerable theological perspicacity. (101)

In a reading of “The Sleepers” as the core of Whitman’s famous project of writing the “New Bible” that strives to emphasize his indebtedness to Puritan culture, New argues that Whitman does not banish the fall; rather, he puts redemption on the same plane with it, resulting in what she describes as an impure Christology. This means that if there is indeed redemption of the body and, with it, of sex, such redemption does not undo or sublimate the burdens of the flesh, but rather designates them, too, as part of the divine: “Whitman knew all along from his Christian forebears that the access route to [Emersonian] originality, if it opens at all, opens only to the lyrical, or ‘naked’ and implicated subject thrown upon his own irreducible self” (126).

New offers us one mode of thinking through Whitman’s ambivalence about sexuality, his awareness that if sex is capacitating, it is also incapacitating, and if it is no less holy than anything else, it is also not *holier* than anything else. Yet her claim that in “The Sleepers” Whitman erases Levitical

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the discourses of sexual hygiene as well as British Romantic ideas about the authority of the poet in order to “tu[rn] sexual possession into a basis for authoritative utterance” (8). Vivian Pollak’s *The Erotic Whitman* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000) is a biographical study of how Whitman came to terms with his own sexuality via the more public/impersonal discourse of his poetry, and contains a chapter (“Why Whitman Gave Up Fiction” (37-55) exploring in depth Whitman’s disdain for sultry romances of his era.

<sup>121</sup> Whitman, *Prose Works, 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963-4), vol. 2: 493-94.

distinctions between clean and unclean, pure and impure, does not apply to most of his other poetic works. Even the poem that has rightfully come to be known as Whitman's foremost paean to human sexuality, "I Sing the Body Electric," exhibits the mentality of redemption-by-distinction:

If any thing is sacred the human body is sacred,  
And the glory and sweet of a man is the token of manhood  
untainted  
And in man or woman a clean, firm-fibred body, is more  
beautiful than the most beautiful face.

Have you seen the fool that corrupted his own body? Or  
the fool that corrupted her own live body?  
For they do not conceal themselves, and cannot conceal  
themselves. (100-101)

Here Whitman affirms not just any body, but one that qualifies as robust and hygienic according to the rubric of the physiology of his age, and, of course, according to his own guide to manly health. To assert that the body is sacred means that another body must be marked as profane, "corrupted"—and flagrantly so. Here we are indeed in the realm of the corruptible body in which New situates Whitman's poetry; Levitical distinctions, however, remain indispensable here, albeit perhaps in a new or displaced form, bringing New's contrast between "The Sleepers" and Whitman's other works even more sharply into relief.

By emphasizing the biopolitical, gendered, and theological discourses by which Whitman's writings seek to redeem sexuality, I wish to call attention to the importance of the scholarly task of critiquing the premises that so often undergird Whitman's poetic redemption of sexuality and the human body—premises that fetishize the heteropatriarchal values of virility, vitality, and forcefulness; the capitalist values of efficiency and productivity; the biopolitical (indeed, eugenic) values of racial and bodily purity; and of course, the value placed by evangelical Christianity on the cleansing of sexual vice. Underestimating the influence of these discourses risks distorting our understanding of Whitman and, at worst, unwittingly perpetuating their metrics of value. By way of an example, take Michael Warner's introduction to *The Portable Whitman*, which celebrates Whitman's redemption of sex, arguing that *Leaves of Grass's* devotion to the poetics of sexuality can be marked as a "watershed in modern culture":

Formerly sexual desire had been seen as an appetite, or a sign of fallen nature, or the animal being against which moral humanity asserts itself, with institutions such as marriage being a kind of toilet-training for sexual desire. Whitman treats erotic life as a distinctive kind of experience, valuable because it is not controlled, allowing for a new mode of expressivity and self-discovery, to be approached with abandonment and respect...in Whitman, sex comes to be seen in a new way: *as sexuality*, a fundamental human capacity.<sup>122</sup>

As we have seen, the difference between Whitman's view of sexuality and, say, Sylvester Graham's, is not as stark as Warner would suggest. Though I do not wish to downplay the groundbreaking, even revolutionary aspect of Whitman's sexual frankness, we have seen that even as Whitman works against the tropes of sexual desire as an appetite attributable to fallen or bestial nature, in doing so he often

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Warner, Introduction to *The Portable Walt Whitman* (New York: Penguin, 2004), xi-xxxvi; xxxi. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

resorts to a discourse of sexual hygiene predicated on those very associations. Likewise, Warner's claim that sexuality for Whitman is "valuable because it is not controlled" is betrayed by Whitman's clear call for the regulation and control of sexual potency in "Manly Health and Training." Even if we regard Whitman's series of columns as an aberration from a more liberated or liberating stance on sexuality he takes in *Leaves of Grass*, the convergence between Whitman's redemptive vision of Transcendentalist spiritual awakening and the regime aimed at augmenting the "capacity for a high state of manly enjoyment" is both remarkable and indisputable.

Warner, meanwhile, echoes the health guide's own language in his appraisal of Whitman's view on sex as "a fundamental human capacity." "Capacity" is a word oft-encountered in Whitman criticism: Jane Bennett praises Whitman's ability to "call forth from the subjectified self a set of naturalistic or elemental capacities, capacities shared with the earth, sun, and the animals"; Jacques Rancière writes of a Whitman who effectuates a "vast redemption of the empirical world" by exercising "a universal intellectual capacity, which most people renounce practicing"; for Peter Coviello, Whitman's sexuality represents "a nearly boundless human capacity for relation to others."<sup>123</sup> I do not mean to pronounce these evaluations as exaggerated or inaccurate—indeed, they perhaps attest to the very force that Whitman attributes to his own poetry—but rather to note the infectiousness of Whitman's exuberant tone. I do not, furthermore, mean to suggest that these critics are themselves influenced by the swarm of nineteenth-century ideologies in the midst of which Whitman made his poetic intervention. I do wish to call into question, however, the apparent critical consensus that what is most valuable about Whitman is his "capacity," or what he capacitates. For in moments of breakdown, incapacitation, or dysfunction in Whitman's writings, we can trace something like the subversion of his era's oft-uninterrogated valorization of productivity, vital force, and masculine gravitas.

The next section will examine instances of such breakdown in Whitman's poetry, and will offer some account of how these capacitating values are both affirmed and challenged in Whitman's writing. The question of Whitman's ecopoetics will be the core of this analysis: as we will witness, erotic sensation and sensation *tout court* will continue to be at stake in Whitman's appraisal of his relationship to nonhuman nature. We have seen that Whitman's task of redeeming sexuality is an integral part of his overall vision of reconciling an alienated humanity with nonhuman nature. In this context, Whitman conceives of the natural world as a garden of earthly delights, a source of sensual pleasures continuous with those associated with sex. In certain of Whitman's poems, however, we witness episodes of erotic and affective dysfunction that disrupt the vision of a harmonious alignment with the universe. In these moments, both the capacity to redeem and the capacity for enjoyment—capacities we have seen to be all but synonymous in Whitman's estimation—are short-circuited, forcing the poet to seek an alternate form of relation to nonhuman nature. The sensations engendered by this relation cannot be squared with a redemptive agenda, nor can they be evaluated within the rubric of pleasure. They are instead deflating, arresting, and incapacitating—far from the realm of robust masculinity encountered in "Manly Health and Training."

My wager is thus also that the Whitman's poetics of incapacity correspond to the most unredeeming moments in his writing, moments in which, as we have seen in Chateaubriand, Nerval, and Dickinson, the task of redeeming humanity *vis-à-vis* nonhuman nature is sidestepped, put on hold, or even abandoned. As it is for Chateaubriand and Nerval, for Whitman receptivity to the natural world is central to a poetic project that aims to reawaken and reenchanted humanity, to reorient it toward

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<sup>123</sup> Jane Bennett, "The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman" in John E. Seery ed., *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 131-146 (136); Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis* (New York: Verso, 2013), 69; Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 143.



the wonders of nonhuman nature. Like these authors, too, however, for Whitman what resembles an “awakening” to nonhuman nature often ironically occurs in the gaps of the redemptive project, such that receptivity to the natural world is predicated on nonhuman nature’s thwarting or undoing of the workings of redemption—and in this specific case, the workings of capacitation as well. With Dickinson, meanwhile, we bore witness to a different irony, in which to gain intimacy with nonhuman nature means to accept or even reinforce the boundaries between the (human) self and the natural world, thus resisting the imperative for redemptive integration *via* poetic vision. As we turn to Whitman’s “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” we will see all of these unredeeming elements at work in moments of incapacitation, even as the text strives to assure itself, and the reader, that the task of the poet is to capacitate and thus to bring about the fulfillment of a redemptive project.

Critics have stressed these unredeeming qualities of Whitman’s writings, though they have not sufficiently grappled, in my estimation, with how those qualities lie in direct conflict with the traits we also hold to be most distinctive about Whitman, including the redemptive embrace of sexuality, the phallic exuberance, and the biopolitical fixation on the body’s capacities that I have traced above. Michael Warner notes that “much of Whitman’s writing...comes down to a radical and paradoxical idea, borrowed from stoic philosophy but with a new resonance in a Christian culture: that what is beautiful is mere existence” (xxx). Warner captures the spirit of a poet who places on one spiritual-poetic-material plane “the threads that connect the stars...and beetles rolling balls of dung,” and who writes in the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* that he “judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing.”<sup>124</sup> Jane Bennett places special emphasis on this latter ethos and comes to a similar stoic vision of Whitman. Bennett holds Whitman’s “solar judgment” as central to his radically egalitarian approach to materiality, defining it as a “strangely open-armed, projective, impersonal, elemental judging” in which “[t]he poet ‘goes solar’ in order to linger long enough and to linger with a mind that is open and quiet enough—that has slackened its reflex to categorize and rank.”<sup>125</sup> By now I hope to have made clear how these elements of perceptive and moral neutrality, as characteristic as they are of *some* of Whitman’s writings, are also contradicted by the redemptive inclinations in his work, including his desire to redeem sex from “the tongues and pens of blackguards” and to perfect the human body.

Nevertheless, such appraisals point us to the importance of understanding the nature of Whitman’s calm acceptance of “mere existence” and the conditions that make such stoicism possible. To do so is no simple task, as further commentary by Warner reveals: “Whitman, full of affirmation that he is, does not seek to exonerate the world or redeem it. His attitude is fundamentally a refusal to see the world as in need of redemption” (xxxix). Even as he limns the very attitude we will explore going forward, Warner’s language of “affirmation” and “refusal” presents us with an agonistic schema in which the value of the world is either asserted or negated, redeemed or condemned. If Whitman’s worldview is indeed (at times) an unredeeming one, it requires a mindset devoid of the drama of damnation and redemption preserved in such agonism. The question, then, is not whether Whitman affirms or redeems “mere existence”—or indeed, “refuses” to see the world as needing redemption—but whether he *merely* acknowledges it.

An important resource for theorizing the unredeeming attitude in Whitman’s poetry going forward will thus be Barthes’ neutral, which alerts us to the difficulty, the near impossibility, of maintaining an attitude in which the paradigm of affirmation and negation may be altogether eluded. Barthes’ lecture course on the Neutral at the Collège de France in 1977-1978 points to the “natural assertiveness” of language, which ensures that even naming something is perceived as an affirmation

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<sup>124</sup> “Song of Myself,” line 28; preface in Moon’s *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings* 620, line 171-172.

<sup>125</sup> “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman,” 133, 134.

of its existence.<sup>126</sup> Given language's implicit tendency toward affirmation, then, the task of writing or inhabiting the neutral means one is perpetually faced with a difficult semiotic task of "sidestepping affirmation"—that is, avoiding affirmation without outright *refusing* it. As Anne-Lise François instructs us in an illuminating essay on such "minimal affirmatives" in the late work of Barthes, Sedgwick, and Empson, Barthes' wish to elude the snares of affirmation and refusal can be understood as continuous with Foucault's critique of the repressive hypothesis: "Barthes' debt to Foucault also appears in *Le Neutre* in his desire to flee a culture that asks him to pursue, lay claim to, and activate desire, and that already anticipates his resistance, rebellion, insurgency."<sup>127</sup> When Whitman comes closest to mere acknowledgment, it means that he, like Barthes in *Le Neutre*, declines to follow the cultural imperative to view the body as a machine, a factory of pleasure. It means, as we will see, not only to forgo affirmation, but also to forgo (but not *renounce!*) pleasure—including the pleasures of affirmation.

### iii. "to leave the best untold"

*Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist that he could report in conversation what had befallen him. Yet, in our experience, the rays or appulses have sufficient force to arrive at the senses, but not enough to reach the quick and compel the reproduction of themselves in speech. The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and impart.... The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty.*  
-Emerson, "The Poet"

*I swear I see what is better than to tell the best,  
It is always to leave the best untold.*

*When I undertake to tell the best I find I cannot,  
My tongue is ineffectual on its pivots,  
My breath will not be obedient to its organs,  
I become a dumb man.*  
-Whitman, "A Song of the Rolling Earth"

"A Song of the Rolling Earth"—or as it first appeared in the 1856 *Leaves of Grass*, "Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth"—is at once among the most Emersonian of Whitman's poems and Whitman's most strident challenge to Emerson's ideas about the relationship between nature and language, as well as the role of the poet in mediating that relationship. On the one hand, its speaker takes up Emerson's idea of the poet as the "sayer" of nature who achieves an "expression or naming [that] is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree."<sup>128</sup> Thus the opening of the poem pronounces that the true words of the earth are not "those upright lines.... those curves, angles, dots," nor are they "those delicious sounds out of your friends' mouths" (2-4); rather than existing on a second, parallel plane of written or verbal representation, the true words are the very stuff of the earth:

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<sup>126</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans Rosalind E. Kraus and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 44.

<sup>127</sup> François, "Late Exercises in Minimal Affirmatives," in Jason Potts and Daniel Stout ed. *Theory Aside* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) 34-55; 41.

<sup>128</sup> *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 296.

Human bodies are words, myriads of words,  
(In the best poems re-appears the body, man's or woman's,  
    well-shaped, natural, gay,  
Every part able, active, receptive, without shame or the need  
    of shame.)

Air, soil, water, fire—those are words,  
I myself am a word with them—my qualities interpenetrate  
    with theirs— (7-11)

The speaker asserts the continuity of his body with the earth and with the elements, thus refuting any idea of human exceptionality, including the exceptionality associated with the use of language. The poet does not just use words but *is* himself a word, reflecting Emerson's idea of poetic inspiration as nature speaking in and through the poet, a view in which art, as he writes in *Nature*, is "nature passed through the alembic of man" (34). Likewise in an Emersonian vein, the lines above propose the ideal human body as "active, receptive," the instrument by which, as Emerson puts it in the above epigraph from "The Poet," the poet can "receive and impart" nature's "rays and appulses." The Whitmanian body, as we have seen thus far, is indeed the body for which "every touch" will "thrill."

On the other hand, as critics have been keen to point out, Whitman's formulation of all of the earth's component parts as "substantial words" unsettles Emerson's Neoplatonic view on language in which words are signs of natural facts and natural facts are in turn symbols of the spiritual realm (3).<sup>129</sup> By pronouncing himself a word, Whitman leads us to questions that unsettle the status of the poet as sayer: If signifier and signified are collapsed into a single plane, what would it mean to actually say something? How would it differ from saying nothing at all? If the poem troubles the conditions of possibility for Emerson's "saying," it also calls into question the idea that the poet's primary concern should be the reproduction of speech. Even at the start, before he ultimately resolves to refrain from "telling" in the third section excerpted above, the speaker casts doubt both on his own capacity to speak and on whether such telling makes a difference:

The earth does not withhold, it is generous enough,  
The truths of the earth continually wait, they are not so  
    conceal'd either,  
They are calm, subtle, untransmissible by print,  
They are imbued through all things conveying themselves  
    willingly,  
Conveying a sentiment and invitation, I utter and utter,  
I speak not, yet if you hear me not of what avail am I to you?  
To bear, to better, lacking these of what avail am I? (21-27)

This passage resonates quite strikingly with Dickinson's "unconveyed" truths we saw in the previous chapter; as with Dickinson, the line between revealing and concealing, enclosing and disclosing is rather blurred here. The earth's truths are "not so conceal'd"—that is, barely concealed, hidden on the surface, lying in wait—which means in turn that "conveying" them strangely resembles leaving

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<sup>129</sup> See M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 25, as well as Burton Hatlen's entry "Song of the Rolling Earth, A" in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, ed. *Walt Whitman, An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 665-666, which synthesizes a number of readings on this subject.

them unconveyed. If such truths are “untransmissible by print,” they seem no more transmissible by speech; nevertheless, the speaker “utter[s] and utter[s]” without producing speech or being heard.

If the speaker indeed counts himself among the “all things” through which the truths of nature convey themselves, if he is indeed a word, a structural component of the message and not just its medium, how can he “tell” nature *à la* Emerson? The syntax of these lines masterfully collapse conveyor and conveyed, author and messenger as they simulate a cascade of communicative agency: “They are imbued through all things conveying themselves willingly,/Conveying a sentiment and invitation, I utter and utter.” It is unclear what the present participle clause modifies, and thus whether “they” (the truths) are “willingly” doing the conveying or whether it is the things themselves that are moved to do so. The next present participle phrase—“conveying a sentiment and invitation”—likewise could modify the truths, the things, or the lyric “I”; as such, it acts as a bridge in the causal and communicative chain, allowing the “I” to emerge as an agent of communication only to recede from all of the many remaining lines that complete the first section. It emerges, moreover, to bemoan its inefficacy and question its ability to make a difference, to add something--“to bear, to better.”

As if to provide solace for this condition, the poem introduces the idea of “the inaudible words of the earth” and goes on to offer a vision of the planet, too, as likewise inhabiting the liminal space between expression and silence, between the meaningful and the unremarkable (15):

The earth does not exhibit itself nor refuse to exhibit itself,  
Possesses still underneath,  
Underneath the ostensible sounds, the august chorus of  
heroes, the wail of slaves,  
Persuasions of lovers, curses, gasps of the dying, laughter of  
young people, accents of bargainers,  
Underneath these possessing words that never fail.

To her children the words of the eloquent dumb great mother  
never fail,  
The true words do not fail, for motion does not fail and  
reflection does not fail,  
Also the day and night do not fail, and the voyage we pursue  
does not fail. (21-27)

The image of the earth as a repository of all of the world’s utterances recalls another poem, “This Compost” which debuted in the same 1856 edition, initially titled “Poem of Wonder at the Resurrection of The Wheat.” In that poem, the earth provokes terror in the speaker due to its wondrous ability to regenerate crops even as it absorbs “endless successions of diseas’d corpses” (44): “It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last” (47). In this poem, meanwhile, the earth simply retains and preserves the “leavings” of human speech, which melt into the ground and yield nothing else, becoming nearly indistinguishable from the “inaudible words” the earth is said to utter. If these “words of the eloquent dumb great mother never fail,” we must understand her success as amounting to nothing more than the status quo: the failproof workings of gravity, the rise and setting of the sun, the “voyage” of the planet around the sun. The “inaudible words of the earth,” an open secret (“the earth does not exhibit itself nor refuse to exhibit itself”), are thus what is and can be taken for granted already.

Thus if, as we see in the lines in the epigraph above, the speaker ultimately abandons the task of telling—at least when it comes to “the best”—in order to become “a dumb man,” he joins in the strange taciturnity of the earth with its “inaudible words.” This active silence resembles what Barthes

designates “the neutral,” which in the field of expression consists of an utterance that in the end amounts to nothing more than the trace of itself. At the end of his career, Barthes returned to the desire articulated in his first full-length book *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), a desire to “create a colorless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language.”<sup>130</sup> In a series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1977-1978, now published as *The Neutral*, he offered a series of figures of such colorlessness. As Barthes took pains to emphasize, neutrality may well be impossible to attain or express through speech, and as such the lecture series may just as well have been titled “the desire for neutral.” It is for this reason that Barthes doesn’t define the neutral, but rather displays a set of figures that pertain to it, described as “every inflection that, dodging or baffling the paradigmatic, oppositional structure of meaning, aims at the suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse.”<sup>131</sup> Some aporetic examples include the utopia of a blank and dreamless empty sleep, a pure suspension of consciousness without lapsing into the unconscious; the Taoist ideal of *Wou-wei*, a positive nonaction that requires one “not to direct, not to use one’s strength, to leave it marking time in place” (176); or the enactment of a silence that eludes the dogmatic *refusal* to speak by “the minimal expenditure of a speech act meant to neutralize silence as a sign” (27).

The earth’s neutrality manifests itself in various forms throughout the poem: it is figured as a woman glancing into a mirror, “inviting none, denying none” (61); it is said to “neither la[g] nor haste[n]” (18); and, as we have seen, it rests in the space between revelation and concealment. But it is regarding the earth’s silence in particular that Barthes’ lectures can teach us about the ecopoetics of “A Song of the Rolling Earth.” For Whitman’s earth’s “inaudible words” closely recall the distinction Barthes draws between *tacere* (silence of speech), and *silere*, which he privileges as a “preparadigmatic condition, without sign,” the “silence of nature or of divinity,” best expressed through ordinary natural metaphors like “the moon turned invisible at its waning, the bud or the tendril that hasn’t yet opened up, the egg that is not yet hatched” (22). We can call this admiration of the blankness of nature an ecopoetics not just because it mimics nonhuman nature, but also because it emerges from a larger project whose aim is to correct such anti-ecological offences as (human) arrogance, the desire for mastery, and the will-to-possess.

Whitman’s speaker comes to a similarly humble stance when, in the epigraph above, he both resolves to “leave the best untold” and finds he is regardless unable to do so when he tries. He elaborates:

The best of the earth cannot be told anyhow, all or any is best,  
 It is not what you anticipated, it is cheaper, easier, nearer,  
 Things are not dismiss’d from the places they held before,  
 The earth is just as positive and direct as it was before,  
 Facts, religions, improvements, politics, trades, are as real as  
     before,  
 But the soul is also real, it too is positive and direct,  
 No reasoning, no proof has establish’d it,  
 Undeniable growth has establish’d it. (107-115)

Here Whitman’s attitude, in its egalitarian leveling of past, present, and future, echoes the now famous lines from “Song of Myself,” in which the speaker declares that “There was never any more inception than there is now,/ Nor any more youth or age than there is now;/ And will never be any more perfection than there is now,/ Nor any more hell than there is now. (40-42). This evening-out of time

<sup>130</sup> Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 77.

