Keeping Watch:
Wartime Attention and the Poetics of Alarm around 1800

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2011

Abstract

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This dissertation identifies in British Romanticism a poetics of heightened attention inseparable from wartime vigilance. This poetics criticizes the political alarmism of the Romantic period, yet also maintains an unexpected proximity to the forms of apprehension and vulnerability prompted by war, as well as to the uncertain epistemology and phenomenology of wartime experience. Instead of resisting the militarization of attention in the 1790s with an aesthetics of distraction, the Romantic texts studied here propose an alternative form of attention, one more receptive than defensive, aiming to decouple alarm from fear. Aesthetic experience emerges as a mode of keeping watch that, while indebted to wartime concerns about security and susceptibility, refuses to predetermine the object of its watch. Attention thus designates a critical site at which history, ethics, and aesthetics intersect. The first chapter investigates Wordsworth's observation that new perceptions arrive only when the "organs of attention" relax; it finds in *The Prelude* the promise that both poetic and historical perceptions may be produced through the rhythms of attention built into verse form. The second chapter considers the relation between sound, war, and alarmism in Cowper's "The Needless Alarm" and Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude," and suggests that both poems resist alarmism by widening the gap between sound and signification, while distinguishing poetic from political uses of "empty sounds." In the third chapter, I read Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head" as a response to the characterization of France as England's "natural enemy." Attuned to the intersections of national security, wartime perception, and nature's history, Smith refigures the more militant coastal prospect poem by turning to the geological history of the coast; this view reveals instead a natural topography that linked England to France, rather than dividing the two nations in a "natural" enmity. The fourth chapter suggests that Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Austen's *Northanger Abbey* understand alarm as a form of subjection. It explores both novelists' use of the Gothic genre to ask how alarm functions as a pretext for the expansion of power. The coda finds in the twenty first century an afterlife for Romanticism's wartime poetics of attention.

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Acknowledgements

I could not have written this dissertation without the unbelievable support, encouragement, generosity, and wisdom of my brilliant advisers, Kevis Goodman and Steven Goldsmith. Kevis gave a truly rare combination of rigor, care, and generosity; her feedback on drafts and revisions was the most challenging I've received, but it was always accompanied by the belief that I could meet those challenges. I owe so much of the thought here to her teaching, advising, and to her own scholarship, the echoes of which are present throughout this project. Steve has been a generous, thoughtful mentor, telling me at the perfect moment that he would read any draft, no matter how unfinished, and then doing it without judgment or doubt. I have often left his office in awe at how much of his time and energy he has offered and at the lucidity of his insights. As I reread this dissertation, I see the marks both of them have left on every page, and I feel incredibly lucky to have found them as teachers, mentors, and friends. Judith Butler and Anne-Lise François have had more impact on this project than they may realize, through their thoughtful feedback and through the tremendous influence of their own writing. Judith has supported my work since the beginning of graduate school; I trace the beginnings of this dissertation to early seminar papers I wrote for her about attention in Celan, Benjamin, and Kafka. I am very grateful for her kind encouragement over the years and her generous interest in this work. Anne-Lise François's responses to these pages have been inspiring and startling in their brilliance, and I am thankful for her openness to my work.

I have been very lucky to find a group of graduate students in the Comparative Literature department at Berkeley who so seamlessly combine humor and fun with intellectual study. I am grateful for the study sessions and the dance parties and everything that came in between to Gabrielle Demeestere, Paul Haacke, Seth Kimmel, Tom McEnaney, and Tristram Wolff. Particular thanks to Katrina Dodson, for sharing her lucky Odradek with us all, and to Amanda Jo Goldstein, a dear partner in Romanticism/midwife to all sorts of apocalyptic babies. Andrea Gadberry and David Simon have helped me write countless applications and abstracts; I don't know what I'm going to do without Andrea's sharp nose for puns and David's caring nonchalance nearby.

I would like to thank the members of Kevis Goodman's dissertation group for their insightful comments on my chapters on Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith. Mary Favret and Noah Heringman also read sections of this project and provided helpful new perspectives. The faculty at the Language & Thinking Program at Bard College have been a wonderful source of inspiration and support, reminding me to take risks in my teaching and writing. And I would never have gone to graduate school without early encouragement from a number of Bard faculty, particularly Thomas Keenan and Marina van Zuylen; more recently, Nancy Leonard generously read parts of this project and offered kind support.

For financial support I am thankful to the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities and the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley.