<sup>131</sup> *The Neutral*, 211. All Barthes citations hereafter are from this text.

offers due consolation for a poet who finds himself unable to “tell” nature due to the conundrums we’ve explored above; if the poet decides not to tell “the best,” or finds that he cannot, it is clear that his act of telling would make no difference “anyhow,” offering no significant change to the world as it is already currently configured. M. Jimmie Killingsworth’s commentary on the way these lines connect the soul and the earth is helpful: “The soul shares with the earth a system of language and meaning distinct from what we normally understand to be human language and logic.”<sup>132</sup> And yet I want to suggest that if the poem is about the soul and the earth working in concert, they are doing so in order to produce an utterance of such flatness that produces no meaning at all—at least not one that is perceptible in its effect. Barthes’ neutral comes to mind here, but so does Geoffrey Hartman’s rendition of Wordsworth as “the unremarkable poet” who, because of his wish “not to violate...nature’s own mode of expression” wrote poems which often barely leave a mark: “A Wordsworth poem often has no point.”<sup>133</sup>

At times this commitment to blank expression may be indistinguishable from incapacitation, such that it is unclear whether one is abstaining from “telling the best” or simply failing at it: “When I undertake to tell the best I find I cannot,/ My tongue is ineffectual on its pivots,/ My breath will not be obedient to its organs,/ I become a dumb man.” (104-107). As Mark Bauerlein puts it, as the speaker’s body betrays him in this poem, “[t]he Orphic mastery [Whitman] had affirmed in ‘Song of Myself...has lapsed into a stifling impotence.”<sup>134</sup> In my focus on such incapacitation in Whitman, I likewise draw much from Killingsworth, who writes of those poems where Whitman “comes face to face with certain phenomena in nature that cause him to admit his puzzlement and incapacity, even terror,” poems with dramatizations of the “unspeakableness of things.” Killingsworth praises Whitman’s dedication to contesting the “extractive or acquisitive discourse” of Transcendentalist-inspired nature writings, which all too willingly transform nature into metaphysical abstraction or spiritual gain. In these moments, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” among them, nature stops functioning as an idea or an object and instead stands before the poet in its utter indifference to his claims on it. As I have tried to show thus far, many of these claims presume nonhuman nature to be a source of pleasure or its amplification in the vast libidinal sprawl that is Whitman’s poetry. In “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” meanwhile, the earth abstains from such a role, “[w]ith her ample back towards every beholder” (50). At the same time, the earth barely can be said to offer resistance to any such claims, and certainly does not provoke Killingsworth’s “terror.” What the “inaudible words” of the earth instead bring is a sensation between tranquility and incapacitation, a feeling for which Whitman unsurprisingly has little vocabulary.

Because of the exceptionality of this feeling, I am hesitant to include the impartiality of the earth among the many forms of Whitmanian sympathy that remind the poet of his vital connection to the world outside his own body, as Jane Bennett does. While it is true that the speaker in “A Song of the Rolling Earth” attains a kind of solidarity with the earth in his effort at blank expression, it is difficult to consider what leads to or what follows from that solidarity as sympathy, even if sympathy is conceived as a “material force” rather than an internalized sentiment. Though Bennett aptly describes gravitational pull in Whitman’s writings as a force that renders the earth “haunted by the specter of unconcern,” it would seem inaccurate to count such a force as a feeling continuous with those like contagious pain or erotic charge—feelings which fit all too easily into Bennett’s theoretical

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<sup>132</sup> M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Walt Whitman and the Earth* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 28. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>133</sup> Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 209.

<sup>134</sup> Mark Bauerlein, *Whitman and the American Idiom* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 116. Cited in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, ed. *Walt Whitman, An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 666.

program of “vibrant materiality.”<sup>135</sup> Indeed, if the shared reticence encountered in this poem is to be considered as sympathy at all, it resembles most Dickinson’s “Wiser Sympathy,” the reciprocal withdrawal of poet and nature in Dickinson’s “The Birds reported from the South” (F780). In other words, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” provides an example in which the profound *discontinuity* between the human feeling and nonhuman nature is what drives the poet toward a greater respect for the latter.

If we are to correlate this particular iteration of Whitman’s affective relation to nonhuman nature with mid-nineteenth-century pseudoscientific enthusiastic practices like Mesmerism and animal magnetism, I am thus less drawn to Bennett’s version of Whitmanian sympathy than Dana Luciano’s account of the strange “geoaffect” described in *The Soul of Things* (1863-1874), a collaboration between the Spiritualist William Denton and his wife Elizabeth Foote Denton, a “psychometric medium.” Though the three-volume study was published a decade after Whitman’s poem, Luciano’s reading nevertheless sheds light on the possibility of a relation to the earth that “interrupt[s], without quite negating, the relentless drive toward human perfection to dramatize the periodic difficulty of human persistence, of persisting as human.”<sup>136</sup> Such interruption certainly has its place in “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” in which the poet finds himself unable “to bear, to better” the truths of the earth; as we will see, it also serves as the very center of the 1860 edition’s “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life.”

Likewise, Luciano’s explanation of how such unsettling, defamiliarizing geoaffect fits into the framework of queer theory’s discourses of pleasure will be an invaluable resource going forward. Luciano points to the Dentons’ study as an exemplary alternative to “a common queer theoretical emphasis on pleasure as a world-making technology,” a tendency she attributes to the legacy of Foucault:

The version of becoming-geological presented in *The Soul of Things* has little in common with the pleurably generative creativity linked to reparative or world-making responses. Yet neither does the abjectness of the inhuman interval become a mode of queerly transformative unpleasure leading to self-dissolution, a geoeffective transposition of antisocial theory. The awkward intervals that result when a body becomes (partly) unmoored from the human are insecure and undirected, very little like world making—queer, geological, and otherwise.<sup>137</sup>

Luciano’s exploration of the relatively uncharted theoretical terrain between pleasure and unpleasure allows us to conceptualize a queer orientation toward nonhuman nature that makes minimal claims on the earth, looking to it neither to affirm or amplify pleasure nor to harness the anti-egoic force of *jouissance*. Luciano’s theory resonates deeply with the lessons of “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” which shows not only that the truths of the earth cannot be spoken for, but also that it is our ecological duty to accept our incapacity to speak for them, “to bear, to better” them. As we return to

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<sup>135</sup> Bennett, “Whitman’s Sympathies,” *Political Research Quarterly* 69.3, 607-620; 615.

<sup>136</sup> Luciano, “Sacred Theories of Earth: Matters of Spirit in *The Soul of Things*,” *American Literature* 86.4 (December 2014), 713-736; 728.

<sup>137</sup> Luciano’s binary opposition between Foucauldian world-making pleasure and the “unpleasure” of “antisocial theory” brings to mind an earlier commentary by one such antisocial theorist, Tim Dean: “[The] disinclination to utilize Lacan [in queer theory] may be explained in several ways, one of which has to do with the emphasis on psychic negativity that follows from understanding sexuality in terms of the unconscious and partial drives. Queer theory’s social utopianism—to create a better world—often carries over into a misplaced utopianism of the psyche, as if improved social and political conditions could eliminate psychic conflict” (“Lacan and queer theory” in Jean-Michel Rabaté ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 238-252; 247).

the image of washed up drift with which the chapter began, the next section illustrates the difficulties that come with inhabiting this ecopoetics of surrender.

#### iv. “a limp blossom”

*A limp blossom or two, torn, just as much over waves  
floating, drifted at random,  
-Walt Whitman, “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”*

*...assumer le Neutre représenterait...une extrême concentration d’énergie, ne serait-ce que celle qu’il faut pour endosser précisément l’image (fausse, mais inévitable) du flasque !<sup>138</sup>  
-Roland Barthes, *Le Neutre* : Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*

If certain poems of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass* have been understood as Whitman at his most hesitant, his most doubtful, then “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” can be considered Whitman at the lowest of the low. Scholars have posited numerous possible reasons for the turn to darker subject matter in the years 1857 to 1860: financial hardship following the economic downturn in 1857 (which drove him to write the 1858 “Manly Training” column in the *New York Atlas*), the failure of the 1856 edition to take off as Whitman had hoped, the increasingly tortured feelings that accompanied the likewise increased reflection on his homoerotic desires, family drama following the death of his decidedly flawed father, health problems, or a sense of the impending national descent into turmoil and war.<sup>139</sup> What is certain is that the period between the 1856 and 1860 editions, while it was characterized by a flurry of writerly activity and the grand ambition of writing “A New American Bible,” was also characterized by occasional crises of faith and doubts about his future as a poet. “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” composed in 1859, is the product of one such crisis. What such a melancholy reflection offers us is an account of the calm resignation of selfhood, rather than its violent abolition or ecstatic dissolution. If Whitman had previously explored expressive incapacity in the presence of the indifferent neutrality of the natural world in “A Song of the Rolling Earth,” here he explores in further depth what such incapacitation would entail for the body and persona of the poet. The poem is thus the epitome of the “limp Whitman” I have been attempting to sketch thus far.

In “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” the ocean furnishes to the poet the occasion to go limp and go with the flow—or rather, with the ebb—an experience that is anything but pleasurable. Sea-drift, meanwhile, provides him with the figure of his own pathetic surrender. After the recounting of his acceptance of this offering to the typological imagination in the first canto, the poem shifts to the defamiliarized present, as the speaker moves from having “wended the shores I know” to an account of what happens “As I wend to the shores I know not” (1, 18). The speaker “list[s] to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck’d,” (19), i.e. the waves that “continually wash you Paumanok” (3), playing on the archaic form of listen as well as the nautical sense of “list” as the swaying of a ship (19). The speaker, like a ship, the people in it, and even the fish-island of Paumanok

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<sup>138</sup> “...to assume the Neutral would represent an extreme concentration of energy, if only the energy one needs to take responsibility for the image [false but inevitable] of the limp!” Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>139</sup> See Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet*, 155-189; Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet*, 276-312; Pollak, *The Erotic Whitman*, 122-152; Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, 209-295. See also Zachary Turpin’s succinct summary of this downturn in the introduction to *Manly Health and Training*, 1-19.



with its “friable shore” (38), is subject to the destructive indifference of the ever-fluctuating, “mysterious” ocean. Its washing of the subject is indistinguishable from wearing away, just as listening to it is indistinguishable from being unsettled by it.

Such surrender, in other Whitman poems, often brings about exhilarating propulsion, but in a poem focused on *ebbing* it amounts to deflation and an anhedonia equated with inanimacy. To return to the poem’s central image, it means that “I too but signify at the utmost a little wash’d up drift,/ A few sands and dead leaves to gather,/ Gather and merge myself as part of the sands and drift” (22-24). Remarkable here is the poem’s strange use of “signify”: rather than resorting to the copula, Whitman softens the relationship between himself and the sea-drift into one of resemblance. At the same time, though, the line suggests that the speaker has *transformed* himself into the very sign of inertia. In an inversion of the typological hierarchy, the lyric “I” becomes himself the figural representation of what had previously been designated as a figure for his state. The collapse of signifying agency is continued in the next two lines, as it becomes utterly unclear whether the poet is gathering or being gathered: “gather and merge myself” comes only after the poet has described himself as “a few sands and dead leaves to gather,” that is *to be gathered* by the constant washing of the waves.

If the speaker has become merely a cog in a signifying machine—just as he found himself lost in the crowd of the earth’s “words”—here he will find no consolation in the idea that he has now become part of a greater meaning. In earlier editions of *Leaves of Grass*, the condensation of sign and meaning, signifier and signified, is understood as a heartening demonstration of the continuity between nature and the spirit, the material and the ideal. We see this in the first appearance of the collection’s namesake, the grass of canto six of “Song of Myself”:

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow  
zones,  
Growing among black folks as among white,  
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,  
I receive them the same. (106-109)

Using “means” intransitively, Whitman synonymizes meaning with simply *being*, finding in the ubiquity and uniformity of the grass not just the symbol of democratic equality, but its very enactment. The speaker mimics the equanimity of the grass, asserting universality and reconciling differences by uniting all people in their shared proximity to it. As John Irwin has shown in his study of nineteenth-century America’s fascination with Egyptology, *Leaves of Grass* on the whole can be categorized as a kind of hieroglyphic Bible: it takes inspiration from pictographic ideograms that merge form with content, thereby enacting what Emerson had called for in *Nature* and “The Poet”—the exposure of the metaphysical meaning of all objects in the physical world.<sup>140</sup> This project brings with it a new attitude toward the materiality of spoken language: “In Whitman’s idealized conception of song, the musical component of poetry, by raising spoken language to that condition in which its sonic form is its content (in which vocal expiration is a return to origin, to that original interpenetration of sign and meaning), transforms spoken language into the audible equivalent of that original language of natural signs in which the form of the pictographic physical object was transparently its meaning.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> For more on this Emersonian-Whitmanian project, including its grounding in German Idealism, see also Rancière’s *Aisthesis* (New York: Verso, 2013).

<sup>141</sup> John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 39.

It is remarkable how sharply “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” differs from this Emersonian optimism about the transparency of meaning in the natural world. If Whitman is channeling Emerson here, it is not the hopeful Emerson of *Nature* or “the Poet,” but rather the despondent Emerson of “Experience.” At the end of the second canto of “As I Ebb’d,” we can hear echoes of an Emerson who declares that “souls never touch their objects,” who “grieve[s] that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature”<sup>142</sup>:

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single  
object, and that no man ever can,  
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart  
upon me and sting me,  
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all. (32-34).

If Whitman has elsewhere condensed being and signifying in a way that affirms the meaningfulness of mere being, here, in the figure of the poet as sea-drift, that condensation is more like a collapse into meaninglessness (again in contrast with “Song of Myself” 6, where “All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses” [129]). That is to say that the poet as the “sayer” (Emerson) or “singer” (Whitman) of nature risks channeling a world in which nothing means anything, and thus no object can be understood. This, indeed, would relegate language to the status of mere chatter: “Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten, /Scum scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by the tide” (11-12). It is no coincidence that in a poem that meditates on the downsides of what poststructuralism has referred to as “the materiality of the signifier,” the most strikingly alliterative and percussive of lines would conjure the image of differentiated yet collectively insignificant matter left merely to drift at sea, or as Betsy Erkkila puts it, “an impenetrable other world of difference and unmeaning.”<sup>143</sup>

In the idea of linguistic expression that escapes the paradigmatic requirements that allow it to *mean*, we return to parallels with Barthes’ neutral. For Barthes, however, approaching a neutral state entails equanimity, while Whitman’s intimacy with the insignificance of the sea-drift provokes instead a great deal of dread and panic—at least at first. As we have seen in the lines above, nature takes on a persecutory role, chastening the poet for his arrogance at ever having “open[ed] his mouth to sing at all” and “taking advantage” of him to “dart” and “sting” him. The poet, meanwhile, once again at odds with himself, bifurcates in order to self-denigrate,

Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon  
Me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,  
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet  
Untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,  
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs  
And bows,  
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have  
Written,  
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand  
Beneath. (25-31)

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<sup>142</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 309.

<sup>143</sup> Erkkila, *Whitman: the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 166.

The tortured irony of these lines displays a paranoia paired with masochism as the speaker imagines himself attacking himself in concert with nature, which is perceived to be doing the same. In his analysis of the poem, Michael Moon argues that “perhaps the strongest anxieties attendant on this text—and those most closely related to the splits in the self that it represents—are those arising from the threatening possibility to the self of being temporarily or permanently overwhelmed by the powers of ‘unduly powerful impressions’ that Freud...argued it is the function of paranoia in its decompositional phase to control.”<sup>144</sup> We might thus read the self-persecutory fantasy elaborated here as a line of defense, a means of the poet asserting a kind of control (albeit a disavowed one) over his own self-dissolution. As Sedgwick has persuasively argued in her essay “Paranoid and Reparative Reading,” paranoia is anticipatory as well as reflexive and mimetic, meaning that it aims to preempt and defend against any future violence against the paranoiac, and, in doing so, takes on the role of the persecuting figure, enacting a violence against the self *before* the persecuting figure itself is able to do so.<sup>145</sup> Following Moon, I interpret this persecutory fantasy as an effort to attenuate a threat to selfhood, though I would characterize that threat not as an “unduly powerful impression,” after Freud, but rather as limpness, as the underwhelming and self-deflating abnegation of power figured by the “little wash’d up drift.”

The speaker’s paranoia thus amounts to a narcissistic reaction formation that allows him initially to elude the oblivion and anhedonia promised by the sea, a presence both gentle and unsparing. By conjuring the idea of a “real Me” that is yet “untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d,” the poetic subject counters the existential dread provoked by his identification with a figure of insignificance, transforming the situation instead into a scenario of *inadequacy*. Accordingly, the tragic element is not that the poet’s life is meaningless per se, but rather that he has not lived up to the promise of a transcendent self that is ultimately both worthy of attaining and legitimized by its judgment of the current iteration of the self. This inadequacy confers on meaninglessness a sense of abjection that is in fact absent from the image of nugatory sea-drift merely floating in the “ocean of life.” It also extends the hope (albeit thwarted) of self-betterment. The fantasies of self-mocking torment and of nature violating the speaker (“taking advantage of me to dart upon me and sting me”) converge to saturate these lines with a masochism that assures the speaker that he does in fact signify *something* in the grand scheme of things, even if that something is the need to be punished.

One could speak of two masochisms here: on one level, there is the masochism of a wounded ego that takes perverse pleasure in its own scene of punishment, while beneath it there is an anti-egoic masochism that desires to surrender the self completely to the forces of nature, as the speaker more or less does in the final two sections of the poem. The latter, of course, has been theorized by Leo Bersani in his field-defining 1987 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, and has found an oft-contested place ever since in the canon of queer theory, perhaps most reputedly in the strain of queer theory now known as “the anti-social turn.” Positing that sexuality “may be a tautology for masochism” and building off his prior work in *The Freudian Body* (1986), Bersani theorized a primary masochism that lies at the heart of sexuality from infancy forward, fundamentally tied to forms of pleasure experienced as inimical to coherent selfhood and antithetical to the conception of sex as intersubjective relation.<sup>146</sup> “It is possible,” Bersani speculates, “to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self. But sex as self-hyperbole is perhaps a

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<sup>144</sup> Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge, UK: Harvard University Press, 1993), 142-143

<sup>145</sup> See “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You” in *Touching, Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-152.

<sup>146</sup> Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3-30; 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

repression of sex as self-abolition. It inaccurately replicated self-shattering as self-swelling, as psychic tumescence” (25). Masochistic sexuality thus allowed for a venue in which the self might be “exuberantly discarded,” and accordingly posed a threat to phallic heteromascularity (25). Arguing that the social imaginary of AIDS-phobic 1980s culture had crystallized the potential for such masochism into the image of the gay man’s rectum *qua* pleasure-laden force of societal self-annihilation, Bersani urged his readers to reconsider the queer and feminist value of “self-shattering” anality and the supposedly insatiable drive for sex among gay men as a force that “never stops re-presenting the internalized phallic male as an infinitely loved object of sacrifice” (30). As such, male homosexuality, as a means by which one can “[lose] sight of the self...represents *jouissance* as a mode of ascesis” (30).

As I have already mentioned above, the Bersanian link between homosexuality, *jouissance*, and self-abolition holds much traction in queer criticism on Whitman. Michael Moon’s *Disseminating Whitman* (1991) focuses on “Whitman’s representation of the nature and sources of boundary-dissolving experience, particularly intense sexual feeling” (59), arguing that “[i]n shaping himself and allowing himself to be shaped by autoerotic and homoerotic forces...the poet has the purpose of empowering himself to exude writing as nature...does” (80). Though Michael Warner, in contrast, favors the study of contemporaneous public discourses (namely, temperance literature) rather than psychoanalysis in his method of interpretation, he nevertheless arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that “[t]he language of *Leaves of Grass* presents challenges for the pragmatics of selfing...[and] this erratically selfed language frequently announces an erotics or even ethics of contemplative self-abandonment.”<sup>147</sup> Mark Maslan’s *Whitman Possessed: Poetry, Sexuality, and Political Authority*, already mentioned above, surveys much of this criticism while marking a critical distance from Bersani in the assertion that dispensing with discrete individuality through self-dissolution (sexual, poetic, or otherwise) does not amount to dispensing with male authority. Nevertheless, Maslan provides a thorough account of Whitman’s grouping of poetic inspiration, spiritual “possession,” and submission to sexual desire (homo, hetero, or otherwise) all under the Bersanian umbrella of experiences that replicate anal penetration’s alleged relinquishment of the boundaries of selfhood.

The episode at the end of the second section, in which the self and an allegedly hostile nature take concerted part in the speaker’s flagellation, may qualify as masochistic self-surrender aligning with the erotic moments of *Leaves of Grass* much-analyzed in the aforementioned studies; in the figure of nature “taking advantage” of the speaker to “dart” and “sting” him we may, for example, see echoes of the famously homoerotic “Is this then a touch?” canto of “Song of Myself,” with its “prurient provokers” who stiffen the speaker’s limbs and “strain the udder of [his] heart...depriving him of his best as for a purpose”(623-626). But I want to suggest that in this case it is *simply* an episode, and that the calm resignation of selfhood we see in the final two sections cannot accurately be described as a scene in which the self is “exuberantly discarded,” in which the ego is “shattered,” or in which the internalized phallic male is “sacrificed.” The intensity of this language derives from the psychoanalytic theory of *jouissance* as a form of pleasure indistinguishable from pain due to its erosive or indeed shattering effects on the ego. As we have already seen, however, from the start of the poem the “electric self” has been set aside as the speaker makes way for a revelation that, for the most part, yields neither pleasure *nor* pain. The end of the second section thus amounts to a last-ditch effort to resist the impersonal and gently anesthetizing experience the sea-side encounter actually provides, to convert it into a scene of hostile judgment, in which the value of the ego—be it positive or negative—is assumed, and in which sensations fit neatly into the erotic rubric of pain and pleasure.

If the first two sections construct a crisis of doubt and the theatrics of self-punishment, the second two sections tend toward the calm acknowledgement of insignificance, such that the poem

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<sup>147</sup> Warner, “Whitman Drunk” in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2005) 269-291;287.

evens out at its end into inconclusive neutrality, into limpness. As Killingsworth puts it, in the second half of the poem the speaker's "acceptance of possible insignificance...ironically allows him to pursue the attempt at signification" (127). Indeed, the very first lines of the third section move toward a dialectical resolution, an embrace of the meaninglessness and smallness that had hitherto provoked no shortage of angst for the poet:

You oceans both, I close with you,  
We murmur alike, reproachfully rolling sands and drift,  
    knowing not why,  
These little shreds indeed standing for you and me and all.