I'd like to thank my loving family - Laura Gurton, Alan Greenhalgh, Gary Wachter, Carol Ott, and Anna Gurton-Wachter; each has provided support, understanding, and encouragement over the years, even when they thought the process might never end. Ahndraya Parlato has been a devoted friend always ready to help and listen. In recalling all of this incredible luck, I feel luckiest to have found Andrew Leland, who I met when this project seemed impossible to finish and who has lightened the weight of writing by making everything funnier and happier, and by giving me a future to get newly excited about every day.

I. On the Militarization of Attention

> Well may it sort that this portentous figure
> Comes armèd through our watch so like the king
> That was and is the question of these wars.
>
> - Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

> It requires no ghost from the grave, Gentlemen, to point out to you the mode by which they can invade us; you know it already, the whole country expect it, and are well acquainted with the method by which they intent [sic] to bring their troops, over to our shores.
>
> - Colonel George Hanger, *Reflections on the Menaced Invasion* (1804)

The 1790s and the following decade brought to England an increased militarization joined with a pervasive demand to keep watch, in response to wartime threats of a French invasion. The figure of keeping watch became a promise and a problem at the turn of the nineteenth century, as both political and aesthetic texts began to investigate how and what we watch, when we *keep* watch. For keeping watch entails a form of perception and attention particular to wartime and its aftermath. As the lines I cite above from *Hamlet* suggest, a concern for how we keep watch joins the realms of security and susceptibility, bringing together questions of war with those of phenomenology and epistemology. "The epistemology of modern wartime," writes Mary Favret in her recent study of Romanticism and distant war, "is an epistemology of mediation" (*Distance* 12). How do we know what to watch for, if it has not yet arrived? How do we know what to protect, if it has yet to be threatened? "You know it already," insists Colonel George Hanger, in his 1804 *Reflections on the Menaced Invasion* (the title of which refers to the anticipated invasion of England by Napoleonic French forces), proposing an epistemology of war that, unlike *Hamlet,* "requires no ghost from the grave," and a model of keeping watch exclusively focused on imagining the arrival of an enemy. I'd like to suggest that literary texts of the Romantic period investigate the posture of keeping watch, its promise and its problems, in order to critique newly militarized forms of attention, alarm, and watchfulness while proposing alternative epistemologies and phenomenologies of war.

The posture of keeping watch in waiting became particularly vexed as military demands to heighten the nation's attention and anticipate the arrival of the enemy proliferated along with the rise in wartime invasion scares. The Earl of Mornington, in his address of thanks to the House of Commons in 1794, compares the English predicament to the personification of Milton's Chaos, who is "compelled to keep perpetual watch upon his frontier, endeavouring, if he can, to preserve the remnants of his anarchy from invasion" (*Parliamentary History* 1209). Three years later, in February 1797, the vigilance was newly heightened by the alarm caused when 1,200 French soldiers landed on the Pembrokeshire coast near Fishguard (Roe 144). At this point, Havilland Le Mesurier, in his *Thoughts on a French invasion, with reference to the probability of its success, and the proper means of resisting it* (1798), declared: "The menace of a French invasion, which formerly afforded a subject for ridicule, cannot now be treated in so light a manner" (qtd. in Roe 144). According to Nicholas Roe, 1797 marked the date when "the ridiculous became reality, and the French landing was no less

alarming because of the small numbers involved, the swiftness of their surrender, and the discovery that the soldiers were mostly convicts" (144).[1] Historians H.F.B. Wheeler and A.M. Broadly refer to these years at the "Great Terror" (I: 104).

Six years later in 1803 – the end of the Peace of Amiens and the start of a new wave of invasion scares, caused by Napoleon's establishment of a series of camps along the channel coast (which remained until 1805) – one newspaper declared that "an extraordinary military enthusiasm has seized the country" (qtd. in Pedley) and a broadside claimed that "the alertness of our People, employed in the several Yards along the Coasts, never had a parallel" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 131).[2] It is this combination of military enthusiasm and unparalleled alertness that I am interested in – the way militarization extends to the mind's alertness and attention, and to everyday forms of watching. For the daily anticipation of an impending French invasion prompted a ubiquitous sense of alarm and a persistent demand for a heightened and watchful attention, a call expressed by one broadside in 1803, entitled "Union and Watchfulness, Britain's true and only security," as the direct claim that "it is the security of a State always to be watchful" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 131).[3]