You friable shore with trails of debris,  
You fish-shaped island, I take what is underfoot,  
What is yours is mine by father.

I too Paumanok,  
I too have bubbled up, floating the measureless float, and  
    been wash'd on your shores,  
I too am but a trail of drift and debris,  
I too leave little wrecks upon you, you fish-shaped island. (35-44)

Rather than *losing* the self, we might say that the speaker gains a series of alternative selves at this moment. The poet distributes his own identity evenly between land and sea, father and mother, carving a space of neutrality for himself, embodying at once the water "reproachfully rolling sands and drift," the drift itself, and the inheritor of what accrues and solidifies underfoot, the "fish-shaped island." Here we see something of the profligate and promiscuous catalogue of identifications for which Whitman is renowned, such as canto 16 of "Song of Myself" in which the speaker declares "I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,...One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest the same,/ A Southerner soon as a Northerner," etc. (330-335). The chorus of "I too", now echoing the prior lone iteration of "I too but signify...", lends to these identifications the accretive feel of those catalogues, providing welcome company for the speaker in his state of mereness.

The ocean is personified as a mournful mother in many other Whitman poems—perhaps most famously in the poem that is often considered as a companion piece to "As I Ebb'd," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,"—but the figure of the island as father is unique, and critics are at odds about how to interpret it.<sup>148</sup> Ecocritical readings tend to see the father figure as an opportunity for the poet to forego the human arrogance of his prior poems in deference to the wonders of the natural world. Killingsworth argues that the poet's actual father functions in the poem as a "good example

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<sup>148</sup>Paul Zweig's biographical reading interprets the Paumanok figure as the poet's flawed image of his own father, from whom he is able to "draw...a kind of negative strength: the ability to endure and thrive in failure" (Zweig, *Walt Whitman: the Making of the Poet* [New York: Basic Books, 1984]), 309. Michael Moon's oedipal reading sees in the island-father the "paternal phallus as chief signifier," the representative of a patriarchal "monolithic hierarchy of signification" which the speaker ultimately rejects in favor of a more distributed, egalitarian, and naturalistic model of writing (*Dessiminating Whitman*, 148). In Erkkilla's convincing political reading of the poem, Whitman, in a moment of profound disillusionment with the nation on the threshold of Civil War, finds in the figure "the caress of a nurturant father(land)" that offers an alternative to the patriarchal political authority in which he has lost faith (*Whitman: the Political Poet*, 167).

of human significance against the background of grand schemes” and that “Whitman’s desperate identification with the father and his own frailties open him to new ways of encountering himself and the earth (127).” More recently, Christine Gerhardt argues that the poem depicts “Whitman’s almost complete transferal of control to a triumphantly sovereign nature.”<sup>149</sup> Placing Whitman’s poem in the historical context of a growing scientific “awareness of marine landscapes as intricate, extraordinarily active systems,” Gerhardt concludes that “the speaker’s conflict with his overpowering nature-parents suggests the struggles involved in recognizing not only nature’s autonomy but also its possible dominance” (127).

Placing undue emphasis on the father figure, many of these readings overlook the characteristically leveling effect of Whitman’s images, which reduce all players—the ocean mother, the island-father, the sea-drift, and the poet himself—to the poem’s signifiatory degree zero--“a little wash’d up drift.” As the “I” itself *drifts* rather confusingly among the varied points of identification in the dynamic scene of erosion and sedimentation, the lines establish a sense of relativism in which it becomes unclear what characterizes and distinguishes those points in terms of gender, power, or physical quality. Though the masculine Paumanok offers the only image of solidity, its “friable shore” marks a site of vulnerability upon which “wrecks” are left while other matter is taken away. Though the feminized ocean is depicted as a turbulent, erosive force, the line between active ocean and passive drift blurs when the speaker declares to the ocean that “These little shreds indeed [stand] for you and me and all.” Gerhardt’s description of the natural figures as “overpowering” or “sovereign” replicates a standard sublime reading of nature, an effect that is in fact not in play in a poem. Rather than depicting a humble human cowering before the sheer power of nature, the poem reflects on neutrality—a state between powerful and powerless, active and passive—as nature’s default state.

Critics may be on to something in their tendency to read this section’s final lines as a failed attempt at the oedipal seizure of paternal power, but what they miss in doing so is the manner in which the poet effectuates a balance of power that evens out to zero:

I throw myself upon your breast my father,  
I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me,  
I hold you firm till you answer me something.

Kiss me my father,  
Touch me with your lips as I touch those I love,  
Breathe to me while I hold you close the secret of the murmuring I envy. (45-50).

In the first stanza, the poet indeed “throws himself” upon his father’s breast, an image of (homo)erotic aggression, but in the second we learn he has done so in fact to surrender himself to his father’s kiss, thus assuming the image of agency in the service of abandoning it. Meanwhile, the lines sharpen the contrast between the parental powers of land and sea in order to accentuate the limitations of each. While it is the solidity of the land that allows it to be held “firm” in contrast with the ocean’s fluidity, it is the ocean’s “murmuring” that the poet in fact envies; the speaker seeks the authoritative knowledge of the “secret” of that murmuring—which as we learned earlier, the ocean likewise doesn’t possess—but he is met only by the muteness of the land.

Thus at the beginning of the next section the speaker will turn once more to the ocean, entreating her to “deny me not”, before he reformulates the poem’s complicated topos of resignation and solidarity, surrender and embrace: “I mean tenderly by you and all,/ I gather for myself and for

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<sup>149</sup> Gerhardt, *A Place for Humility: Whitman, Dickinson, and the Natural World* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 126. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

this phantom looking down where we lead, and following me and mine” (55-57). Once again deploying “to mean” intransitively, Whitman returns to the central image with which the poem began, the notion of a “spirit that trails in the lines underfoot.” Whereas the speaker began from the transcendent vantage point looking down at indecipherable script, he now counts himself a part of this inscrutable writing system scrawled beneath a godlike reader. Interpellating the reader as a proxy for this “phantom looking down,” he in turn offers the poem itself as an instance of such writing-as-drift. The presence of the phantom reader, meanwhile, dissolves the familial framework and any power struggle that may have come with it, uniting all terrestrial parties as they “float the measureless float” of meaning set adrift.

The speaker’s diagnosis of his concluding state as akin to a floating corpse or a “limp blossom” conjures the image of being *moved* (affected) without being *animated* (brought to life):

Me and mine, loose windrows, little corpses,  
 Froth, snowy white, and bubbles,  
 (See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last,  
 See, the prismatic colors glistening and rolling,  
 Tufts of straw, sand, fragments,  
 Buoy’d hither from many moods, one contradicting another,  
 From the storm, the long calm, the darkness, the swell,  
 Musing, pondering, a breath, a briny tear, a dab of liquid or  
     soil,  
 Up just as much out of fathomless workings fermented and  
     thrown,  
 A limp blossom or two, torn, just as much over waves  
     floating, drifted at random...(57-71)

By imagining his own writing (and the self-as-writing) as a cluster of dead and dying matter surrendered to the forces of nature, Whitman revises his governing theory of free verse: poetic lines are no longer a self-realizing force, no longer the self-organizing “metre-making argument” of an organic form set free of external constraint, as described in Emerson’s “The Poet.” Indeed, with “buoy’d hither from many moods” Whitman once again resembles instead the despondent Emerson of “Experience,” who concedes that life is but “a train of moods like a string of beads,” leading to no particular insight and offering no anchorage in a stable sense of truth or reality (309).

Barthes once again supplies us with a wealth of insight into the form of surrender captured in these lines, not least in these lines’ evocation of limpness and “drif[ting] at random.” Regarding the former, Barthes lists the limp (*le flasque*) among the depreciative images of the neutral, bearing witness to the way in which the casual indecision and softness of the neutral is construed negatively by those who cling to “the very endoxal idea that to love is to choose, to eliminate, and thus to destroy ‘the remainder’” (71). “Drifting,” too, becomes a useful figure for Barthes to express his idea of the neutral, as it allows him to theorize a way of resisting antagonistic binarisms without doing so through opposition: “Drift = to dismiss opposition—or gently take leave of...”(*dérive = donner congé de l’opposition—ou prendre congé doucement de..*)—the French “*prendre congé*” better reflects Barthes’ idea of both departing and taking time off) (203).<sup>150</sup> These figures allow us to better understand the internal conflict of a speaker who at times seems to equate going slack with slacking off. The neutral constitutes

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<sup>150</sup> Barthes, *Cours et séminaires au Collège de France, 1977-1978* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 253.

the paradox in which letting go and going limp is both one's natural default state and yet perhaps the most complicated one to achieve and maintain, as the epigraph above attests.

Limpness is the embodiment of the surrender of the individual will, which is unsurprisingly often represented as tantamount to dying. Hence the poet envisions his own death, pairing the poem's naturalistic repudiation of organic form with an eco-poetics of the dead and dying. Counting himself among a collective of "little corpses," the speaker envisions his own death, entreating the reader to do so as well: "(See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last,/ See, the prismatic colors glistening and rolling,)"(59-60). These parenthetical lines, omitted on account of their shocking nature from the original 1859 *Atlantic Monthly* publication at the request of the editor James Russell Lowell, have typically been understood in ecocritical readings as a humble abandonment of the self in deference to the greater power of nature or the bigger picture of an ecosystem. Christine Gerhardt, for instance, writes that for Whitman "becoming one with the world...implies a loss of self," and that the poem thus depicts death "not [as] a state at the end of a linear life narrative, but [as] a presence that connects the poet's body to the natural environment" (129). Paul Outka argues that in these lines Whitman "ali[gns] himself not with resurrection but with the ecosystem," such that "death is embraced, accepted, but as a return, not simply an end."<sup>151</sup> These readings conceive of death as a kind of ecological altruism, but it is important to take into account the patent inconsequentiality of the poet's dissolving act, as he simply accepts his place in an (a)signifying order of which he has always already been a part. The death in question represents the culmination of a balancing act we have seen throughout the poem, in which negation and affirmation are consistently evened out to a kind of emptied presence, and in which assuming the state of the natural world—"becoming one" with it—also means becoming anything at all (note the equalizing anaphora of "just as much," which appears twice more in the lines that follow), or nothing special.

I offer Barthes' neutral here not to posit definitively or simply that death in the poem "is" the neutral—as Barthes himself stresses, the neutral is, as its figural archive suggests, particularly hard to pin down, and it would be oxymoronic to assert it as a programmatic position—but rather to draw a contrast with what might seem the most obvious theoretical interpretive recourse in this context: the queer psychoanalytic association between egoic dissolution, *jouissance*, and the death drive. Given the remarkable influence of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, the "self-shattering" capacity of pleasure theorized in Bersani has become almost synonymous with the idea of a raw negativity that threatens the reproduction of meaning and futurity—and meaning *as* futurity—in the heterosexist social-symbolic order. If queerness has indeed been consistently associated with self-annihilating *jouissance*, Edelman argues, it is because of its status as an "[e]mpty, excessive, and irreducible" signifier in a heterosexist reproductive order, a placeholder for the death drive itself, conceived following Lacan as the "lifeless machinery" of the dead letter.<sup>152</sup> Edelman insists that it is the duty of the queer to embrace the negativity and excess of the death drive as a means of challenging not just heteromascularity, but the "reproductive futurity" of the dominant social order. In the face of the fantasy of the preservation of "life," which names a status quo that is self-destructive in its own right, queers have no choice but to choose death. "Queerness" thus demarcates for Edelman "less an identity than an ongoing effort of divestiture, a practice of undoing" opposed to an optimistic futurity that cannot but enforce and reinforce the social order as such.<sup>153</sup>

When the speaker attains death in "As I Ebb'd," it proves to be far less exciting than the radical negativity of Edelman's death drive; dying, furthermore, exhibits none of the "exuberance"

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<sup>151</sup> Paul Outka, "(De)composing Whitman," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12.1 (Winter 2005), 41-60; 54.

<sup>152</sup> *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 27.

<sup>153</sup> Edelman and Lauren Berlant, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 19.





Described earlier as a “phantom looking down where we lead,” the figure imagined here doubles as God and the reader of the poem. If it is the former, it is a rather creaturely God, one who walks or sits like any other. In either case, the figure is imagined as taking part in the interpretation of the arbitrary scattering of matter of which the speaker counts himself a part, for if this scattered sea-drift amounts to a sign, it can only do so if a reader is assumed. The “blare of the cloud-trumpets” certainly signals the Judgment Day that such an act of reading might represent, but the image is accompanied by a readerly figure who may prove just as “capricious,” who may indeed be merely a phantom, who may just as well pass by, or see in the drifts nothing more than a pattern in the sand. This reader, in other words, may answer the poet’s call in “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand” to “release me and depart on your way.” As we have seen, it is in the gesture of release that we can identify a Whitmanian ecopoetics that slackens one’s grip on the earth, that relieves it of the demands (Whitman’s, but also our own) to yield pleasure, meaning, and redemption.

## CHAPTER FOUR Hell on Earth with Baudelaire (and Poe)

Of late, scholars within the environmental humanities have attempted to theorize a kind of grim realism, a mode of thinking and feeling equipped to register the impact of widescale planetary ecocide that is both severe and ongoing. It goes without saying that this grim realism remains skeptical of the value of hope. In her most recent work, Donna Haraway considers the frame of mind necessary for dealing with the ongoingness of climate change and planetary destruction in light of two harmful responses to Anthropocene conditions: one is “a comic faith in technofixes,” which holds that “technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children, or what amounts to the same thing, God will come to the rescue of his disobedient but ever hopeful children.”<sup>156</sup> The other is “a position that the game is over, it’s too late, there’s no sense trying to make anything better, or at least no sense having any active trust in each other in working and playing for a resurgent world” (3). To combat complacency, Haraway invites us to “stay with the trouble,” to maintain a position between the Scylla and Charybdis of blind optimism and total despair. Similarly, in *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* Roy Scranton contends that because capitalism is inherently carbon-fueled, we must give up all hope in technocratic attempts to correct or reign in its world-destroying capacity. Scranton proposes “learning to die as a civilization,” which entails “letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress.”<sup>157</sup> Urging us to put to rest all hopes of the future as a continuation—albeit a “greener” one—of current civilization, Scranton offers us the vocabulary of *giving up* to supplement Haraway’s *staying with*, showing us how the former is necessitated by the latter, and that giving up is not always, contrary to common understanding, the easiest of options.

Haraway and Scranton hold that the difficult acknowledgement of mortality—our own as well as other species’—is central to cultivating this grim realism, and here they are part of a growing contingent in the environmental humanities. Sarah Ensor turns to queer theory’s critique of reproductive futurity for insight into how to face death on a planetary scale, a necessary aspect of tending to a “natural” world that we have, following Bill McKibben, ended:<sup>158</sup> “An environmentalism that took its cues from queer theory... would seek less to save the planet from a single, cataclysmic end than to embrace the ethical and practical demands posed by the multiple endings that condition our experience of the everyday.”<sup>159</sup> Ensor’s queer ecology means learning how “to steward within [a] terminal temporality” putting aside hopeful fantasies of “saving the planet” in a phantasmatic future in order to attend to those beings who are dying in the present, before our eyes (54). The editors of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, a compendium of interdisciplinary accounts of various species’ resilience in the midst of climate crisis, call attention to how species that have narrowly escaped disappearance “remind us that we live in an impossible

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<sup>156</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>157</sup> Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015), 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>158</sup> See McKibben’s *The End of Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989).

<sup>159</sup> Sarah Ensor, “Terminal Regions: Queer Ecocriticism at the End,” in Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood eds. *Against Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2016), 41-62; 55. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

present—a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction.”<sup>160</sup> For such species, “worlds have ended many times before,” and while we may find inspiration in their resilience, we must also acknowledge them as “ghosts” rather than representatives of triumphant life, for they show us “where life persists in the shadow of mass death” (G8).

Under such conditions, Scranton argues that we must “accept human limits and transience as fundamental truths,” and indeed, to varying degrees, the reflections above all consider the deadly conditions of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene through the concept of transience, attending to environmental loss by accentuating it as an ongoing process (24). *Transience*, with its etymology in *transire* (to move on, to pass away, or to be transformed, among many other meanings), evokes mortality without positing death as an absolute, total, or definitive state.<sup>161</sup> When an entity is rendered transient, it does not so much stop existing as it stops existing *as such*: it transforms into another state, dissolves, or passes into a different category of entities. Make no mistake: thinking with and through transience does not engender a blind hope in the promise of transformation. Unlike related terms like *flux* or *metamorphosis*, transience conforms to the law of conservation of matter while *also* capturing the negative affect associated with loss. Transience speaks to irrevocable ecological damage at any scale—marking the loss of individual organisms and habitats or entire species and ecosystems—while also attesting to what remains, what carries on in its wake in new forms.

Over a century and a half before these environmental thinkers, Charles Baudelaire and his greatest literary influence, Edgar Allan Poe, theorized a poetics of transience, believing that the value of poetry was fundamentally tied to an acknowledgement of mortality and human limits. In an era when, both in France and the United States, Enlightenment narratives of progress and human sovereignty dominated, these writers placed death, decay, and human *vanitas* at the center of their work. Inverting the idea of decadence as merely the underside of progress, Baudelaire praised Poe for his critique of progress as “that great heresy of decrepitude” (*cette grande hérésie de la décrépitude*) (127, 592). At odds with the positivism of the age, and inheritors of Percy Shelley’s ideas about the fleeting apprehension of “Intellectual Beauty,” Poe and Baudelaire both maintained that transience is intrinsic to the beautiful, holding that beauty can only appear on the condition of its disappearance. Though both held the transient apprehension of beauty (or the apprehension of transient beauty) to be a glimpse of the great beyond, the transcendent realm of the Ideal, each was a steadfast materialist in his own way. Poe at times held that even the highest state of being—divinity itself—was just a more complex form of matter continuous with our own, while Baudelaire depicted the existence of the Ideal as cruel and dispiriting in its radical unattainability. If Poe believed (or wished to believe) that transient beauty was an uplifting intimation of the world to come, Baudelaire embraced a more tortured view, one in which the Ideal haunted us even as its existence was

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<sup>160</sup> “Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene” in Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G1-G14; G6.

<sup>161</sup> The Oxford English dictionary describes the etymology of “transient” as follows: “classical Latin *transseunt-*, *transiens*, in post-classical Latin also *transient-*, *transiens* (6th cent.), present participle of classical Latin *transire* to come or go across, to pass, to move on, to transfer, to be transformed, to go through, to go past, to overtake, to surpass, to pass by, to ignore, to pass over, to omit, to pass away < *trans-* *trans-* *prefix* + *ire* to go (see exit *v.*1).” “transient, adj. and n.”, *OED Online*. March 2019. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/view/Entry/204789?redirectedFrom=transient> (accessed April 08, 2019).

questionable, even doubtful. If for Poe at the fleeting apprehension of the Ideal offered weak redemption from the transience of mortal existence, Baudelaire challenged and destabilized the realm of the Ideal, rendering it just as transitory and contingent as the world he found to be irredeemably fallen.

The fallen world is also the natural world, and thus Baudelaire's aesthetic theory and (a)theological thinking provides us with a worldview fit for inhabiting a planet that is permeated by loss. If the environmental theorists above call for us to dwell in a world in which redemption is not at hand, Baudelaire's aesthetics and cosmology have much to teach those of us who may feel called to "stay with the trouble," to "learn to die," to dwell in a "terminal temporality" or to fully inhabit "a world haunted with the threat of extinction." And yet, though Baudelaire teaches us how to attend to such a world, he makes little effort to show us how to tend to it. What follows in my readings of Baudelaire (and Poe) is thus not a theory of an environmental ethics, though it may serve as the grounds for it. Baudelaire's commitment to thinking and living without redemption can supply, in Joseph Acquisto's words, "a livable vision that neither succumbs to despair and inactivity nor relies on illusion or the traces of a messianic glimmer of hope," –the exact vision Haraway calls for in *Staying with the Trouble*.<sup>162</sup> Haraway writes that "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as *mortal critters* entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings." To be sure, there is much of Baudelaire in Haraway's emphasis on the present, on the unfinished, and *certainly* on the idea of being a mortal beast, yet "to be truly present" can never be an operative term in his work. For Baudelaire, to be human is to be double, to be never fully present to oneself, and thus we might say that Baudelaire *stays with the trouble* of staying with the trouble, of inhabiting a world that is at once alien and familiar, beautiful and ugly, good and evil, alive and dead.

To put it simply, for Baudelaire to exist is to be damned and life is the punishment thereof, and thus it might be said also that for Baudelaire, hell is indeed already on earth. In his poetry, "nature" designates a realm that is corrupted by original sin, that is subject to mortal transience, and in which evil reigns supreme. Yet it is also a source of beauty and inspiration, at times divine, a tension captured in the title *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Heaven and hell are commonly understood as worlds to come, yet for Baudelaire it is almost certain that neither will ever arrive, meaning that if they exist (and Hell at least *must* exist as a concept, he insists), it is here on earth. Nature is at once paradise and the inferno, yet never fully either, and therein is the rub, for such indeterminacy and lack of closure are what render life on earth hellish. Drawing on inspiration from Poe's cosmological writings, Baudelaire depicts a natural world in which the certainty of the absoluteness of death is withheld, in which entities are constantly dying and decaying yet never attain *le néant* (nothingness). Living on means dying on, a "terminal temporality" that is also *interminable*, a kind of afterlife of its own.

In some cases, the notion of the world's annihilation and/or humanity's species extinction may indeed be more palatable and psychically manageable than the anticlimactic yet no less harrowing likelihood that humanity will live on—with the many other species its behaviors have impacted yet not eliminated—to witness the damage the Capitalocene has wrought.<sup>163</sup> This chapter

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<sup>162</sup> Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 97.

<sup>163</sup> Stephen D. Seely and Drucilla Cornell in *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2016) argue that the active dismantling of the structures of white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism are also the most effective (and crucial) means of combating the planetary destruction of the Capitalocene. They argue that the front-line communities affected disproportionately by climate change have no other choice but to revolt against global capitalism and neo-colonialism, and that theorists of

shows how Baudelaire's worldview provides a framework in which one might come to terms with the terminal while also accepting the pain—and the beauty—that living on entails. It is a resolutely unredeeming worldview deeply informed by his engagement with Poe, but also by the rise of capitalist modernity, a historical formation for which Baudelaire is often considered the representative poet as well as one of its fiercest critics. Though this chapter will not dwell with many of the topoi addressed by Marxian critics of Baudelaire—alienation, commodity fetishism, the city, the masses, the crowd—it is crucial to note that the conditions of capitalist modernity are inseparable from the bleak insights we will be exploring. In other words, it is no coincidence that a poet considered to inaugurate the poetics of capitalist modernity would also reflect, in a manner that is perhaps prophetic, on living on in a world permeated by loss and mass destruction.

In what follows, I first examine how Baudelaire inherits many intellectual preoccupations from Poe—among them a distaste for the idea of progress and a fascination with the ontology of death and dying—by way of reading some of the lesser-known texts by Poe that reflect on the material universe, the fate of the planet, and the nature of the afterlife. These texts, I show, lay the groundwork for Baudelaire's interrogation of living on after death—including one's own. The next section investigates Baudelaire's inheritance of the poetic theory of Shelley and Poe, in particular the question of the relationship between beauty, transience, and the Ideal. In the trajectory from Shelley to Poe to Baudelaire, what starts as mere allegory—the decay of organic matter representing the transient experience of ideal beauty—becomes successively intensified and literalized, such that decaying flesh becomes Beauty incarnate, a means by which Baudelaire turns the blade on the cruelly transcendent Ideal. The result is that heaven, Eden, and—most palpably—hell are brought to earth. The final section explores Baudelaire's famously troubled relationship to nature. What has often been mistaken as pure antipathy toward nature on Baudelaire's part is revealed to be a complex working-through, a process of coming to terms with a nature that is disenchanting, fallen, as devoid of salvific power and divine presence as any of the urban landscapes for which his poetry is arguably most famous. Baudelaire's nature poems may portray life as hell on earth, but, true to his commitment to (human) limits, it is the only life, the only earth one gets. In revealing this, Baudelaire also releases nature from two competing yet equally destructive fantasies: one in which it functions as the refuge from human ills and sin, and the other in which it is hostile and punishing, the bringer of an oblivion that might satisfy the self-destructive fantasies of the death drive. If Baudelaire expresses a deep dissatisfaction with nature, it is because it exhibits the cold neutrality of a mirror, reflecting back one's own projections in lifeless form. Nature in Baudelaire is the reminder of humanity's fallen nature but not the source of it, the trouble with which we are bound to stay.

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posthumanism would do well to join them: "We...wonder why...for many posthumanist thinkers the claim that the destructivity of Man has reached its pinnacle seems to necessarily involve a simultaneous refutation of revolutionary desires and possibilities rather than a more urgent call for collective action"(7-8)

## i. unending endings

*Le monde va finir. La seule raison pour laquelle il pourrait durer, c'est qu'il existe. Que cette raison est faible, comparée à toutes celles qui annoncent le contraire, particulièrement à celle-ci : qu'est-ce que le monde a désormais à faire sous le ciel ?—Car, en supposant qu'il continuât à exister matériellement, serait-ce une existence digne de ce nom et du dictionnaire historique ?...Nous périrons par où nous avons cru vivre. La mécanique nous aura tellement américanisés, le progrès aura si bien atrophié en nous toute la partie spirituelle, que rien parmi les rêveries sanguinaires, sacrilèges, ou anti naturelles des utopistes ne pourra être comparé à ses résultats positifs. ... Ces temps sont peut-être bien proches : qui sait même s'ils ne sont pas venus, et si l'épaississement de notre nature n'est pas le seul obstacle qui nous empêche d'apprécier le milieu dans lequel nous respirons !*<sup>164</sup>

--Charles Baudelaire, *Fusées* (around 1856)

*Prematurely induced by intemperance of knowledge, the old age of the world drew on. This the mass of mankind saw not, or, living lustily although unhappily, affected not to see. But for myself, the Earth's records had taught me to look for widest ruin as the price of highest civilization. . . for the infected earth at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death.*

--Edgar Allan Poe, "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841)

Baudelaire characterizes Poe thusly in his 1857 *Notes Nouvelles sur Poe*, the third and final essay he wrote on the author he so greatly admired:

Quel mépris pour la philosophaillerie, dans ses bons jours, dans les jours, dans les jours où il était, pour ainsi dire, illuminé !...Le jour où il écrivait « Toute certitude est dans les rêves, » il refoulait son propre américanisme dans la région des choses inférieures ; d'autres fois rentrant dans la vraie voie des poètes, obéissant sans doute à l'inéluctable vérité qui nous hante comme un démon, il poussait les ardents soupirs de l'ange tombé qui se souvient des Cieux ; il envoyait ses regrets vers l'Ange d'or et l'Éden perdu ; il pleurait toute cette magnificence de la Nature, *se recroquevillant devant la chaude haleine des fourneaux* ; enfin, il jetait ces admirables pages : *Colloque entre Monos et Una*, qui eusse charmé et troublé l'impeccable De Maistre.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> "The world is about to end. Its sole reason for continuance is that it exists. And how feeble is this reason, compared with those which announce the contrary, particularly the following: What, under Heaven, has this world henceforth to do? Even supposing that it continued materially to exist, would this existence be worthy of the name or the Historical Dictionary?...we shall perish by that which we have believed to be our means of existence. So far will machinery have Americanized us, so far will Progress have atrophied in us all that is spiritual that no dream of the Utopians, however bloody, sacrilegious or unnatural, will be comparable to the result. ...That age is perhaps very near; who knows if it is not already come and if the coarseness of our perceptions is not the sole obstacle which prevents us from appreciating the atmosphere in which we breathe?" Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (Dover: Mineola, NY, 2006), 55-58.

<sup>165</sup> Baudelaire: *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), 592. Hereafter cited as BOC parenthetically in the text). "What scorn for pseudo-philosophy on his good days, on the days he was, so to speak, inspired!...The day that he wrote "All certainty is in dreams," he thrust back his own Americanism into the region of inferior things; at other times, becoming again the true poet, doubling obeying the ineluctable truth which haunts us like a demon, he uttered the ardent sighs of *the fallen angel who remembers heaven*; he lamented the golden age and the lost Eden; he wept over all the magnificence of nature *shriveling up before the hot breath of fiery furnaces*; finally,

To read Baudelaire's essays on Poe in succession is to see the intellectual personae of the two poets blend together. If at times Baudelaire projects his own ideas and opinions onto the figure of Poe, his personal investments nevertheless capture and reveal many crucial elements of the American poet, in particular his critical thoughts about poetry and philosophy, his dark outlook on humanity, and his commitment to satire and irony. Poe's animosity toward his country is, to be sure, exaggerated; for Baudelaire, the U.S. represents all the ills of the nineteenth century against which he rails. In the 1856 *Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres*, Baudelaire condemns the U.S. as follows: "*Les États Unis sont un pays gigantesque et enfant, naturellement jaloux du vieux continent. Fier de son développement matérielle, anormal et monstrueux, ce nouveau venu dans l'histoire a une foi naïve dans la toute-puissance de l'industrie; il est convaincu, comme quelques malheureux parmi nous, qu'il finira par manger le Diable* (BOC 577)."<sup>166</sup> For Baudelaire, the U.S. is nearly synonymous with the hubristic ideals of post-Enlightenment modernity he most abhors: blind faith in progress, belief in the perfectibility of man, the belief in Reason as a salvific force, and commitment to democracy and the rule of the common man. If it shocks us to see this last item on the list, we should keep in mind not only that Poe expresses antidemocratic ideas in much of his work, but also that Baudelaire much admired the political reactionary De Maistre, to whom he implicitly compares Poe above.

In portraying Poe as an author who represses his own American identity ("*il refoulait son propre américanisme dans la région des choses inférieures*») in the 1857 essay, Baudelaire finds in him a compatriot, a fellow exile in a world of fatuous ideas, greed, and hubris. Praising Poe for, among other things, "*un amour insatiable du Beau, qui avait pris la puissance d'une passion morbide*" ["an insatiable love of the Beautiful which had become a morbid passion,"] Baudelaire concludes for the reader of the 1856 essay that "*vous ne vous étonnerez pas que pour un pareil homme la vie soit devenue un enfer, et qu'il ait mal fini: vous admirerez qu'il ait pu durer aussi longtemps*" ("You will not be surprised that for such a man life should have become hell, and that he should have come to an end. You will be astonished that he was able to *endure* such a long time" (BOC 577, BP 95). After Baudelaire had crafted a mythos and martyrology for Poe as a *poète maudit avant la lettre* (a status he himself will of course posthumously attain) in the 1856 essay, the passage from the 1857 essay above integrates Poe even more deeply into his own fallen cosmology, including his ideas about the status of the poet in that fallen world. The martyr Poe becomes at once a diabolic figure (the fallen angel who can but remember Heaven) and an Adamic figure mourning after a lost Eden. For Baudelaire, these roles are nearly identical as, taking inspiration from Milton, he views Satan as not only a more sympathetic figure *for* humanity than God, but also more sympathetic *to* fallen humanity in its plights, as exhibited in the supplicatory prayer-poem "Les Litanies de Satan" and its refrain, "*O Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!*"

Poe's "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841) becomes a flashpoint for Baudelaire because it expresses precisely those elements that he loves most about Poe: his profound skepticism regarding science, reason, and the idea of progress; his mournful disposition toward both a lost golden age of harmony with nature and an unattainable transcendent Ideal; his love for the "phosphorescence of decay" as a baroque retort to Enlightenment ideals and optimism (BP 117);

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he produced those admirable pages: *The Colloquy of Monos and Una* which would have charmed and troubled the impeccable De Maistre. (*Baudelaire on Poe: Critical Papers*, trans. Lois and Francis Hyslop (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1952), 126-127.

<sup>166</sup> "The United States is a young and gigantic country, naturally jealous of the old continent. Proud of its material development, abnormal and almost monstrous, this newcominer in history has a naïve faith in the omnipotence of industry; it is convinced, like some unfortunate persons among us, that it will succeed in devouring the devil." *Baudelaire on Poe: Critical Papers*, trans. Lois and Francis Hyslop (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1952). Hereafter cited as BP.



and, most important and the crystallization of all of the above, a vision of the world irredeemably doomed by humans, possessors of a corrupting knowledge. Most pertinent to our interests here, the story—a conversation between two spirits who have departed the earth and now look down upon it to contemplate its fate in the *longue durée* of geologic history—toggles between imaginings of “apocalyptic and salvific futures” (to borrow Haraway’s language once again) only to reveal them both as two sides of the same redemptive coin. In light of the failure of both narrative and cosmological redemption, the text supplies in its stead the vision of a seemingly unending, indeterminate process of dying—a vision that undoubtedly seeped into Baudelaire’s imagery.

By reading this text, along with a few related texts—all of which, it is no coincidence, appeared in Baudelaire’s second collection of translations of Poe in 1857, preceded by the aforementioned essay—one can trace not only Poe’s profound influence on the poet, but also the development of the intellectual questions to which Baudelaire would return again and again, questions regarding the ontology of the material universe, the nature of death, and the status of Beauty in a world in which neither salvation nor absolute damnation are in sight. Reading “Monos and Una” through the lens of Baudelaire’s concerns also brings to light the shortcomings of contemporary interpretations of Poe that look to his “materialism” as the model for an ontology that can ostensibly curb the destruction wrought by Western mechanistic science and alienated Enlightenment (a pursuit that Baudelaire, no doubt, would regard as the kind of *philosophiaillerie* towards which he believed Poe was inimical).

“The Colloquy of Monos and Una” relates a tale familiar to us by now: the romance of the reconciliation of humanity with the planet from which it has become radically alienated. The story is a dialogue between the posthumous spirits of two lovers whose names mean “one” in Greek and Latin, respectively. *À propos* of their names, they dream of a moment in the Earth’s history at which humanity and nature will finally exist in a unified state. Monos speaks of various failed opportunities for such reconciliation “in the five or six centuries immediately preceding [their] dissolution,” in which a bold intellectual dared to “doubt the propriety of the term ‘improvement,’ as applied to the progress of our civilization” and, despite societal scorn, “boldly contended for those principles...which should have taught our race to submit to the guidance of the natural laws, rather than attempt their control.”<sup>167</sup> As these “poetic intellects” dissented against the enlightenment myth of progress, they in turn “pondered piningly” for “ancient days...holy, august and blissful days, when blue rivers ran undammed, between hills unhewn, into far forest solitudes, primaeval, odorous, and unexplored” (*SW* 280). Rehearsing a standard metanarrative of Romanticism, Poe describes a series of would-be Romanticisms of the past, all of which have failed in the face of “the great ‘movement’...a diseased commotion, moral and physical” that prevented man from “acknowledge[ing] the majesty of Nature,” instead causing him to “[grow] infected with system, and with abstraction” (*SW* 281). This alienated enlightenment, we learn, has always won the battle against the poets, who futilely championed a “taste alone” that “could have led us gently back to Beauty, to Nature, and to Life” (*SW* 281). The result was ongoing ecological devastation, as “huge smoking cities arose,” “[g]reen leaves shrank before the hot breath of furnaces” and “[t]he fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of some loathsome disease” (*SW* 281).

Since the wholesale reconciliation of humanity with nature was a “thing [that] was not to be,” at the end of their lives the two lovers instead turned to apocalyptic fantasies of a decidedly Christian nature (*SW* 282). To quote Monos at length:

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<sup>167</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G.R. Thompson (New York: Norton, 2004), 280. Hereafter all citations from this edition will be cited parenthetically with page numbers preceded by *SW*.

...for the infected world at large I could anticipate no regeneration save in death. That man, as a race, should not become extinct, I saw that he must be "*born again*."

And now it was, fairest and dearest, that we wrapped our spirits, daily, in dreams. Now it was that, in twilight, we discoursed of the days to come, when the Art-scarred surface of the Earth, having undergone that purification which alone could efface its rectangular obscenities, should clothe itself anew in the verdure and the mountain-slopes and the smiling waters of Paradise, and be rendered at length a fit dwelling-place for man:--for man the Death-purged—for man to whose now exalted intellect there should be poison in knowledge no more—for the redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal, but still for the *material*, man." (SW 282)

In light of the poets' fruitless attempts to combat alienated enlightenment and its effects, Monos and Una's dreams offer the fantasy of nothing short of total Armageddon. If the poets of nature are doomed to fail at renovating humanity, nature will sort itself out through its own fiery self-purification. Alas, this too has failed to come to fruition, as Una replies that "the epoch of the fiery overthrow was not so near at hand as we believed...Men lived; and died individually" (SW 282). With great disappointment, Monos and Una themselves succumb to such individual death before they can ever witness the regeneration they could anticipate *only* "in death"; from the beyond, they still wait for the righteous climax they had awaited.

The pantheist first-person narrator of the "Island of the Fay," written in the same year, likewise bemoans the Enlightenment worldview of mechanism and human sovereignty while also entertaining a wish for humanity's reunification with the earth—one that again goes unfulfilled. Believing that "the endowment of matter with vitality is...the *leading* principle in the operations of Deity," the narrator—a man seemingly like the author himself—laments that man has come to believe himself "of more moment in the universe than that vast 'clod of the valley' which he tills and contemns, and to which he denies a soul for no more profound reason than that he does not behold it in operation."<sup>168</sup> To cure himself of such estrangement, he commits to regularly contemplating nature in utter solitude, such that, removed from the "stain upon the landscape" constituted by the presence of anything but "the green things which grow upon the soil and are voiceless," he can regard nature's inhabitants as "the colossal members of one vast animate and sentient whole," a living being "whose cognizance of ourselves is akin with our own cognizance of the *animalculae* which infest the brain" (C 564-565). Unlike the poets of the historical account in "Monos and Una," the narrator of this paean to solitary reverie expresses no desire to proselytize his beliefs about the living earth, instead insisting that his lone reflection on nature is enough *per se* for him—his steadfast insistence on this point ironized, of course, by the existence of the narrative itself. If his reflections do not accomplish the global unification of humanity with nature to which Monos and Una's apocalyptic dream aspired, the narrator instead settles for the promise of redemption on the small scale of the private individual.

In the face of a destructive mindset that threatens to do irrevocable damage to the planet, each of these stories conjures the fantasy of a revitalizing re-enchantment with the earth, only to gainsay that fantasy by asserting the inevitability of death in place of the fulfillment of redemption. Where "Monos and Una" observe the failure of a re-enchantment movement, they seek conciliation in the idea of the wholesale extinction of man; where the latter fails, the inevitability of death for *individual* humans, at least, obtains. In "The Island of the Fay," the narrator—echoing the story's epigraph, Poe's "Sonnet—To Science," with its famous evocation of science as a "vulture" whose

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<sup>168</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 565. Hereafter all citations from this edition will be cited parenthetically with page number preceded by C.

“dull realities” drive “the Hamadryad from the wood/ To seek a shelter in some happier star”—regards the sunset on the island he is visiting, fancying that the western end of the island is “the haunt of the few gentle Fays who remain from the wreck of the race” (*SW* 21; *C* 567). The illusion created by the sunset provides the narrator with a fitting allegory of disenchantment: as the shadows on the eastern end of the isle grow, the faeries “waste away mournfully, rendering unto God, little by little, their existence, as these trees render up shadow after shadow, exhausting their substance into dissolution” (*C* 567). As he imagines he sees a fairy circling the island in a canoe, submerging herself and then re-emerging from the shadows, her brightness fades with the setting of the sun until, at last, “when the sun had utterly departed, the Fay, now the mere ghost of her former self, went disconsolately with her boat into the region of the ebony flood—and that she issued thence at all I cannot say, for darkness fell over all things, and I beheld her magical figure no more” (*C* 568). Matthew Taylor argues that the story confirms that “the death of the individual, the death of the human—[is] a precondition of Life.”<sup>169</sup> Indeed, the dissolution of the fairy retroactively affirms her prior existence by furthering the willful suspension of disbelief: her apparent death, after all, is just that—*apparent*—and the narrator’s speculation that she may have “issued thence” without him perceiving it reinforces the workings of enchantment, lending credence to what had been merely a subjective illusion all along.

True to Baudelaire’s appraisal of his steadfast pessimism, Poe’s preoccupation with mortality poses a challenge to the redemptive narratives contained both in his writings and in the spirit of the age. In his juxtaposition of death with the utopian sentiments of the nineteenth-century U.S.—including his own own—Poe undermines the latter, attesting to Evan Carton’s observation that “Poe’s extravagant horrors always comprise the underside of his extravagant possibilities.”<sup>170</sup> Without fail, Poe asserts that every living thing—including the planet—is subject to the ravages of death, with no hope in sight for the revivification of the dying or the resurrection of the dead. This irredeemable condition is starkly rendered in an early short story attributed to Poe titled “A Dream” (1831), in which the narrator, after falling asleep reading of “the dying agonies of the God of Nature,” dreams that he is a Pharisee returning home after assisting in the crucifixion of Christ, described in gruesome detail.<sup>171</sup> As the universe covers itself mournfully in the crucifixion darkness, the narrator witnesses the heavens opening to reveal Christ himself wearing “the robe of the King of kings,” but with a twist: instead of a wreath of “immortal amaranth,” he is wearing one of cypress, a symbol of death (*M* 9). The narrator next witnesses what can only be described as a mock resurrection, as the last king of Israel rises from the grave:

‘Twas a hideous, unearthly form, such as Dante, in his wildest flights of terrified fancy, ne’er conjured up. I could not move for terror had tied up volition. It approached me. I saw the grave-worm twining itself amongst the matted locks which in part covered the rotten scull (sic). The bones creaked on each other as they moved on the hinges, for its flesh was gone. I listened to their horrid music, as this parody on poor mortality stalked along. He came up to me; and, as he passed, he breathed the cold damps of the lonely, narrow house directly in my face. The chasm in the heavens closed; and, with a convulsive shudder, I awoke. (*M* 9)

<sup>169</sup> Matthew A. Taylor, *Universes without Us: Posthuman Cosmologies in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 37. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>170</sup> Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 67. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>171</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically with page numbers preceded by *M*.

True to oneiric form, the dream condenses the events of crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and apocalypse into one catastrophic montage of sickly images. In its climax —grotesque to the point of being darkly comedic—neither nature nor humanity are redeemed from the rot of mortality. In the afterlife apparently accomplished by the sacrifice of Christ, decay and dissolution persist. Indeed, even the “God of Nature” himself appears subject to the corrosion of time. Just as he does in “Monos and Una” and “The Island of the Fay,” here Poe, as Colin Dayan so aptly puts it, “[substitutes]...a vision of renewal with a fact of corruption,” in turn “reduc[ing] every hope of restoration to nothing more than a very perishable and very mortal nature.”<sup>172</sup>

Dispensing with what Baudelaire held most dear about Poe, recent appraisals of Poe’s “materialism” and its curative potential ignore his insistent pessimism regarding the possibility of the earth’s redemption from death, including the death brought about by alienated enlightenment. Drawing on Poe’s engagement with the work of the Cambridge chemist Richard Watson in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Branka Arsic identifies in Poe an “eco-logic” that presents the world as “vital and relational,” offering a “nondualistic ontology” that could ostensibly combat the violence of Western science’s estrangement from the natural world.<sup>173</sup> Likewise, historian of science John Tresch, contextualizing Poe’s work within the rich tableau of “alternative cosmographies” that emerged in the nineteenth-century U.S. (“Mormons, Shakers, Baptists, African Methodist Episcopalians, Swedenborgians, Gileadists, phalansterians, mesmerists and spiritualists”), argues that Poe’s forays into science challenge Western scientific paradigms of “*mechanism, materialism, and objectivity*—or MeMO for short.”<sup>174</sup> Pointing to the account of global destruction described in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” as a harbinger of the devastation wrought by MeMO in our current age, Tresch argues that “alternative cosmological routes such as Poe’s...can prepare new envelopes of thought and being” (896).

If Poe exhibited profound skepticism regarding redemptive narratives foretelling the reconciliation of humanity with a “vital” material universe—ideas in circulation in their time—we must likewise, in the spirit of Poe and Baudelaire alike, balk at theories that tell similar stories in the present, indulging in fantasies that if we wrest the right ontology from Poe’s writings, we might save the planet. To posit Poe’s materialism as a salvific force in such a way ignores the grim realism we have explored thus far—the very same realism that, as Baudelaire shows, can act as the basis for an environmental ethics. Moreover, before the craze for “new materialisms” of the present, Dayan’s *Fables of Mind* (1987) demonstrated in great detail that Poe’s materialism is best understood as resolutely negative: it offers an account of a “radically physical world” primarily as a means of “criticizing the myth of progress or perfectibility...and...refuting the ‘Abundant recompense’ experienced in America as the merger of romantic theory and the democratic ideal” (15). Situating Poe within the skeptical lineages of Calvinism and the empiricism of Locke, Newton, Hume, and Edwards, Dayan illuminates how the “convertibility” of spirit into matter in Poe’s fiction leads not to ecological or spiritual renewal, but rather to the doubt and confusion associated with the irredeemable realm of the flesh. Dayan’s Poe, to be sure, is in line with Baudelaire’s rendition of the poet.