The persistent demand to keep watch during this period prompted what I'd like to call a militarization of attention, a standardization of movement and gesture which attempted to render attention a faculty that soldiers could control and maintain in unison. This marks a shift in how people thought about paying attention from the realms of psychology and physiology to politics and the military. *The Oxford English Dictionary* finds the first written indication of "Attention!" as a military command in the publication in 1792 of the first official military field manual published by the British War Office: *Rules and regulations for the formations, field-exercise, and movements, of His Majesty's Forces.* "Attention," def. 5a). This text marks the first public, written attempt to regulate and systematize the movements, postures, and exercises of the British army, preparing forces for, according to William Fawcett's introduction, "the exact uniformity required in all movements" (2). "On the word *Attention,*" the manual instructs, "the hands are to fall smartly down the outside of the thigh; the right heel to be brought up in a line with the left; and the proper unconstrained position of a soldier immediately resumed" (8). The importance of this attempt to control and harness the attention in the regulation of military movements and postures should not be underestimated. According to one correspondent to the *Royal Military Chronicle*: "almost everything depends on the perfect attention and recollection of twenty-four pivot men…" (qtd. in Muir 133). And the *Rules and Regulations* manual aims to manage the attention throughout the text, asserting that "the chief attention required from the soldier, when in the ranks, and under arms, is his keeping his shoulders and body constantly square; his head to the front; and his eyes on glance to the point of dressing," and demanding that "the marching, halting, and general attentions of a battalion, when moving in line, are to be governed by its own center" (7, 6). While the attention and concentration had doubtless previously been essential to military movement, the Romantic period witnessed an explicit attempt to discuss, regulate, and make uniform the attention for secular and military purposes which might

[1] For an account of the intended plans for this particular invasion, which were published in England in 1798, see Hoche's *Authentic copies of the instructions given by Gen. Hoche to Colonel Tate, previous to his landing on the coast of South Wales, in the beginning of 1797.* According to this text, the goal of the invasion was the destruction of Bristol, which would "prepare and facilitate the way for a descent, by distracting the attention of the English government" (9).

[2] On Napoleon's invasion plans, see Watson 92.

[3] On the pervasiveness of the fears of invasion and the way that "daily life for most people would have been punctuated with reminders of the threat of invasion and the need for public vigilance and support," see Mark Philp's "Introduction: The British Response to the Threat of Invasion, 1797-1815" in *Resisting Napoleon.*

not have been possible prior to corresponding Enlightenment attempts to harness and manage the attention in areas such as psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, and other sciences of the mind.[4]

The proximity and, at times, indistinguishability between attention and waiting – revealed in attention's tie to the French verb *attendre,* to wait – is also central to the military context: for, as Mary Favret reminds us, "the conduct of warfare in the age of Napoleon consisted primarily of waiting" (*War at a Distance* 75). In his 1832 text *On War,* Carl von Clausewitz confirms this paradoxical military passivity in the age of Napoleon and beyond, explaining that: "*immobility* and *inactivity* are the normal *state* of armies in war, and *action* is the *exception*" (254). And Walter Benjamin, reading a history of the French language, notes "*Faire droguer,* in the sense of *faire attendre,* 'to keep waiting,' belongs to the argot of the armies of the Revolution and of the Empire" (*Arcades* 110). Indeed, the passive yet difficult acts of waiting and keeping watch were central to British military strategies preoccupied with preparing for and anticipating a French invasion, strategies driven by the pervasive anxiety, raised in another broadside, that "nothing can be more difficult than to place an adequate defense on every part of an extensive coast" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 143). This striking inactivity of war – what Favret calls the Romantic-era "meantime of war" – suggests that soldiers had the experience not only of waiting *for* war to happen or arrive, but also that waiting was itself a wartime experience, an actively passive form of military experience and action.[5]

The claims made on the attention by war-time anxieties extended beyond military postures and positions to the everyday attention of British civilians. A pamphlet by Francis Wollaston in 1799 called *The origin and insidious arts of Jacobinism: a warning to the people of England* began with the simple, but powerful command: "What I say unto YOU, I say unto ALL: WATCH" (1). After the failure of the treaty of Amiens in 1803, broadsides warning the British of a French invasion asked for the contribution of all civilians' national loyalism, weapons, and – central to a consideration of attention in the period – their senses, asking everyone to "strain every nerve in defense of our native land," and thereby to "become half soldiers" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 38, 34). Alarmist broadsides often linked national security with a communal and constant watchfulness that exposed and enhanced one's "sense of danger," asking, with reference to the potential invasion, "How…are we to avert such horrors?" and responding with the imperative: "by feeling the full extent of your danger" (ibid. 33). These texts directly linked the security of the state to its inhabitants' nerves, senses, and forms

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[4] On the proliferation of studies of "attention" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture,* Michael Hagner's "Toward a History of Attention in Science and Culture," and Gary Hatfield's "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology." I return to this topic more extensively in chapter one, where I discuss Wordsworth's poetics of attention.