As a prime example of this morbid materialism, we might turn to the well-known “The Fall of the House of Usher,” another story that Baudelaire included in his 1857 collection of translations.

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<sup>172</sup> Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 198. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

<sup>173</sup> Arsic, “Materialist Vitalism or Pathetic Fallacy: The Case of the House of Usher,” *Representations* 140 (Fall 2017), 121-136; 133, 135.

<sup>174</sup> Tresch, “‘Matter No More’”: Edgar Allan Poe and the Paradoxes of Materialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 42 (Summer 2016), 865-898; 871, 870. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

The story is narrated by an unnamed narrator who is called to visit the home of his friend Roderick Usher, who has fallen ill and is thoroughly convinced of the inevitability of his demise. Upon arrival, the narrator reflects on the house and its surroundings as an aesthetic whole, concluding that there was “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime” (*SW* 199). Usher is preoccupied with the theory of sentience of all matter, organic and inorganic, a principle Arsic takes to be an ecological affirmation of the universe’s “vitality.” Yet at the very moment this vitalistic theory is proven true to the narrator (and reader), it also proves to be the grounds for total dissolution. At the story’s end, in which the house implodes, Usher is condemned to the fate he had feared all along, the consequence of his belonging precisely to a *living* whole, the vital system comprised of the house, the fungi that deteriorates it, and the adjacent tarn. As the fissure in the house tears and it implodes with him and his sister inside, Usher realizes what it means to be a part of a “vast animate and sentient whole” such as the narrator of “The Island of the Fay” fancies the earth to be. In other words, much like the failed re-enchantment narratives of the latter story and “Monos and Una,” “The Fall of the House of Usher” demonstrates that to affirm one’s domain as a living entity—or a system of living entities—does nothing to avert its destruction, nor one’s own.

If one situates this cold fact about Usher’s demise within the larger scope of Poe’s ideas about the universe and the natural world, as Matthew Taylor does in his thorough and convincing study of Poe’s “meta/physics,” one can detect an unwavering faith in the inevitability of destruction. This belief is rendered most manifest in his cosmological treatise and self-described “prose poem” *Eureka* (1848), which Baudelaire translated in 1863. Published one year before the author’s death, *Eureka* asserts that the material universe once existed as a finite and uniform entity that was essentially indistinguishable from God. As a result of its own divine volition, this matter emanated and differentiated itself into varied instantiations, composing the vast yet finite universe. The principle of gravity or attraction in particulate matter, *Eureka* argues, attests to the inherent desire on the part of the universe’s components to return to their original unity. The presence of a competing principle of repulsion, manifested as the negative “ether” of space, has delayed this inevitable collapse of the universe back into itself, allowing for an increasingly complex universe that includes conscious beings.

Nevertheless, implosion is inevitable in *Eureka* and will lead to the termination of all matter, such that the universe’s will-to-unity reveals itself to be a cosmological version of the Freudian death drive. As Poe puts it,

Matter, finally expelling the Ether, shall have returned into absolute Unity—it will then (to speak paradoxically for the moment) be matter without Attraction and without Repulsion—in other words, Matter without Matter—in other words, again, *Matter no more*. In sinking into Unity, it will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception, Unity must be—into that Material Nihilism from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked—to have been *created* by the Volition of God.<sup>175</sup>

In Poe’s cosmology, the original state is one of quiescence, and thus a return to originary unity is synonymous with universal destruction. Masterfully tracing similar narratives of the boundary-dissolving descent into nothingness as they emerge in works such as “Usher,” “The Black Cat,” and “Ligeia,” Taylor defines Poe’s materialism as fundamentally anti-utopian, offering a vision of “self and world...defined not by their distance but by the frisson of their annihilative convergence” (52).

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<sup>175</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 102-103. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

In other words, while Poe gave credence to the pantheistic, panpsychist, and vitalist theories of the nineteenth century, he at the same time revealed that the consequences of their validity were far from positive. Taylor thus argues that even as Poe challenges anthropocentric presumptions, his ontology is “[n]either triumphantly nor redemptively posthuman,” for its “closed, deterministic, teleological cosmos—darkly beautiful in its crystalline perfection—defies our attempts to humanize it, to conscript it to our ends, but at the cost of our very existence” (55-6). “Perfection” indeed best describes *Eureka’s* annihilative vision of the universe, especially in the word’s grammatical sense that denotes an act that has been wholly and definitively completed.

Few (if any) other than Baudelaire could claim an agreement as deep with Poe’s vision of a death-bound cosmos. Crucially, though, Baudelaire troubles the absolute status of death, depriving it of the determinacy of perfect nothingness we see in *Eureka*. Take, for instance, the prose poem “Le Tir et le Cimetière.” It features a hiker who chooses to stop at a tavern adjacent to a cemetery, a location that leads him to conclude that the proprietor must certainly be familiar with Horace, Epicurus, and the Egyptians, “*pour qui il n’y avait pas de bon festin sans squelette, ou sans un emblème quelconque de la brièveté de la vie*” (“for whom no feast was proper without a skeleton or some emblem of the brevity of life.”)<sup>176</sup> After a drink, he walks down to the cemetery, where he can hear shots being fired from a nearby rifle range. The sun is so blazing that “*on eût dû que le soleil ivre se vautrait tout de son long sur un tapis de fleurs magnifiques engraisées par la destruction*” (“one could imagine that the drunken sun was sprawled full length upon a carpet of magnificent flowers fertilized by decay”) (*FE* 442-443). This image of luxuriant life teeming and feeding off decay is recurrent in Baudelaire’s writings, and it is one to which we will return. Lest one think that it is a straightforward embrace of a vitalist worldview—such as we saw in *Leaves of Grass*—in which death is part of a cycle that begets more life, the grave on which the hiker is sitting emits a whisper:

Maudites soient vos cibles et vos carabines, turbulents vivants, qui vous souciez si peu des défunts et de leur divin repos ! Maudites soient vos ambitions, maudits soient vos calculs, mortels impatients, qui venez étudier l’art de tuer auprès du sanctuaire de la Mort ! Si vous saviez comme le prix est facile à gagner, comme le but est facile à toucher, et combien tout est néant, excepté la Mort, vous ne vous fatigueriez pas tant, laborieux vivants, et vous troubleriez moins souvent le sommeil de ceux qui depuis longtemps ont mis dans le But, dans le seul vrai but de la détestable vie ! (*FE* 442)<sup>177</sup>

With its dark and comic rebuke of mortal affairs and human vanity, this voice could easily pass for Baudelaire’s own. In its rhetorical shift from the literal target of the riflemen (*cible*) to the more abstract *but* (aim, goal, target), the voice mocks the meaning and purpose of these “living toilers” whose labors will prove mere busywork in the end. “*Le prix est facile à gagner*” : the phrase captures both “the prize is easy to win” and “the price is easy to earn,” both speaking to the fact that death is the path of least resistance. The joke, of course, is that the path of *most* resistance also

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<sup>176</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil and Paris Spleen*, trans. William H. Crosby (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 1991), 442-443. Hereafter cited as *FE*.

<sup>177</sup> Curses on your targets and your carbines, you living rowdies, you have such small regard for the dead and their sacred slumber! Curses on your ambitions, curses on your schemes, impatient mortals, who come to learn the art of killing beside the sanctuary of the Dead! If you only knew how easy it is to win the prize, how easy to reach the goal, how everything is nothing, except Death, you wouldn’t tire yourself, you living toilers, and less often would you trouble the sleep of those who reached the Goal so long ago, the only real goal of the detestable life! (*FE* 443).

leads to death, and in this totalizing vision the prose poem certainly concurs with the annihilative cosmology of *Eureka*: “*tout est néant, excepté le Mort.*”

This opposition between nothingness and death proves ironic, however, in that death, in most understandings and certainly Poe’s, is *also* nothing, if not *the* nothing. By making this statement but also by its very existence, the voice reverses the binary of being and nothingness that distinguishes the living from the dead. Its speech raises the question: If death is not nothing, then what is? In this comic instance, one might take that deprivation as comforting: like Monos and Una in Poe’s story, the existence of the voice promises that we might still be around in some form after death to mock and judge the mishaps of those who live on.

In the sonnet “Le Rêve d’un Curieux,” appearing in the final section of *Les Fleurs du Mal* marked “La Mort,” on the other hand, the lack of finality of death is rendered to horrifying effect. The speaker is ostensibly a departed spirit speaking from the beyond and narrating his experience of dying, a (non-) experience that proves anticlimactic, unresolved, and therefore disappointing. The octave takes pains to express the emotional ambivalence of awaiting death:

Connais-tu, comme moi, la douleur savoureuse,  
Et de toi fais-tu dire: “Oh! L’homme singulier!”  
--J’allais mourir. C’était dans mon âme amoureuse,  
Désir mêlé d’horreur, un mal particulier;

Angoisse et vif espoir, sans humeur factieuse.  
Plus allait se vidant le fatal sablier,  
Plus ma torture était âpre et délicieuse;  
Tout mon cœur s’arrachait au monde familier.<sup>178</sup>

In their ironic pairings—“*douleur savoureuse*” (delicious suffering), “*désir mêlé d’horreur*” (desire and horror mixed), “*angoisse et vif espoir*” (distress and vivid hope), “*âpre et délicieuse*” (bitter and delicious)—these lines communicate the vagueness and equivocality that come with the speaker’s anticipation of death. Despite the first stanza’s appraisal of this experience as “un mal particulier,” the ambivalence of the feelings that arise while dwelling in this anticipation are in a sense unexceptional for Baudelaire, the poet of Ennui, for whom life—in the tradition of French Romanticism since Chateaubriand’s “*vague des passions*”—is characterized by doubleness, contradiction, and vague yearnings for which only death may offer satisfaction. The final line of the second stanza seems to promise just such fulfillment, as the heart detaches from a world that is painfully, boringly familiar, the mere waiting room of death.

Nevertheless, the death that occurs (if it can be said to occur) after the volta leads to yet another waiting room:

J’étais comme l’enfant avide du spectacle,  
Haïssant le rideau comme on hait un obstacle...  
Enfin la vérité froide se révéla:

J’étais mort sans surprise, et la terrible aurore

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<sup>178</sup> Have you not known, as I have known, delicious pain?/ Are not folks wont to say of you, “How singular!”/--As I lay dying, deep In my enamored brain/Desire and horror mixed, an illness most bizarre;//Distress with vivid hope, without a fractious mood./The emptier the fatal hour-glass became,/ The bitterer and tastier my torture grew;/ My heart was torn away from its familiar frame.

M'enveloppait.—Eh quoi! N'est-ce donc que cela?  
La toile étais levée et j'attendais encore.<sup>179</sup>

Until now the sonnet had relied quite fittingly on the imperfect tense to demarcate a past action that is ongoing and/or was never completed, but the third line of the sestet, with its simple past « se révéla » debuts the first and definitive action of the poem. As such, we might think of it as the actual volta, albeit fittingly delayed. The poem shifts to the *plus-que-parfait* to confirm that, indeed, the death *had occurred*—just as the curtain *had lifted*—yet « sans surprise », foreshadowing the underwhelming aftermath of the revelation itself: what is revealed is precisely nothing. Like Baudelaire's realization in the epigraph above—that the end of the world may well have already come without us noticing—death arrives but yields no perceivable closure. It has indeed provided an opening onto an abyss, but it is less like *le néant* (nothingness) and more like *rien* (just plain nothing). The temporal marking of “*la terrible aurore*” communicates the permanently liminal nature of this unveiling, evoking a day that never quite breaks to match a show that never begins.

In “Le Rêve d'un Curieux,” death that fails to perfect itself, since absolute nothingness, *le néant*—a concept both terrifying and comforting in its certainty—never makes the grand entrance the speaker awaits. Here the poem echoes the end of “L'irréparable” earlier in the collection, in which, after eight stanzas meditating upon a fallen state of humanity beyond repair, the speaker in the final two stanzas shifts to the memory he has of a “*théâtre banal*” in which an illusory faerie character, in a “*miraculeuse aurore*,” manages to throw Satan to the ground. With this faint memory of the (deeply Nervalian) image of an ephemeral and illusory figure who saves the day, the poem concludes on a low point: “*Mais mon Coeur, que jamais ne visite l'extase, / Est un théâtre où l'on attend / Toujours, toujours en vain, l'Être aux ailes de gauze!*” (“My heart, which ecstasy has never given pause, / Has been a stage where I must wait / In vain, in vain the creature with the wings of gauze!”) (FE 110-111). Both poems depict an eternal waiting for a redemption that never enters from the wings.

The perfect annihilation of Poe's *Eureka* thus appears desirable compared to Baudelaire's portrayal of a death that never delivers on the promise of its own completion. This is an oversight of Matthew Taylor's otherwise perceptive reading, as it overlooks the redemptive nature of the treatise's ending. *Eureka*, after all, ends on a note of transcendent self-realization, promising that “the sense of individual identity will be gradually merged in the general consciousness” such that “Man... ceasing imperceptibly to feel himself Man, will at length attain that awfully triumphant epoch when he shall recognize his existence as that of Jehovah” (106). What fails to be affirmative in its immediate connotations—the annihilation of the universe—is nevertheless redemptive in its “awfully triumphant” implications, such that humanity's annulment is at the same time its apotheosis—just as it is in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” This rhetoric, which merges a pantheistic worldview with a Christian apocalyptic grand narrative, aligns perfectly with the redemptive visions of German Idealism. Evan Carton has persuasively argued that *Eureka* can be understood as “a parodic redaction of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” as it “demands a historically embodied metaphysics that proceeds from an original to an eventual identity of subject and object through phases of alienation and incomplete union” (16). Like Taylor, Carton understands *Eureka* to be pessimistic at its heart, an extended self-parodic exercise in which the bleak promise of self-annihilation works to undercut Poe's own most transcendental aspirations. Yet one could just as easily take Poe at his word that a teleology of self-destruction and self-realization may be one and

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<sup>179</sup> I had become a child impatient for the play, / Hating the unraised curtain as one hates delay... / At last the truth revealed its cold simplicity: / I was dead, no great surprise; the terrible dawn / Came over me.—What's this! It's all there is to be? / The curtain had gone up, and I just lingered on. (251)



the same, *sans* irony. Hegelian *Aufhebung*, after all, is a technology by which irony is annulled and apparent contradictions resolve into identity. In its finality, complete annihilation—whether it be of the human species or the planet—is the flip side of the coin of complete apotheosis, as Monos and Una know all too well when they posit apocalyptic species extinction as the pretext for the “redeemed, regenerated, blissful, and now immortal...man.”

In contrast with such fantasies of destruction as completion, many of the works by Poe that Baudelaire held most dear represent death as a chronic condition, an ongoing process—a distinctly “terminal temporality” if there ever was one. In the case of “The Island of the Fay,” for instance, if the narrator only *speculates* that the fairy might still be around, we the readers *know* that with the magic of the mayfly (*Ephemeroptera*), she will live to die again tomorrow. Just like her cyclical migration from light to darkness around the island, the illusion that procures her deathly existence is itself predicated on the ceaseless turning of the planet away from and toward the sun. Likewise, in “The Colloquy of Monos and Una,” death provides neither the closure nor the permanence its titular characters had longed for. Immediately after Una marks her disappointment that Armageddon never came (“Men lived; and died individually”), the story turns to an extensive account of the stages of death, revealing dying to be a process that extends beyond the grave. Monos recounts that even after he has assumed “a breathless and motionless torpor” that was “termed *Death* by those who stood around me,” after interment the physical senses continue to function upon the “passive brain” in a manner that renders perception more acute (*SW* 283). Then, as the five senses deteriorate, Monos experiences a more pronounced sense of time and its passing as well as “the sole consciousness of entity” (N285). As the final sentence of the story conveys, after the body fully decays, the consciousness of being gives way to “the autocrats *Place* and *Time*”: “For *that* which *was not*—for that which had no form—for that which had no thought—for that which had no sentence—for that which was soulless, yet of which matter formed no portion—for all this nothingness, yet for all this immortality, the grave was still a home, and the corrosive hours, comates” (*SW* 286). In Monos’s posthumous report, decay is not merely something that comes after the event of death; rather, death is synonymous with decay, both seemingly endless subtractive processes, mimicked here by an anaphoric negation that apophatically traces the remains of Monos by naming what they “had not.” The (apparent) end of the story assures us that even after a dying/decaying entity succumbs to nothingness, it is continuously subjected to “the corrosive hours” that push it beyond zero into negative infinity.

Such infinite modes of dying contrast sharply with the abrupt and tangibly finite deaths one encounters in “Usher” or in “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845). The final sentence of the latter story seems written as if to manifest the opposite fate of that portrayed in the last sentence of “The Colloquy of Monos and Una.” In “M. Valdemar,” the total annihilation of the titular dead man is held in abeyance by a mesmeric trance effected by the narrator before the event of death, such that the spirit of the subject is temporarily able to speak from the beyond—affirming that he is indeed dead—through the medium of the body that remains. Until, that is, the moment at which the conceit breaks and “the whole frame at once...crumbled...absolutely *rotted* away” into “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence” (*SW* 414). The final sentence of the story annuls the speaking subject through the finality of death just as it also demolishes the “frame” of the narrative, formally enacting death as both completion and annihilation. In “Monos and Una,” meanwhile, the final sentence, extensive in its very form, extends the possibility of an afterlife in which the two spirits continue to converse. The afterlife, however, is not, as common understanding would have it, “deathless”: it is rather identical with the processes of death and decay, infinite in both their scope and ostensible lack of teleology. Contra Taylor’s reading also, this negative infinity precludes the unification seemingly foreshadowed by the titular characters’ names, for near the end of the story we learn that—like the companion who “died for Beauty” and the “One who died for

Truth” in Dickinson’s F449—the two lovers have been buried next to each other, yet death does not go so far as to provide the fulfillment of complete convergence.<sup>180</sup> At the story’s end, the title stands: the text remains a colloquy between two parties, and the separation between them, like the conversation for which it is the precondition, will be maintained *ad infinitum*.

Baudelaire is certainly horrified by the prospect of such suspended death and unending (after)life, as we saw in “Le Rêve d’un curieux”; as such, annihilation attains a redemptive status that is only hinted at in Poe. In “Le Goût du néant,” the speaker, a self-described “*esprit vaincu, fourbu*” longs for death now that life has lost its luster and “*Le Printemps adorable a perdu son odeur.*” The final lines depict death as a prolonged process that mimics the slow procession of time under conditions of Ennui:

Et le Temps m’engloutit minute par minute,  
Comme la neige immense un corps pris de roideur;  
Je contemple d’en haut le globe en sa rondeur,  
Et je n’y cherche plus l’abri d’une cahute.

Avalanche, veux-tu m’emporter dans ta chute? (*FE 142*)<sup>181</sup>

The speaker, whose spirit is already as good as dead, conjures the image of his physical death only to find it unsatisfactory, a state that too much resembles life in its incompleteness. He thus wishes for a second death of sorts, the all-encompassing “avalanche” of annihilation. In an earlier apostrophe, he calls out, “*Résigne-toi, mon coeur; dors ton sommeil de brute,*” a sentiment echoed in the preface to the third edition to *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

Chantre des voluptés folles du vin et de l’opium, je n’ai soif que d’une liqueur inconnue sur la terre, et que la pharmacie céleste elle-même ne pourrait pas m’offrir—d’une liqueur qui ne contiendrait ni la vie/vitalité ni la mort, ni l’excitation, ni le néant. Ne rien savoir, ne rien enseigner, ne rien vouloir, ne rien sentir, dormir et encore dormir, tel est aujourd’hui mon unique vœu. Vœu infâme et dégoutant, mais sincère. (*BOC 124*)<sup>182</sup>

The stupor imagined here is a comatose state of unemphatic (non-)existence, absent the grandeur and horrors of life, death, and nothingness. It is perhaps the only alternative to the nightmare of living/dying on for Baudelaire, but it is also, he acknowledges, an impossibility. The poet thus has no choice but to live the unfulfilled life and die the unfulfilled death.

With such thoughts, inspired no doubt by Poe’s sketches of unending death, Baudelaire imagines an existence in which the “end” of the world, to refer again to the epigraph above, is coming—actually may already have come—but will offer neither the salvation we’d hoped for nor the annihilation we’d feared (yet also hoped for, if unconsciously). To dispense with apocalyptic fantasy is to accept the fate that we are bound to that world no matter what—even if that world is a

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<sup>180</sup> See Taylor’s *Universes Without Us*, 38-39.

<sup>181</sup> “And minute by swift minute Time’s dissolving me,/Swept like a frozen corpse where clouds of snow are swirled;/ From heights I contemplate the roundness of the world/And don’t search any longer for a sheltering lee.//Avalanche, in your crush will you not swallow me?” (*FE 145*)

<sup>182</sup>“Cantor of the wanton sensuousness of wine and opium, I thirst only for one liquor, unknown on earth, and that the celestial pharmacy itself could not offer me—a liquor that contains neither life/vitality, nor death, nor excitement, nor nothingness. To know nothing, to teach nothing, to want nothing, to feel nothing, to sleep and to sleep some more, such is today my sole wish. An Infamous and repulsive wish, but sincere” (translation mine).

veritable hell on earth. If this world is permeated by the loss that comes with ongoing terminality and the pain that comes with permanent indeterminacy, it can also be beautiful. As the next section will show, Baudelaire's aesthetics hold that such beauty is appreciated not by overlooking such loss and indeterminacy, but by facing it with open eyes. Baudelaire arrives at this conclusion likewise through his engagement with Poe, once again intensifying Poe's darkest thoughts on the matter, taking them to their limit. Baudelaire derives from Poe an aesthetics of transience, an appreciation of beauty not in spite of loss and morality, but *in* loss and mortality. This aesthetic theory of course deeply informs Baudelaire's poetry, but it also yields insights that lay the groundwork for an environmental ethics of staying with the trouble, of living with and through the worst.

ii. to sing the decaying flesh

*"Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man."*

--Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry" (1821)

*Alors, ô ma beauté ! Dites à la vermine  
Qui vous mangera de baisers,  
Que j'ai gardé la forme et l'essence divine  
De mes amours décomposés !<sup>183</sup>*

--Charles Baudelaire, "Une Charogne" ("A Carcass," 1857)

The experience of transient beauty and the melancholy that follows in its wake lie at the heart of Poe's poetic theory. At the opening of "The Poetic Principle," completed as a lecture in 1849 and printed in 1850 after his death, Poe declares:

I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags—fails—a revulsion ensues—and then the poem is, in effect, and in fact, no longer such.<sup>184</sup>

In evaluating a poem principally by its effect, Poe remains consistent with his earlier "Philosophy of Composition" (1846), in which he maintains that a poet should begin the process of composition by "commencing with the consideration of an *effect*," an effect that can only be brought about by the "unity of impression" that requires that a text be read in one sitting (*CT* 60, 62). While the latter text offers a systematic and mechanistic account of poetic composition that depicts the creation of poetry as a quasi-scientific endeavor, it also claims that this poetic effect is tied to the apprehension of Beauty as "an intense and pure elevation of *soul*," an experience whose transitory nature makes

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<sup>183</sup> Then, O my beautiful, repeat this to the worm/Whose kisses eat your face away:/ That I preserve the sacred essence and the form/Of all my loves as they decay!" (*FE* 69).

<sup>184</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Critical Theory: The Major Documents*, ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 176. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text with page numbers preceded by *CT*.

melancholy the best tone suited to poetry, and the death of a beautiful woman “the most poetical topic in the world” (CT 65).

By the time he wrote “The Poetic Principle,” Poe had given his theory of poetics a metaphysical grounding: the “immortal instinct” driving humanity toward the apprehension of “Supernal Beauty” is “the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above” (CT 183, 184). Thus the experience of reading a poem worthy of the name is characterized by “a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp *now*, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem...we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses” (CT 184). Here Poe follows in Percy Shelley’s footsteps.<sup>185</sup> As early as his 1836 review of Drake and Halleck, Poe declares that “Poesy is the sentiment of Intellectual Happiness here, and the Hope of a higher intellectual Happiness hereafter,” citing Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” as the foremost example of this insight (SW 606). Indeed, Poe’s later ideas about the supernal Beauty captured by poetry speak as if directly to Shelley’s opening lines characterizing that poem’s namesake: “The awful shadow of some unseen Power/Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting/This various world with as inconstant wing/As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.”<sup>186</sup> It is likely that at least by the time of writing “The Poetic Principle,” Poe had also read Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” (1821), with its description of poetry as the written record of “evanescent visitations of thought and feeling...always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression” (PS 697).

Poe’s critical theory affirms a separation between the realms of the material and the ideal, and the value of poetry is found principally in its ability to give humanity access, albeit fleeting, to the latter. In the review of Drake and Halleck, Poe identifies “the circumscribed Eden of [the poet’s] dreams” as “distinctly and palpably marked out from amid the jarring and tumultuous chaos of human intelligence.” Thus if *Eureka* depicts a material universe that is bound for annihilation, Poe’s poetic theory portrays poetry as exceeding that annihilation in its relation to supernal Beauty.<sup>187</sup> Poetry, for Poe, often finds itself at odds with natural law and the world *as is*. Indeed, in his 1842 review of Longfellow’s *Ballads and Other Poems*, Poe goes so far as to state that “supernal Beauty...[is]

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<sup>185</sup> See “The Influence of Shelley on Poe” in Julia Power, *Shelley in American In the Nineteenth Century: His Relation to American Critical Thought and His Influence*, published in *The University Studies of the University of Nebraska*, vol. 40 (April 1940), 99-120.

<sup>186</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 114. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text with page numbers preceded by PS.

<sup>187</sup> This fact must give us pause when attempting to apply ideas from his scientific materialism to his poetics. While Poe had seemed to reconcile scientific and poetic intelligence as late as 1848’s “prose poem” *Eureka*, it is important to note that a year later in “The Poetic Principle” he directly contradicts the idea of continuity between these two realms of knowledge. Engaging with a theory of diverging faculties characteristic of post-Kantian philosophy and aesthetics, the latter text asserts that poetry’s “sole arbiter is Taste,” which means that “With the Intellect or the Conscience, it has only collateral relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or Truth” (CT 185). It goes on to establish that the excitement of the soul in its fleeting apprehension of Beauty—the “Poetic Sentiment”—is “easily distinguished from Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart” (CT 185). Poe’s definition of poetry as evoking fleeting and indefinite pleasure stands in conflict with *Eureka*’s totalizing and definitive account of the material universe. *Eureka*, in its all-encompassing definitive account of the universe, despite Poe’s own categorization of the text as a “prose poem,” must be considered such a tale. Poe’s *poetic* faith in supernal beauty would seem to trump the prosaic account of annihilative finitude he elaborates in *Eureka*; we thus must hesitate to emulate its totalizing tendencies by applying its cosmology to all of Poe’s works, as Matthew Taylor is inclined.

a beauty which is not afforded the soul by any existing collocation of earth's forms" (*SW* 640). This disjuncture between worldliness and poetic beauty in Poe's writings is what drives Richard Wilbur's influential rendition of Poe as a poet whose "strategy is to accomplish a mock-destruction of earthly things, estranging the reader from material reality and so, presumably, propelling his imagination toward the ideal."<sup>188</sup> Referring to Poe's 1842 review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Wilbur points out that although Poe believes that fiction is much more capable of transmitting truth in alignment with scientific knowledge because "it can proceed toward a definiteness of meaning not permissible in the poem," he ultimately holds poetry to be the superior genre given its association with a transcendent ideal of Beauty.<sup>189</sup> Poe's desired poetic effect, as Wilbur describes it, "is a sense of transcending tidy mundane thought-patterns in the direction of a 'vague and therefore spiritual' realm where the closure of the mind on its material is impossible" (*LP* 35).

In his association of decay with the apprehension of this divine realm, Poe exhibits his debt to Shelley while also marking a critical difference—namely, that poetry imitates decay rather than redeeming it. For Shelley in the "Defence," "Poetry...arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life," thus "*redeem[ing] from decay* the visitations of the divinity in man" (*PS* 698, emphasis mine). By asserting that good poetry always elicits melancholy and must be transitory in form, Poe instead proposes that poetry is *mimetic* of this decay of experience. For Poe, as we have seen, the brevity and concision of a poem enacts the dissolution of the "elevating excitement" it also provokes. Like the fairy of "The Island of the Fay," Beauty's disappearance is the precondition of its appearance. This, perhaps, is why Poe so admired Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant," whose final speculations about the possible existence of deathless beauty are preceded by an extended description of a deteriorating garden, a scene in which "weeds were forms of living death" whose "decay and sudden flight from frost/Was but like the vanishing of a ghost" (*PS* 459).<sup>190</sup> Following Shelley, Poe further condenses the appearance and disappearance of beauty such that decaying matter is not just *one* metaphor for the manifestation of "Supernal Beauty" in the realm of the flesh; it is *the* metaphor, as well the model. This is the deep irony that lies behind the Gothic motifs and melancholy mood of his poetry: if the idea of a heavenly realm of beauty offers some solace for mortality, it is only through the direct experience of that mortality that one can access it.

Baudelaire's 1857 *Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* is a testament to the profound impact that Poe's poetic theory had on Baudelaire's own—though, as critics are quick to point out, this theoretical influence does not necessarily translate into actual poetic practice. Baudelaire reiterates and endorses many of the core ideas from "The Poetic Principle": the soul-elevating function of poetry, the ideals of totality of effect and unity of impression, the notion that poetry has no goal other than itself, and the sentiment that beauty—not morality, truth, or passion—is the sole domain of poetry. In a florid passage, Baudelaire vaunts the transcendent properties of poetry:

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<sup>188</sup> Richard Wilbur, "Introduction" to *Edgar Allan Poe: Poems and Poetics*, ed. Richard Wilbur (Washington: Literary Classics of the United States, 2003), xxiii.

<sup>189</sup> Richard Wilbur, "Introduction" to *The Laurel Poetry Series: Poe* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1959), 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *LP*.

<sup>190</sup> See the May 1849 entry in Edgar Allan Poe, *Marginalia*: "If ever poet sang—as a bird sings—earnestly—impulsively—with utter abandonment—to himself solely—and for the mere joy of his own song—that poet was the author of 'The Sensitive Plant'" (Edgar Allen Poe, *Marginalia* [Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1981], 181). In the aforementioned review of Halleck and Drake in 1836, he cites the "The Sensitive Plant,"—among works by Aeschylus, Dante, Cervantes, Milton, Burns, Coleridge, and Keats—as a poem of "the purest ideality" (*SW* 610n1).

C'est cet admirable, cet immortel instinct du Beau qui nous fait considérer la terre et ses spectacles comme un aperçu, comme une correspondance du Ciel. La soif insatiable de tout ce qui est au-delà, et que révèle la vie, est la preuve la plus vivante de notre immortalité. C'est à la fois par la poésie et à travers la poésie, par et à travers la musique que l'âme entrevoit les splendeurs situées derrière le tombeau : et quand un poème exquis amène les larmes au bord des yeux, ces larmes ne sont pas la preuve d'un excès de jouissance, elles sont bien plutôt le témoignage d'une mélancolie irritée, d'une postulation des nerfs, d'une nature exilée dans l'imparfait et qui voudrait s'emparer immédiatement, sur cette terre même, d'un paradis révélé. (BOC 598)<sup>191</sup>

These lines more or less summarize Poe's views while transposing them into Baudelaire's own conceptual framework, adding the Swedenborgian notion of a "correspondence" between heaven and earth as well as evoking the postlapsarian condition of "*une nature exilée dans l'imparfait*," lending a more explicit Christian theological valence to Poe's understanding of poetry and its effects. The passage—indeed all of Baudelaire's writings on Poe—is uncharacteristic of Baudelaire's typically ironic and iconoclastic tone, attesting to the sacrosanct status Poe occupied for the poet (Baudelaire reportedly prayed to the American author every day).<sup>192</sup>

*Les Fleurs du Mal*, however, maintains a tortured relationship to the Ideal not seen in Poe, attributing to transcendent beauty a sadistic, even demonic quality. In "Hymne à la Beauté," the speaker calls into doubt whether beauty is in fact a beneficent heavenly entity:

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme.  
O Beauté ? Ton regard, infernal et divin,  
Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,  
Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin. (FE 52)<sup>193</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Baudelaire likens artistic inspiration to intoxication—a resemblance that he believes contributed to Poe's alcoholism—thus blurring the lines between physical and ostensibly loftier pursuits. The lines that follow suggest not only that beauty inspires sins and wreaks suffering on humanity, but also that it takes pleasure in doing so: "*Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques*" (You walk on corpses, Beauty, mocking as you go) (FE 54-55). The artist, in turn, is rendered a masochist, as Baudelaire transposes Poe's "desire of the moth for the star" into the image of a mayfly sacrificing itself to beauty: "*L'éphémère ébloui vole vers toi, chandelle, / Crépite, flambe, et dit: Bénissons ce flambeau!*" ("The dazzled mayfly flitters in your candle flame / To crepitate and blaze and

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<sup>191</sup> "It is this admirable, this immortal instinct of the beautiful which makes us consider the earth and its spectacles a revelation, as something in correspondence with Heaven. The insatiable thirst for everything that lies beyond, and that life reveals, is the most living proof of our immortality. It is at the same time by poetry and *through* poetry, by and *through* music that the soul glimpses the splendors beyond the tomb ; and when an exquisite poem brings us to the verge of tears, those tears are not the proof of excessive pleasure ; they are rather evidence of an aroused melancholy, of a condition of nerves, of a nature which has been exiled amid the imperfect and would like to take possession immediately, on this very earth, of a revealed paradise." *Baudelaire on Poe: Critical Papers*, trans. Lois and Francis Hyslop (State College, PA: Bald Eagle Press, 1952), 140-141.

<sup>192</sup> In his intimate journals, Baudelaire writes "Faire tous les matins ma prière à Dieu, réservoir de toute force et de toute justice, à mon père, à Mariette et à Poe, comme intercesseurs" (BOC 404).

<sup>193</sup> "Are you from heaven's depths or hell's infinity, / O Beauty? Just your gaze, infernal and divine, / Can pour out such a mix of crime and courtesy / That I have found myself comparing you to wine. (FE 53).

cry : O blessed fire !” (FE 54-55). Beauty here cruelly bestows its own transience on its admirers. The poem concludes that, if beauty is indeed cruel, even Satanic, it is nonetheless valuable because it can redeem the monotony of Ennui:

De Satan ou de Dieu, qu’importe ? Ange ou sirène.  
Qu’importe, si tu rends, --fée aux yeux de velours,  
Rythme, parfum, lueur, o mon unique reine !—  
L’univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds ? (FE 54)<sup>194</sup>

If beauty ultimately plays a redemptive role in the last poem, in “La Beauté,” just a few poems before, it reveals itself to be complicit in the exile it would remediate. It is cold, punishing, and markedly detached from the realm of lived experience:

Je suis belle, ô mortels! Comme un rêve de pierre,  
Et mon sein, où chacun s’est meurtri tour à tour,  
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour  
Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

Je trône dans l’azur comme un sphinx incompris;  
J’unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;  
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,  
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris. (FE 46-48)<sup>195</sup>

Likening itself to “a dream of stone”—lifeless and sublime like a marble statue—beauty is also a Medusa figure that mortifies the poet, condemning him to a love that brings with it the cold, hard qualities of pure “matter.” Beauty combines the mystifying muteness of the sphinx, the cold purity of snow and the white blankness of swans, the French *cygnes* echoing the dead letter of the *signe* (sign) as is oft noted in commentaries of the poem of the same name. These lines maintain Poe’s definition of ideal beauty against the muddle of human passions and the “chaos” of human intelligence: beauty holds contempt for tears, laughter, and the messiness of mortal movement, which threatens to blur the lines of pure aesthetic form.

Beauty’s lifelessness in “La Beauté” echoes the mortifying effects of Ennui described in the final lines of the second poem titled “Spleen” in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which the speaker apostrophizes his own body deadened by splenetic ennui:

— Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivante!  
Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante,  
Assoupi dans le fond d’un Sahara brumeux;  
Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux,

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<sup>194</sup>“From Satan or from God, who cares? Angel, siren/ Who cares? If you—O fairy with eyes of velour./ With rhythm, perfume, glimmer, O my only queen!--/Will make the world less grim and moments less a bore” (FE 55).

<sup>195</sup> I’m beautiful, O Mortals! Like a dream of stone;/ My breasts upon which, turn by turn, each one is killed,/ Are fashioned so that love, with which the poet’s filled,/ Stays quiet and eternal as a fossil bone.// I am enthroned in azure; strange as a sphinx am I;/ I blend a heart of snow with whiteness of a swan;/ Abhorring changes where one line might come undone,/ And I have never laughed, and I shall never cry. (FE 46-49)

Oublié sur la carte, et dont l'humeur farouche  
Ne chante qu'aux rayons du soleil qui se couche. (FE 138)<sup>196</sup>

The resemblance between the melancholic poet of “Spleen” and the lifeless allegory of Beauty reveals the affinity underlying the two terms in “Spleen et Idéal,” the title of the section in which all of the aforementioned poems appear. As Walter Benjamin puts it in his early notes on Baudelaire, “Doesn’t [this] title mean that it is the melancholic above all whose gaze is fixed on the ideal, and that it is the images of melancholy that kindle the spiritual most brightly?”<sup>197</sup> Perhaps best illustrated in the above poem—in which the speaker intensifies the deadening effect of ennui from line to line, identifying with a series of obsolete objects—Baudelaire makes tangible Poe’s idea that receptivity to the Ideal results in a heightened sense of its inaccessibility to mortals. The conclusion Baudelaire draws is that the poet has no other recourse but to reinforce the divide between mortal life and the transcendent ideal. According to the logic of melancholy, dying—the very element that defines mortal life as such—provides the only means of approaching, but never reaching, the lifelessness of ideal beauty. The speaker of “La Beauté” knows this cruel truth, which is why, as Barbara Johnson notes, Baudelaire took the already well-established Parnassian trope of addressing “silent female statues, marble Venuses and granite Sphinxes whose unresponsiveness stands as the mark of their aesthetic value” in order to “parod[y] this conceit by making Beauty *speak* her own responsiveness and gloat over the muteness of the poet’s love for her.”<sup>198</sup> As he does with amorous relationships (ex. “Les Métamorphoses du vampire,” his comments on love in “Les Fusées”), with the relationship between God and humanity (“Le Reniement de Saint Pierre”), and with the act of self-reflection (“L’héautontimerouménos”) Baudelaire inflects the relationship between the poet and beauty with sadomasochism.

Baudelaire’s strategy for countering ideal beauty’s absolute power over the mortal poet is to embrace and valorize the transience that characterizes the fallen world in which the poet resides. His most well-known effort to do so is in the aesthetic theory developed in his review of the painter Constantin Guys, “Le peintre de la vie moderne.” In it, Baudelaire maintains that beauty is always of a double nature corresponding to the duality found in fallen humanity: “*Le beau est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. Sans ce second élément, qui est comme l’enveloppe amusante, titillante, apéritive, du divin gâteau, le premier élément serait indigestible, inappréciable, non adapté et non approprié à la nature humaine* » (BOC 791).<sup>199</sup> If the concept of the eternal and ideal is indispensable for Baudelaire, in “Le Peintre de la vie moderne” he attempts to make the transitory and the material likewise indispensable to any theory of beauty. Guys becomes the model for this

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<sup>196</sup> Nothing can match the tedium of halting days,/When, slowly captured in the drifts of years and snows,/Ennui, the fruit of dull incuriosity,/Achieves the amplitude of immortality./-From this time forth, O stuff of life, you are no more/Than blocks of granite compassed round by some vague fear,/Dozing in the depths of a Sahara’s dust;/An ancient sphinx, lost in the world’s disinterest,/Lost on the map, your wild caprice was never sung/Except beneath the luster of the setting sun.] (FE 139)

<sup>197</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), 29.

<sup>198</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Muteness Envy” in *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 200-216, 202.

<sup>199</sup> “Beauty is made of an eternal, invariable element, of which the quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you will, one by one or all together, epoch, fashion, morality, and passion. Without this second element, which is like the titillating, amusing, and appealing outer layer of the divine cake, the first element would be indigestible, unappetizing, not adapted to and not belonging to human nature” (translation mine).



aesthetic theory because he unabashedly represents the present in its transience. In doing so, Guys pays homage to modernity, which Baudelaire defines as “*le transitoire, le fugitive, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable*” (“the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, one half of art, of which the other half is eternal and immutable”) (BOC 797, translation mine).

When Baudelaire imagines the idea of a beauty divorced from the transitory status of modernity, he conjures the lifeless image of beauty we saw in “La Beauté”: “*Cet élément transitoire, fugitive, dont les métamorphoses sont si fréquentes, vous n’avez pas le droit de le mépriser ou de vous en passer. En le supprimant, vous tombez forcément dans le vide d’une beauté abstraite et indéfinissable, comme celle de l’unique femme avant le premier péché*” (“This transitory, fugitive element, of which the metamorphoses are so frequent, you do not have the right to disregard it or pass over it. In repressing it, you fall necessarily into the void of an abstract and indefinable beauty, like that of the only woman before the first sin”) (BOC 797, translation mine). As if to disparage the cruel allegorical figure he sketches in “La Beauté,” here Baudelaire reverses the hierarchy in which the transcendent, the eternal, and the disembodied are valued over the immanent, the transitory, and the embodied. Baudelaire likewise reverses the language of the fall, so that suppressing the transient in favor of the ideal means to *fall* into a void, the undesirable state of pure abstraction. While keeping the ideal as a precondition of its intelligibility, the essay expresses a preference for the impurity of lived experience over the purity of ideal beauty, likening the latter to the prelapsarian Eve and thus the unfavorable “state of nature,” a concept he likewise disparages in the same essay.

*Les Fleurs du Mal* can be understood similarly as the overturning of the hierarchy of the ideal over the material, of the transcendent over the fallen; crucially, though, this never results in an escape from the idea of the fall itself. As the Romanian-French poet Benjamin Fondane puts it in his *Baudelaire et l’expérience du gouffre* (1943), the title of Baudelaire’s collection of poems expresses his determination to create a poetry that celebrates fallenness without attempting to redeem it:

Non seulement Baudelaire descend dans le sous-sol humain où grouille un monde de stupre et de honte, mais il prend sur lui de montrer que le sous-sol peut donner des fleurs, que cheveu, boue, crasse, *peuvent aussi chanter*. Aussi, son chant...témoigne...que la poésie est autre chose que la manifestation sensible de l’Idée, quand elle le veut, quand elle l’ose.<sup>200</sup>

This attitude is antagonistic toward the idealism that Baudelaire at times espouses. Though Baudelaire claims to admire Constantin Guys because of his ability to “*tirer l’éternel du transitoire*,” (draw out the eternal from the transitory) (BOC 797, translation mine), there is much in his own poetry that foregoes this process of extraction or refinement, singing the transitory world of the flesh without the need to save it from the fate of disappearance. This is why critics such as Leo Bersani and Joseph Acquisto have taken issue with Walter Benjamin’s rendition of Baudelaire, which too easily assimilates the poet to his own redemptive Marxist philosophy of history—even if its anti-progressivist bent would suit Baudelaire’s own understanding of history.<sup>201</sup> Indeed, in his journals (“Fusées”), Baudelaire identifies the figure of iredeemability *par excellence* as the male archetype of

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<sup>200</sup> Benjamin Fondane, *Baudelaire et l’expérience du gouffre* (Paris: Éditions complexe, 1994), 208. “Not only does Baudelaire descend into the basement of humanity where a world of shame and corruption mills about, but he takes it upon himself to show that the basement can yield flowers, that hair, mud, spit, *can also sing*. Also, his song...shows... that poetry is other than the sensory manifestation of the Idea when it wants to be, when it dares to be.” Translation mine.

<sup>201</sup> See Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) and Joseph Acquisto, *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

beauty: “*je ne conçois guère...un type de Beauté où il n’y ait du Malheur...il me serait difficile de ne pas conclure que le plus parfait type de Beauté virile est Satan,—à la manière de Milton*” [I can hardly conceive of...a type of Beauty in which there is not some *misfortune*...it would be difficult for me not to conclude that the most perfect example of masculine beauty is *Satan*---in the manner of Milton (*BOC 394*, translation mine).