[5] Coleridge makes the passivity of paying attention explicit in a note to an introductory aphorism in *Aids to Reflection,* where he makes the following distinction: "In ATTENTION, we keep the mind *passive.* In THOUGHT, we rouse it into activity. In the former, we submit to an impression – we keep the mind steady in order to *receive* the stamp. In the latter, we seek to *imitate* the artist, while we ourselves make a copy or duplicate of his work" *(Aids to Reflection,* note to Introductory Aphorism VIII). In his *Logic,* he uses the same distinction between passive attention and active thought to divide the human from "brute creation," writing of human attention: "We hesitate…in naming it an act of attention, the word 'act' being here contradistinguished from the results of any mere passive sensation or impression. Still less are we entitled to *conclude,* however much in the case of certain animals we may be inclined to *conjecture,* that this attention exists in connection with any process of thought. Consequently we cannot name it an act of the understanding. This remains exclusively appropriate to the human faculty" (*Collected Work* 13: 60). Coleridge's insistence on separating attention from "any process of thought" and his hesitation even to call attention an "act" makes clear his difference from an eighteenth century thinker like Thomas Reid, who claims: "Attention is a voluntary act; it requires an active exertion to begin and to continue it, and it may be continued as long as we will" (Reid 42).

of attention, as though a communal feeling of safety or anaesthesia to danger itself would cause the nation's political and military vulnerabilities, and as though indulging the feeling of alarm and fear - "that rational sense of danger" – might do some good (*The Alarmist* viii). Coleridge's enigmatic aim to "excite in every part of the British empire, THE SENSE OF DANGER, WITHOUT THE FEELING OF FEAR" reveals the urgent though confused demands on the senses during the period (*Essays on his Times* 423). The emphasis throughout these pamphlets on feeling and the senses reveals a militarization that moves beyond the body's physical postures and positions and aims to control its affect, its feeling, and its senses. This aspect of the period confirms and anticipates the wartime strategy Judith Butler describes in her recent *Frames of War*: "War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others" (51-2).

The demand for watchfulness was not limited to an anticipation of the French; the watch was also turned inward, toward suspicious figures at home. One letter to a volunteer corps in 1793 asked for a more general, pervasive watchfulness, "to prevent the Contagion from becoming infectious":

> It is hoped there may be no need of the following recommendation, but if unhappily there should be such a CREATURE near you as a Being of *Suspicious* character - a WRETCH who would *plunder his Friend or betray his Country*, you are particularly requested to mark that man, and to communicate to us the *grounds* of your suspicions. We solemnly engage not to disclose any confidence you may do us the honour to place in us - but as we deem a treacherous friend to be infinitely more dangerous than an avowed foe, it will be our endeavour, as it is our duty, to watch with a scrutinizing and jealous eye the movements of those whose minds are so miserably depraved, and if we cannot reclaim them by argument, we will spare no means that may seem to have a tendency to frustrate their malevolent intentions, and to prevent the Contagion from becoming infectious. (Ashcroft 69)

And yet, despite a real fear and constant state of panic, some civilians admitted that this constant sense of danger might be as difficult as, if not more difficult than, the anticipated event itself.[6] In a letter to her son, a contemporary onlooker, Teresa Ann Cholmeley, writes:

> You seem to be amusing yourself without the smallest idea of the alarm and danger of the times in which if it continues all must expect to take their share, and if Bonaparte does not invade this country (which I must apprehend he really will) before winter, he will at least keep us in a state of preparation which for expence and anxiety will be nearly as bad as invasion itself. (ibid. 70)

This "state of preparation" made enormous demands on the senses. Hannah More also gestures to this militarization of the senses in her account of how an excess of the feeling of danger manipulates and alters the imagination. In a pamphlet published in the form of a letter addressed to a woman whose sense of danger seems to exceed reason, More writes:

> I was in hopes too of hearing that you were in your usual cheerful spirits, but your girls tell me, you have long been quite miserable from your fears of the French. Mary

[6] Mary Favret reads Wordsworth's poem "Anticipation: October 1803" in a similar light. "He finds himself hoping for an invasion so that he can in fact experience a finished event," writes Favret (*War at a Distance* 78).