The poetics of transience, decay, and fallenness are all crystallized in the poem “Une Charogne”—included, too in “Spleen et Idéal.” The poem begins with an entreaty by the speaker to his addressee (“mon âme”—most likely his lover, as becomes apparent later) to recall a shared experience in which they both happened upon a rotting carcass in the middle of their path. With the themes of contingency and ephemerality already in place, the poem immediately establishes a lascivious air as it first describes the scene:

Les jambes en l’air, comme une femme lubrique,  
Brûlante et suant les poisons,  
Ouvrait d’une façon nonchalante et cynique  
Son ventre plein d’exhalaisons.

Le soleil rayonnait sur cette pourriture,  
Comme afin de la cuire à point,  
Et de rendre au centuple à la grand Nature  
Tout ce qu’ensemble elle avait joint ;

Et le ciel regardait la carcasse superbe  
Comme une fleur s’épanouir.  
La puanteur était si forte, que sur l’herbe  
Vous crûtes vous évanouir. (*FE 64*)<sup>202</sup>

Baudelaire’s chosen metaphor of a licentious woman is in line with his standard gynophobia, but it is worth noting that in his misogynistic worldview, women are associated with the bestial element of fallen humanity, a condition the poem embraces and celebrates even as it denigrates women. From the shameless, even demonic promiscuity established in the first stanza above, the poem moves to an image of gratuitous proliferation. The “*soleil*” and “*ciel*”—fittingly placed at the top of the following two stanzas—look down on the scene, emblems of the heavenly ideal. Following the logic of sacrifice, in return for the slaughtered offering the heavens bestow gifts, multiplying terrestrial life and transforming the scene into a blossoming flower, the recurring symbol of Baudelaire’s poetry. Lest we think this is a moment of the Apollonian poet sublimating and monumentalizing the carcass into the eternal beauty of the art object, we must recall that the aestheticization of the scene in question is inextricable from the acceleration of the process of deterioration.

Johnathan Culler notes that Poe’s influence on Baudelaire encouraged the latter to master the art of “generat[ing]...an allegorical narrative through the literalization of a phrase or figure,” and we might say that “Une Charogne” takes quite literally Poe’s sentiments about death and decay as

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<sup>202</sup> “Its legs upthrust to mock female lubricity,/Seething and sweating its pollution,/Its open belly, cynically and carelessly/Venting a gaseous corruption[.]//The sunlight burned intensely through the rottenness/As though to render it well done,/Returning thus a hundredfold Nature’s largesse/By multiplying what was one;//And God in heaven gazed upon this splendid corpse,/Luxuriating like a flower.//The horrid stench had almost felled you in the gorse,/So overwhelming was its power (*FE 67*).

the ideal topoi of poetry.<sup>203</sup> If for Poe the beautiful decaying body was the most apt metaphor for the transient apprehension of divine beauty, Baudelaire further collapses the two, such that the decaying body *is* ideal beauty. Culler identifies the prose poem “Laquelle est la vraie?” as conspicuously exhibiting Poe’s influence, and it performs quite the similar move of dragging the ideal not just to the earth, but to the scene of decay. Echoing Poe’s stories “Ligeia” and “Morella,” which depict similarly idealized women destined for the grave, the speaker recalls “*une certaine Bénédicte, qui remplissait l’atmosphère d’idéal*” (“a certain Bénédicte who filled the atmosphere with the ideal”), for whom he arranges the burial after her sudden death (FE 430/431). On the grave, at his feet, he encounters a small woman identical to his late lover, who laughs hysterically and declares “*C’est moi, la vraie Bénédicte! C’est moi, une fameuse canaille! Et pour la punition de ta folie et de ton aveuglement, tu m’aimeras telle que je suis!*” (“It is I, the true Bénédicte! It is I, a famous slut! To punish your folly and blindness, you’ll now have to love me as I am!”) (FE 430/431). The speaker resists and stomps the ground so violently that he is stuck there “*comme un loup pris au piège...pour toujours peut-être, à la fosse de l’idéal*” (“Like a wolf caught in a trap...stuck, perhaps forever, in the grave of the Ideal”) (FE 430/431). “Une Charogne” likewise depicts the degradation of the ideal, but its speaker abandons the melancholy tone Poe prescribes; indeed, the speaker perversely revels in the most disgusting elements of the rotting carcass, adopting, we might say, the demonic attitude of the false (*fausse*) ideal at the grave (*fosse*) of the real one. As Culler notes, Baudelaire “prosaicizes” Poe by literalizing the speaker’s attachment to the idealized lover in the image of him remaining “attaché” at her grave (69). In a sense, then, in “Laquelle est la vraie?” Baudelaire does to Poe’s thoughts what he does to the ideal in that prose poem as well as in “Une Charogne.”

At the center of “Une Charogne” is a sensory description of the decaying carcass that rivals the famous “Correspondences” as a paragon for the Symbolist poetics of which Baudelaire is considered the founder. While the latter traffics in mystical religious elements to effectuate its poetics of disorienting synesthesia—a temple, incense, the vague sense of harmony and infinity—the former finds the putrescence at hand to be more than sufficient:

Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride,  
D’où sortaient de noirs bataillons  
De larves, qui coulaient comme un épais liquide  
Le long de ces vivants haillons.

Tout cela descendait, montait comme une vague,  
Ou s’élançait en pétillant ;  
On eût dit que le corps, enflé d’un souffle vague,  
Vivait en se multipliant.

Et ce monde rendait une étrange musique,  
Comme l’eau courante et le vent,  
Ou le grain qu’un vanneur d’un mouvement rythmique  
Agite et tourne dans son van. (FE 66)<sup>204</sup>

<sup>203</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Baudelaire and Poe,” *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, Bd 100, 61-73; 71.

<sup>204</sup> “Flies in droves descended on that putrid belly/From whence exuded black brigades/Of larvae trickling slowly like a liquid jelly/From end to end along its shreds;//All of it heaved and fell as smoothly as the sea/And writhed and rustled in its motion;/One might surmise the corpse, breathing uncertainly,/Survived in the proliferation.//That little world was murmuring a mystic sound/Like running water on the wind/Or grain, in winnowing, that softly swirls around/In rhythm with the basket’s spin” (FE 67)

If the sun—the ideal, perhaps—had initially supplied the means by which the life is propagated, here the rotting body itself takes on that role, both multiplying the lives of the vermin infesting it and, in doing so, taking on a life of its own (“*vivait en se multipliant*”). What propagates, too, is the series of similes to describe the scene, offered in quick succession. Piled up paratactically and separated by the “or” that communicates that no one metaphor is essential, the similes nevertheless “correspond” to each other: the rise and fall of a wave (*vague*) echoes the idea of the body animated by uncertain (*vague*) breathing; the “strange music” of the sounds of running water and wind serve to describe the sound effects of the winnower just as much as they do the carcass itself. In other words, the poem’s metaphoric vehicles take on a life of their own and start to move away from the tenor of the carcass, rhetorically enacting its dissolution.

As the sketch gets sketchier, the poem supplies a metaphor that reveals to the reader that this has been an exercise in the aesthetics of transience:

Les formes s’effaçaient et n’étaient plus qu’un rêve,  
 Une ébauche lente à venir,  
 Sur la toile oubliée, et que l’artiste achève  
 Seulement par le souvenir. (*FE 67*)<sup>205</sup>

As the lines of the body dissolve, we know we are squarely in the realm of the contingent, the ephemeral, a fallen realm characterized by “*le mouvement qui déplace les lignes*,” which the allegorized Beauty of “La Beauté” held in such contempt. What has decayed, though, is not just the body, but the poem itself. Like the rotting carcass, it has transformed itself into a fleeting dream, a half-finished draft, a fuzzy memory. Baudelaire has accomplished Poe’s ideal of a poem that enacts its own transience, while also providing a perverse, ironic, even demonic example of Shelley’s “evanescent visitations of thought and feeling...always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression.” In a sense, the poem might as well end here, but instead the remaining quatrains first shift focus to a dog eyeing the carcass and then return to the framing device of apostrophe, making the famous pronouncement that the addressee will one day, too, resemble “*cette ordure...cette horrible infection*” (*FE 68*).

It is, of course, a paradox if not an impossibility to “capture” the essence of the transient, but Baudelaire has made his best attempt, intensifying the poetics of Shelley and Poe while maintaining a steadfast commitment to the material world in all its fallen irredeemability. The final lines, for all their sadistic glee, can be understood as an attempt to elide the futility of the task at hand, yet they might just as well be said to acknowledge it:

Alors, ô ma beauté ! Dites à la vermine  
 Qui vous mangera de baisers,  
 Que j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine  
 De mes amours décomposés ! (*FE 68*)<sup>206</sup>

If the rest of the poem has taught us anything, it is that the only way to “preserve” the form and divine essence of a mortal being is to enact its dissolution. This means, too, that the divinity of said

<sup>205</sup> “These shapes dissolved in dreams, grew even fainter, / Outlines showing blearily/ On a forgotten canvas, sketches by a painter/Who had worked from memory” (*FE 67*)

<sup>206</sup> Then, O my beautiful, repeat this to the worm/Whose kisses eat your face away:/ That I preserve the sacred essence and the form/Of all my loves as they decay!” (*FE 69*).

being is both inextricable and unsalvageable from its fate of material decomposition. “Une Charogne” is thus Baudelaire’s victory over the terrors of the disembodied Ideal.

This victory—of the material over the abstract, of the transient over the eternal—is also the victory of fallen nature over the heavens, and it is thus also a *defeat* precisely because of nature’s fallenness. To *épanouir* (bloom, flourish) one must also *évanouir* (faint, vanish). If there is nothing more than the natural world, there is nothing more than decay, and a theory and practice of transient beauty, though it may provide comfort, is far from able to redeem the world—and our experience of it—from decay. Baudelaire’s aesthetics of transience provide a framework in which one might notice and witness the beauty amongst the destruction of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, but they promise no more than that. The next and final section looks for something more: the possibility of an ethics in the midst of a world of unending endings and global transience. Amidst Baudelaire’s representations of the world as fallen and irredeemable, one can also identify figures of commitment, resilience, and even stewardship. To access them, however, one must confront the disturbing implications of a demystified Nature, an entity that provides no reprieve from subjectivity and no absolution for the sin of fallen humanity. In what follows, we will trace in Baudelaire’s work some encounters with Hell on earth, or, alternately, Eden as exile. For Baudelaire, “nature,” an echo-chamber, resonates with the same imperfection and indeterminacy that defines the human. It thus promises no escape for fallen humanity. The absence of such escape may be the key to ethically living—and dying—along with it.

### iii. “une nature exilée dans l’imparfait”

*The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given. Strindberg’s idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now.*

--Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”

*Et mon cœur s’effraya d’envier maint pauvre homme  
Courant avec ferveur à l’abîme béant,  
Et qui, soûlé de son sang, préférerait en somme  
La douleur à la mort et l’enfer au néant !<sup>207</sup>*

--Charles Baudelaire, “Le Jeu”

More than any other poem from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “L’Irrémédiable,” the penultimate poem in “Spleen et Idéal,” supplies the vision of Baudelaire’s fallen world. After a series of images of the fall itself—from the Ideal falling into a Stygian muck, to an Angel swept downward by a storm, to a ship mired in polar ice (an homage, no doubt, to Poe’s “MS Found in a Bottle”)—the poem’s final two quatrains succinctly describe the ontology of fallenness:

Tête-à-tête sombre et limpide  
Qu’un cœur devenu son miroir !  
Puits de Vérité, clair et noir,

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<sup>207</sup>“I’m terrified that I should envy the poor soul/Who feverishly races toward the great abyss/And who, though glutted with his blood, would, on the whole, /Prefer his pain to death and hell to nothingness.” (FE 183).

Où tremble une étoile livide,  
 Un phare ironique, infernal,  
 Flambeau des grâces sataniques,  
 Soulagement et gloire uniques,  
 --La conscience dans le Mal! (FE 150)<sup>208</sup>

One among countless mirrors in Baudelaire's poetry, the heart that becomes its own mirror captures the tension of a self that is doubled and thus as much at odds with itself as the antonyms of the first and third lines are with each other. That the Well of Truth should be both somber and bright, clear and dark is fitting given the secret it contains, which, a "Satanic grace," both saves and damns. The final revelation of that secret, "La conscience dans le Mal," is both the cause of the fall and its result, as the phrase captures the knowledge we possess *of* evil (the knowledge gained from the forbidden fruit) as well as knowledge, consciousness itself, both the result and the cause of our fallen state. To know evil is to have knowledge of the self as fallen, which is why such knowledge is damning. The ironic relief it provides is the certainty that we are stuck in a state of uncertainty, an existential rift. It is the knowledge that we will remain exiles from ourselves and the world, yet nonetheless bound to both.

Unsurprisingly, this sense of exile extends consistently to the world of nature in Baudelaire's writings. In his 1856 letter to Alphonse Toussenel railing against "la grande hérésie moderne,"—the progressivist suppression of the reality of original sin—Baudelaire declares that "Aussi la *nature* entière participe du péché original" [All of nature also participates in original sin] (BOC 919). We can sense acutely the fallenness of nature in the prose poem "Le Confitteur de l'artiste," which, as F.W. Leakey notes, "ranges over what is almost the full gamut of Baudelaire's attitudes to Nature".<sup>209</sup>

Que les fins de la journée d'automne sont pénétrantes! Ah! Pénétrantes jusqu'à la douleur ! car il est de certaines sensations délicieuses dont le vague n'exclut pas l'intensité ; et il n'est pas de pointe plus acérée que celle de l'Infini.

Grand délice que celui de noyer son regard dans l'immensité du ciel et de la mer ! Solitude, silence, incomparable chasteté de l'azur ! une petite voile frissonnante à l'horizon, et qui par sa petitesse et son isolement imite mon irrémédiable existence, mélodie monotone de la houle, toutes ces choses pensent par moi, ou je pense par elles (car dans la grandeur de la rêverie, le *moi* se perd vite !) elles pensent, dis-je, mais musicalement et pittoresquement, sans arguties, sans syllogismes, sans déductions. (FE 334-336)<sup>210</sup>

<sup>208</sup> Tête-à-tête, sombre and bright,/ A heart becoming its own mirror !/The Well of Truth, darker, clearer,/Where, trembling, glows a pale starlight,/Ironic beacon of the Devil,/Torchlight of the grace of Hell,/A glory and relief as well,/--Awareness of our state of Evil ! » (FE 151)

<sup>209</sup> F.W. Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1969), 279. Leakey's study likewise ranges "the full gamut" of Baudelaire's views on nature, tracing shifts in his opinions and inclinations across the stretch of his career as a writer. His reading of this piece in some way acts as a culminating moment in his study, and I wish to acknowledge his influence here without rehashing his analysis.

<sup>210</sup> "How chill is the close of autumn days! Ah, it penetrates to the point of pain: certain delicious sensations, although vague, are no less intense, and no point is sharper than Infinity. What a great delight, to drown one's gaze in the immensity of sky and sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chastity of the azure! A little sail trembling on the horizon, imitating by its littleness and isolation my incurable existence, monotonous melody of the waves, all these things think through me, or I through them (for in the grandeur of a reverie the *me* is

The very first lines capture all the ambiguity that unfolds in the sentences to come. The sight of the autumn sunset (two signs of melancholy in one) is exhilarating, yet painfully so. As nature becomes the symbol of infinity, it wounds in the same way that the contemplation of bad infinity might. The sky and sea are the sublime in which the speaker happily loses himself, and yet just as solitude is attained, it transforms itself into its negative, isolation, as the speaker identifies himself in the “little sail” moving on the horizon, a stain in the seascape painting. Nature thus becomes the backdrop against which the speaker stands out in his isolation: it reinforces the edges of his ego as separate, and thus we move from the “chastity” of the sea to the “irremediable” condition of his psyche. And yet in the same sentence, the speaker exclaims that “the ego loses itself quickly” in the reverie inspired by the contemplation of nature. The back-and-forth of affects and ideas is disorienting to say the least. This sense of conflicted ambiguity carries over into the theory of correspondences—familiar territory for Baudelaire—that emerges next, as it is unclear who—nature or the speaker?—is doing the thinking through whom.

If there is any solace to be found in this piece—a “Satanic grace,” perhaps—it is the consistency and certainty of the feeling at which the speaker arrives in its second half. The text moves to a description of the physical sensation the speaker feels as he encounters this ambiguity:

Toutefois, ces pensées, qu’elles sortent de moi ou s’élancent des choses, deviennent bientôt trop intenses. L’énergie dans la volupté crée un malaise et une souffrance positive. Mes nerfs trop tendus ne donnent plus que des vibrations criardes et douloureuses.

Et maintenant la profondeur du ciel me consterne ; sa limpidité m’exaspère. L’insensibilité de la mer, l’immuabilité du spectacle, me révoltent... Ah ! Faut-il éternellement souffrir, ou fuir éternellement le beau ? Nature, enchanteresse sans pitié, rivale toujours victorieuse, laisse-moi ! Cesse de tenter mes désirs et mon orgueil ! L’étude du beau est un duel où l’artiste crie de frayeur avant d’être vaincu. (*FE 336*)<sup>211</sup>

The overwhelm experienced by a mind trying to sort everything out cedes to the overstimulation of the nerves, a sensation that at least is “positive” in the face of so much equivocality. To suffer is the fate of a spirit too sensitive to the sublimity of nature, an immensity whose scale tortures the speaker. If the first half of the poem, with its dialectical twists and turns, represented the “duel” to which the artist likens his relationship to nature in the final line, the second dwells in the defeat with which the prose poem ends.

As Baudelaire sees it, the defeat of the artist may well be his duty. To be an artist means to accept the condition described as *eternal*, the scene to which he will return again and again. The artist thus comes to terms with the trouble he is bound to encounter in nature. Rather than being a reprieve or redemption from suffering, nature is revealed to be a beautiful tormentor, and the artist its willing masochist. In “L’essence du rire,” an extended meditation on the role of laughter in the

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quickly lost!); they think, as I say, but in music and in the picturesque, without arguments, without syllogisms, without deductions.” (*FE 335-227*)

<sup>211</sup> “Yet these thoughts, whether they issue from me or surge out of things, soon become too intense. The energy in voluptuousness creates malaise and actual suffering. Too taut, my nerves give off only shrill and painful vibrations. And now the sky’s depth confounds me; its clearness exasperates me. The sea’s insensibility, the immutability of its spectacle, revolt me... Ah, must we suffer eternally, or flee eternally from beauty? Nature, pitiless enchantress, forever my victorious rival, let me be! Stop tempting my desires and my pride! The study of beauty is a duel in which the artist cries out in terror before being conquered.” (*FE 337*).

fallen world of humanity, Baudelaire argues “l’artiste n’est artiste qu’à la condition d’être double et de n’ignorer aucun phénomène de sa double nature” (“the artist is only an artist on the condition of his being double and not ignoring any phenomenon arising from his double nature”) (BOC 701, translation mine). In the context of the essay, this doubleness is the sense that one is both *of* nature and *exterior* to it. For Baudelaire, the artist is by definition a figure who willingly dwells in this estrangement from the natural world, neither repressing nor avoiding it.

In the sonnet “Obsession,” which appears aptly after “Le goût du néant” near the end of “Spleen et Idéal,” Baudelaire takes up this very task for himself, meditating on the experience of dwelling in a natural world from which one is fundamentally estranged. A co-conspirator in the fall, nature too is doubled. “Obsession” deploys the echo-chamber and the mirror image as figures for expressing concretely the frustrations of living in a natural world that reflects back the poet’s own doubled state. To come to terms with nature’s betrayal—its refusal to offer a refuge from fallenness—is a painful and frightening enterprise:

Grands bois, vous m’effrayez comme des cathédrales ;  
Vous hurlez comme l’orgue ; et dans nos cœurs maudits,  
Chambres d’éternel deuil où vibrant de vieux râles,  
Répondent les échos de vos *De Profundis*.

Je te hais, Océan ! Tes bonds et tes tumultes,  
Mon esprit les retrouve en lui ; ce rire amer  
De l’homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d’insultes,  
Je l’entends dans le rire énorme de la mer.

Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit ! sans ces étoiles  
Dont la lumière parle un langage connu !  
Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu !

Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles  
Où vivent, jaillissant de mon œil par milliers,  
Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.<sup>212</sup>

Paul de Man’s now-canonical reading of the poem provides us a conceptual framework for understanding the poem, while providing some fruitful opportunities for disagreement. De Man’s reading hinges on interpreting “Obsession” as the specular other of “Correspondances.” Put simply, for de Man “Obsession” deals with the same poetic and philosophical issues as “Correspondances,” but the latter raises a challenge to “metaphor[s] aspiring to transcendental totality” through its destabilizing tropological play, while “Obsession” relies on the stability of its central analogy: the

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<sup>212</sup> You great woods, like a leaved cathedral, frighten me;/You bellow like an organ; in our cursed breasts/Are chambers filled with pain where rales of agony/Reverberate your *De Profundis* anapests.//I hate you, Ocean! Hate your tumble and your tumult,/My spirit knows them well; the cold hilarity/of vanquished men, the hidden weeping and the insult,/I hear them in the boisterous laughter from the sea.//How would you gladden me, O night! Without those stars/Whose light speaks in a language so well understood!/ Instead, I seek the black, the vacant,, and the nude!//Upon the empty canvas of the void appears,/Projected from my eye, many a vanquished face;/And each one stares at me with a familiar gaze. (FE 143).



anthropomorphism of nature.<sup>213</sup> De Man holds that “Correspondances” deserves its title as the inauguration of Symbolism, while “Obsession,” despite having been published after the latter in the second edition of *Fleurs du Mal*, is a perfect example of the Romantic lyric as de Man understands it. “Obsession” exhibits a “funereal monumentality,” relying on “the recuperative power of the subject metaphor” to react with subjective emotion to the unsettling implications of the system of relational and differentiated signification elaborated in “Correspondances” (“AT” 259, 257). The openness of the chain of sensory associations evoked in “Correspondances” is met in “Obsession” with “the enclosed space that, like the sound chamber of a violin, produces the inner vibration of emotion” (“AT” 256). De Man thus reads “Obsession” thematically as the interiorization of “Correspondances, and as “the negation of the positivity of an outside reality” (“AT” 257). As a buffer against the contingency of the historical and the phenomenal, “Obsession” constructs a coherent voice that revels in its own emotion, “[its] pathos of terror stat[ing] in fact the desired consciousness of eternity and of temporal harmony as voice and as song” (“AT” 262).

Far be it from de Man to explicitly assign value to one poem over the other, yet both his rendering of Symbolism as a literary precursor to deconstructive criticism and his interpretation of “Obsession” (and of Romantic “lyric” generally) as a kind of reaction formation to “external reality” imply that there is progress in the movement from Romanticism to Symbolism. In making that judgment, de Man’s reading overlooks the manifest content of “Obsession,” which deals explicitly with the displacement and decentering of the lyric subject he claims it is monumentalizing. The central figure shaping the first two quatrains is that of an echo-chamber in which the source and locus of “voice” is called into question. Both quatrains are constructed around a semicolon in the second line; on either side, a sound and its echo are described in a manner that raises doubts as to which is which.

Dismissing it as a “traditional” association, de Man passes quickly over Baudelaire’s reference to *Le Génie du Christianisme*, yet this reference is essential to an understanding of the first quatrain. The anthropomorphic comparison of nature to a cathedral is the mirror image of Chateaubriand’s theory that gothic cathedrals mimic forests (itself a reference no doubt to Milton’s notion that Edenic nature takes the sheltering form of a man-made place of worship).<sup>214</sup> This resonates with the first quatrain’s likening of the heart to a place where the “*vieux râles*” of the forest vibrate, the latter looped back into anthropomorphism with the comparison to the *De Profundis* of the church. In this *mise en abyme* of likenesses, sylvan nature is like a cathedral, a cathedral mimics sylvan nature, and we too are the cathedrals in which nature’s mournful hymns redound. There is no exit from this cathedral of correspondent simulacra. Baudelaire’s anthropomorphism is thus not stabilizing as de Man would have it, but rather the opposite, as the status of nature as authentic and originary is here thrown into question as much as it is in the *Éloge du maquillage* in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*.

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<sup>213</sup> Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 239-262; 250. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as “AT.”

<sup>214</sup> “Les forêts des Gaules ont passé à leur tour dans les temples de nos pères, et nos bois de chêne ont ainsi maintenu leur origine sacrée. Ces voûtes ciselées en feuillages, ces jambages qui appuient les murs et finissent brusquement comme des troncs brisés, la fraîcheur des voûtes, les ténèbres du sanctuaire, les ailes obscures, les passages secrets, les portes abaissées, tout retrace les labyrinthes des bois dans l’église gothique ; tout en fait sentir la religieuse horreur, les mystères et la divinité... L’architecte chrétien, non content de bâtir des forêts, a voulu, pour ainsi dire, en imiter les murmures, et, au moyen de l’orgue et du bronze suspendu, il a attaché au temple gothique jusqu’au bruit des vents et des tonnerres, qui roule dans la profondeur des bois. » François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme* (Paris : Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), 401.

Baudelaire's use of this well-worn Romantic analogy, far from being a poetic shortcoming on his part, is an example of the allegorical denaturalization of nature for which Walter Benjamin greatly admired him. In his unfinished work on Baudelaire as allegorist, Benjamin writes of "the destruction of organic contexts in the allegorical intention" of Baudelaire's poetry, concluding that "the dissolution of semblance (*die Scheinlosigkeit*) and the decay of the aura are identical phenomena. Baudelaire places the artistic device of allegory in their service."<sup>215</sup> For Benjamin, the auratic function in nature (as in art) is the human gaze returned, such that both are affirmed as authentically alive. "Obsession," meanwhile, stages the return first of a sound and then of a gaze, neither of which confirms that nature *or* the human is anything more than the projection of the other. In the first two lines of the second quatrain, the speaker "finds again" (*retrouver*) the sounds of the ocean, already a disconcerting occurrence and instance of the internalization De Man emphasizes. The second half of the quatrain, however, reveal that the sounds of the ocean had already contained the cries of vanquished man—a revelation formally echoed by the return of "*rire amer*" as "*rire de la mer*" in the final line of the quatrain. If, following de Man, the poem has so internalized the world of nature as to negate its positivity, we must note that it also turns the glove inside out and does just the opposite, revealing subjective interiority to be merely the invagination of the external world.

This move abounds in Baudelaire's poetry, notably in the "Spleen" poem already mentioned above (see also "L'Héautontimoroumenos" and "Le Mauvais Moine"), in which the lyric voice fancies itself an old boudoir, the repository for a multitude of lifeless, discarded objects. Referring to that poem's rendering of "subjectivity as a junkyard," Leo Bersani claims that it demonstrates Baudelaire's "experien[ce of] a certain indistinctness in the boundaries between external reality and the internal world of the subject."<sup>216</sup> The boudoir contains freshly outmoded works of art, akin to "Obsession's" use of a tired Romantic cliché. Baudelaire models Benjamin's baroque allegorist when he traffics in such obsolescence, for doing so exhibits precisely the transience Baudelaire associates with modernity in art. Applying the cathedral metaphor thus *denaturalizes* this convention, exposing it as a contingency of history and convention, indeed enacting the "decay of the aura": both nature and humanity are rendered transitory, neither a solid anchoring point for the other.

Putting aside de Man's notion that the anthropomorphism of the poem attempts to confer some integrity on the human subject, the poem can instead be understood as the use of anthropomorphism to stage a transient world in which nature and human history mutually erode. This is the realm of Benjamin's *natural history*, and it is also, of course, Baudelaire's conception of a fallen world. I would like to suggest that we read the sonnet's sestet as coming to terms with the implication that this fallen world is the only world we get. This realization is signaled affectively by the contrast in punctuation between the two tercets: the exclamatory fervor of the first tercet, with its wish that things might be otherwise, is met in the second with calm resignation. In this sense, "Obsession" can be read as a rewriting of "Le *Confiteur* de l'artiste, with its shift toward the painful acceptance that "*L'étude du beau est un duel où l'artiste crie de frayeur avant d'être vaincu.*" If the "*langage connu*" and "*regards familiers*" represent the dark and claustrophobic implications of the theory of correspondences articulated in the poem of the same name—and here de Man's reading is especially convincing—the tercet reveals there is no other choice but to live with and through those implications. In an ecocritical framework, this means understanding that "nature" will never be as alien nor as familiar as we might hope. If it is indeed our reflection, it returns our gaze by looking straight through us, meeting our projective identifications with a destabilizing and estranging distortion of identity. If, instead, we address it as a great beyond, the non-identity that offers some

<sup>215</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006), 148.

<sup>216</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 78.

promise of escape from our own fallenness—“*le vide, le noir, et le nu*”—we receive instead the very image of that fallenness, the reflection in all its familiarity. In this instance, even shadows become a canvas on which we paint an artwork bound to become cliché.

“*Le vide, le noir, et le nu*,” of course, is yet another version of the nihilism promised in the apocalyptic fantasies of Poe, the death longed for by the speaker of “Le Goût du néant” and “Le rêve d’un curieux.” Baudelaire provides us with the choice of indulging in the dream of non-existence, but it is clear he holds this option to be unadmirable. At the end of “Le Jeu,” while watching gamblers and prostitutes indulging shamelessly in their sins, the speaker proclaims, with both wonder and horror:

Et mon cœur s’effraya d’envier maint pauvre homme  
Courant avec ferveur à l’abîme béant,  
Et qui, souûl de son sang, préférerait en somme  
La douleur à la mort et l’enfer au néant ! (FE 182)<sup>217</sup>

Benjamin Fondane’s gloss on these lines captures the existential realism it might take to live on in a world under erasure, a veritable hell on earth:

Il n’est énorme pouvoir que celui du néant ! Mais Baudelaire a beau aspirer à ce pouvoir seul compatible, selon les sages, avec la dignité de l’homme, il préfère, malgré qu’il en ait, la douleur à la mort et l’enfer, au néant. Il préfère le samsara au nirvana, persuade qu’il est, bêtement, que le sensible est le lieu des révélations et des mystères, et que s’il y avait, jamais, un dieu qui s’intéressât à l’homme, c’est de la vie et non du néant qu’il engendrerait la perfection... Dieu n’existe pas, peut-être, mais l’enfer existe, certainement ; nous *sommes* en enfer. Donc l’enfer *est* quelque chose, on peut s’y accrocher, espérer ! Que peut-on espérer du néant? ...Ce n’est que dans l’Enfer que Baudelaire sent encore une promesse de la présence de Dieu. (245)<sup>218</sup>

In the last section, we explored precisely this stubborn commitment to the domain of *le sensible* (the sensory, the phenomenal), the transitory plane of existence, the realm of the (rotting) flesh, or in Fondane’s apt comparison, *samsara*. Another name for this terrain is, of course, *la nature*.

Baudelaire’s commitment to the world of transience grounds not only his aesthetics, but also his ethics. In his reading of Baudelaire alongside Cioran, Joseph Acquisto theorizes an “asoteriological ethics” through which one can “move from the low point of despair..., which permeates all aspects of existence and is irreversible, to the possibility of carrying on living,” that is,

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<sup>217</sup>“I’m terrified that I should envy the poor soul/Who feverishly races toward the great abyss/And who, though glutted with his blood, would, on the whole, /Prefer his pain to death and hell to nothingness.” (FE 183).

<sup>218</sup> Benjamin Fondane, *Baudelaire et l’expérience du gouffre* (Paris: Éditions complexe, 1994), 245. “There is no power as enormous as that of nothingness! But as much as Baudelaire aspires to the one power reconcilable, according to the sages, with the dignity of man, he prefers, despite having this power, pain to death and hell, to nothingness. He prefers samsara to nirvana, persuaded as he is, doggedly, that the phenomenal is the site of revelations and mysteries, and that if there were to ever be a God who takes interest in man, it is from life not from nothingness that he would bring perfection into being... Perhaps God does not exist, but hell exists, certainly: we *are* in Hell. Thus, hell *is* something, one can hold onto it and hope. What can one hope for from nothingness?... It is only in Hell that Baudelaire still feels the promise of the presence of God.” Translation mine.

“an ethics that emerges from nihilism but remains within that nihilism rather than transcending it, finding within it the basis for an *art de vivre*” (171, 173). Acquisto explores these ethical reflections primarily in Baudelaire’s prose poems, which he sees as testing grounds for an ethics without God: their speakers encounter the other without recourse to a greater theological or interpretive framework. The other remains, however, a *human* other in Acquisto’s study, while this chapter has sought to explore an ethics addressed to non-human nature in a similarly atheological landscape.

Towards an atheological and asoteriological environmental ethics, we can turn in closing to a poem and a series of images that figure quite strikingly the act of living on and staying with the trouble. Collected (along with “Le Jeu”) in “Tableaux Parisiens” in the 1860 editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “Le Squelette Laboureur” captures the grim realism we have limned thus far in Baudelaire’s work, while also providing an image of determination through suffering. The poem recounts the speaker coming across an anatomical drawing—most likely from Andreas Vesalius’s *De humanis corporis fabrica* (1543) (See **Figure 1**)—in which a skeleton, seemingly pausing from work, leans on a spade and assumes a posture expressing exhaustion, despair, world-weariness. In an apostrophe filled with both wonder and horror, the speaker inquires:

Dites, quelle moisson étrange,  
Forçats arrachés au charnier,  
Tirez-vous, et de quel fermier  
Avez-vous à remplir la grange ?

Voulez-vous (d’un destin trop dur  
Épouvantable et clair emblème !)  
Montrer que dans la fosse même  
Le sommeil promis n’est pas sûr ;

Qu’envers nous le Néant est traître ;  
Que tout, même la Mort, nous ment,  
Et que sempiternellement,  
Hélas ! Il nous faudra peut-être

Dans quelque pays inconnu  
Écorcher la terre revêche  
Et pousser une lourde bêche  
Sous notre pied sanglant et nu ? (*FE* 179)<sup>219</sup>

As this chapter has shown, the answer to the rhetorical questions posed in the last three quatrains is undoubtedly YES. As in Poe’s “Monos and Una,” individual death does not provide solace, certainty, or a reprieve from restlessness. Like the speaker of “Le Rêve d’un curieux,” *le néant* never arrives for the skeleton. Instead, it is condemned to live on in exile in “*quelque pays inconnu*”—a country no different from that of the living in its estrangement from humanity. Yet perhaps we

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<sup>219</sup> “Confess, what strange crop do you garner,/You convicts salvaged from your graves/And, having filled his barn, sad slaves,/Confess to us: who is the farmer?//Is it your wish (appalling token/Of destiny’s deceitfulness!)/To show that even promises/Of sleep within the grave are broken,//That Nothingness is treachery,/That all things, even Death’s a lie,/And that, alas! Both you and I,/Perhaps through all eternity,//Must labor in some unknown spot,/Flaying an irritable soil,/Driving a spade with heavy toil/Beneath a naked, bloody foot?” (*FE* 179).

might read in the final quatrain the terrified admiration we saw in “Le Jeu,” or at least the grim acceptance of fate we saw in “Le *Confiteor* de l’artiste” and “Obsession.”

Regarding the question posed in the first quatrain about the strange crop harvested by this skeleton, we can find an answer in Baudelaire’s vision for the frontispiece of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In a letter to Nadar, Baudelaire recounts his newfound fascination with the beauty of anatomical drawings and illustrations of the *danse macabre*—a fixation which inspired many of the new poems in “Tableaux Parisiens”—and attributes his vision for the frontispiece to a sixteenth-century engraving he came across in Eustache Hyacinth Langlois’ *l’Essai historique, philosophique et pittoresque sur les danses des morts* (see **Figure 2** below).<sup>220</sup> The image depicts the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as an arborescent skeleton harboring the serpent, who offers the forbidden fruit to Eve. The engraving, with its rendering of nature itself conspiring in the fall of humanity into sin and mortality, is transformed into a dark and glorious dream in Félix Bracquemond’s draft of the frontispiece according to Baudelaire’s specifications (see **Figure 3**). In place of Adam and Eve, seven flowers of evil, evoking the seven deadly sins, stretch upward to meet the skeletal tree, whose arms stretch outward and upward beyond the frame as if to summon the *moisson étrange* below. The elongating effect of the composition suggests a kind of victory through verticality, a beauty arising from the ground of an exilic Eden. The image condenses the posthumous labor of the anatomical skeleton and the postlapsarian fate of Adam and Eve, condemned, too, to labor upon *quelque pays inconnu*. The flowers of evil, the fruits of *Ennui*, arise not in spite of but *because of* the fall. To enjoy them, however, one must tend to one’s garden, however death-bound it is, and however troubling and eternal that task may be.

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<sup>220</sup> See Antoine Compagnon et. al., *L’Oeil de Baudelaire* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2016), 87-91.

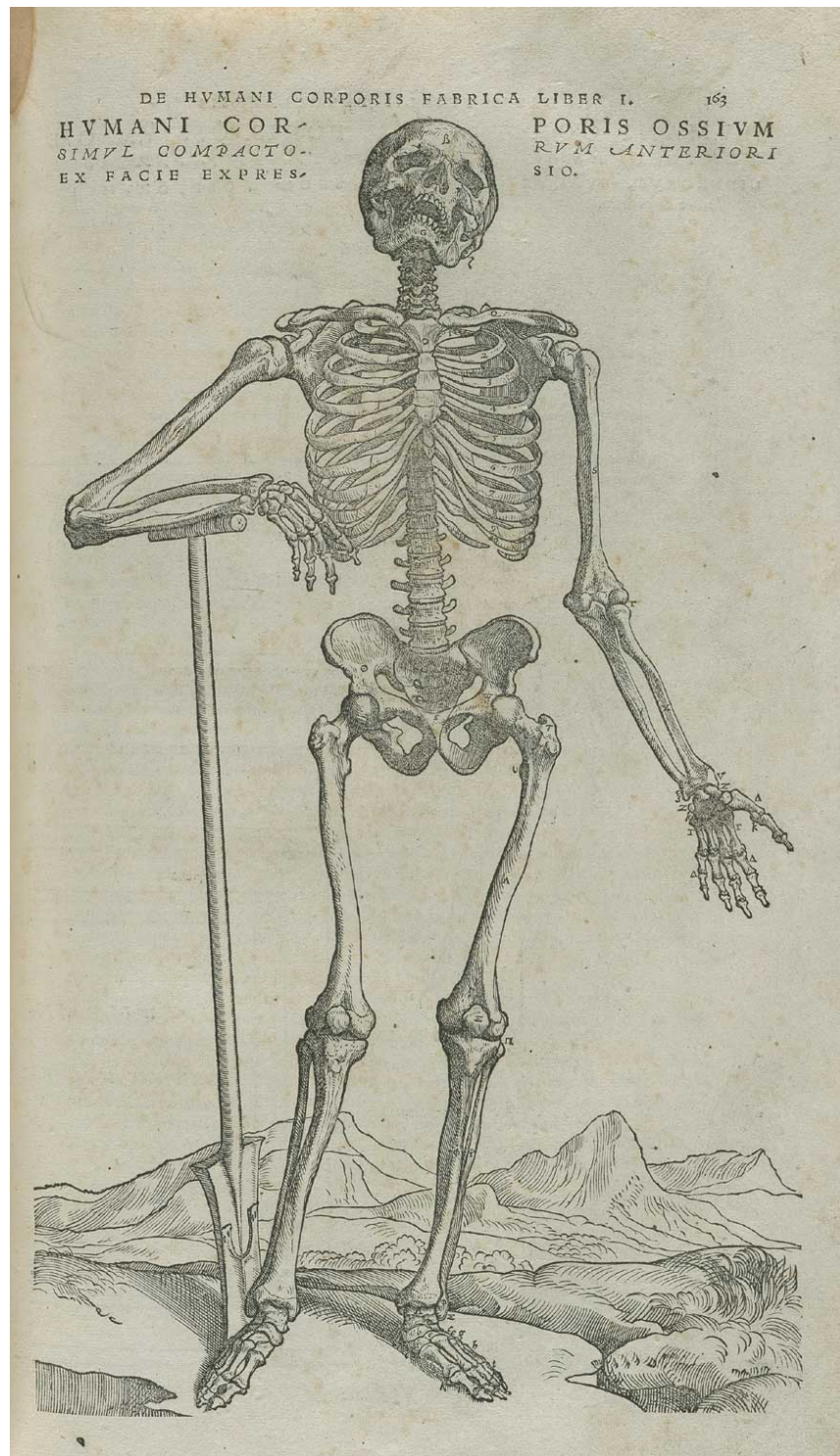


Figure 1: from Andreas Vesalius, *De humanis corporis fabrica* (1543)



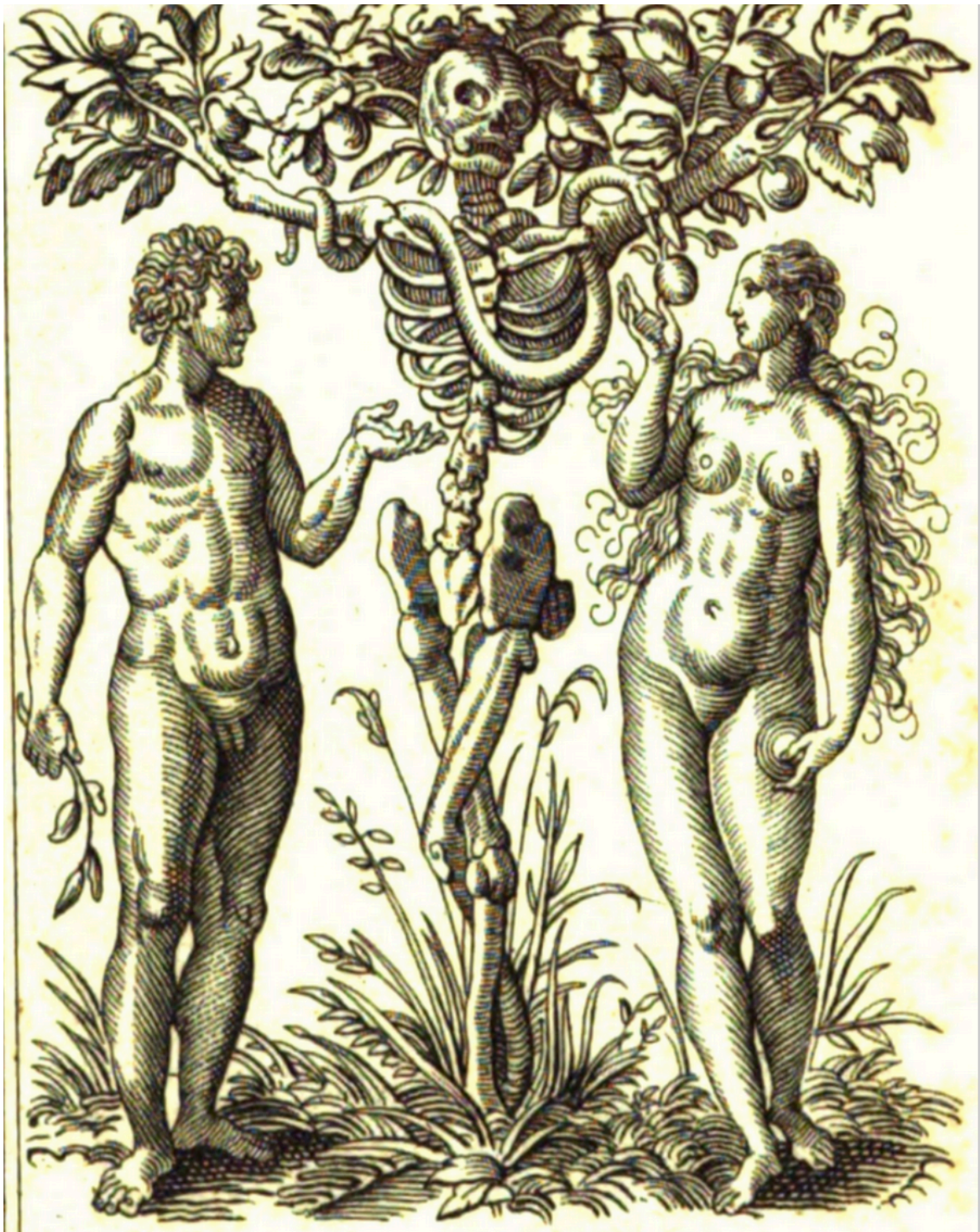


Figure 2: Detail from Eustache-Hyacinthe Langlois, *Essai historique, philosophique et pittoresque sur les danses des morts*, vol. 2 (1851)





Figure 3: Félix Bracquemond,  
Unfinished draft of the frontispiece  
for the second edition of *Les Fleurs  
du Mal* (1860)



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