> says, you sit by the fire and fancy how things will be when once their army has got footing in old England, till you imagine they are really come, every time you hear any little noise or bustle; and that you are afraid of walking down the village after dark, for fear of meeting them; and that you go to bed in terror every time, lest they should come and murder you before the morning. (*Friendly Advice)*

This picture of a state of preparation that opened up a heightened imagination which hears invasion at any "little noise or bustle" would have been a familiar topos at the time. The presumably relaxed and reclined postures of sitting by the fire or going to bed become daily occasions for a heightened sensibility and watchfulness that leads to hallucination and paranoia about the enemy's invasion, so that every sense perception becomes a signal of danger. More's pamphlet reveals how the heightened attention that John Barrell, writing about De Quincey, calls "wartime listening" put a constant strain on the everyday attention of civilians at the time (*Infection* 132).

I would like to suggest that these wartime demands for a heightened attention, perception, and imagination ask us to rethink and reframe Romanticism's preoccupation with the imagination, with receptivity, and with heightened states of perception, and that these aesthetic experiences typically considered both passive and apolitical might respond in unexpected ways to the militarization of attention, wartime perception, and the daily threats of alarm during the Romantic Period. John Barrell has similarly shown how wartime alarmism troubled concepts of the imagination; he characterizes "loyalist alarmism as a disorder of the imagination" (*Imagining* 44).[7] In his study of the political stakes of the imagination in the 1790's and the debate about "imagining the king's death," Barrell finds in debates over the imagination "signs of a struggle for ownership of the language of law and politics" (ibid. 44). In related work, Mary Favret's recent *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* uncovers in Romanticism an origin for a modern wartime marked by the constant experience of war felt and seen at a distance. Favret explains the effects of war on everyday life in England as the "transformation of society not by warfare per se, but by a militarization of institutions, social systems, and sensibilities," a militarization she also describes as the way "war invades thought itself" (39, 12).[8] Favret's military metaphor for how the mind is structured by war dovetails with, while perhaps rendering impossible, Clausewitz's claim that, in war, "our mind must be permanently armed" (102). The militarization of everyday attention that I am tracing during the Romantic period echoes Favret's and Barrell's claims about the transformation of the sensibilities, the imagination, and of thought itself in the face of war. Both exceptional studies, as well as other studies of Romanticism and war, have informed this project, and I owe much to them. Yet I hope to shift the focus to what Clausewitz, explaining the requirements for "military genius," calls *Geistesgegenwart*, or presence of mind – to ask how war and a state of constant alarm alters how and to what we pay attention, as well as how and when we pay attention

[7] Barrell makes the connection between imagination and attention in the introduction to *Imagining the King's Death*, when he quotes Home who writes that "Imagination 'multiplying objects without end' especially when the will or judgment is asleep' when our attention is not fixed on any one thing, a state of mind called reverie, we may observe, that our thoughts are continually changing, so that in a little time our imagination wanders to something very different from what we were thinking of just before" (6) and asserts that imagination can become atrophied by the continual attention of the mind to one particular dry or abstract study (7).

[8] Sam Weber makes a similar argument in his *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking,* where he writes about the "target" as a protective shield, an activity that seeks to hit or seize, and "a metaphor or figure for thinking itself" (vii).

to war.[9] Following Judith Butler's claim that "war sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively," I ask how wars act on attention (*Frames of War* 51). What kind of selective attention does war craft? Not only was this a period of war, but it was also a period when alarm and alarmism became crucial political terms. At stake in the emerging alarmism of the period was a demand for attention and watchfulness that cannot be separated from seemingly similar demands made by aesthetics.

II. The Invention of Alarmism

> Alarm, *n.* < Old French *alarme*, < Italian *allarme* = *all' arme!* 'To (the) arms!' originally the call summoning to arms, and thus, in languages that adopted it, a mere interjection; but soon used in all as the *name* of the call or summons.
>
> - *Oxford English Dictionary,* "Alarm"

The transcripts of the parliamentary debates in England during the 1790s reveal one central, strikingly self-reflexive point of dispute: the necessity and origin of alarm. Fears of a violent military invasion and the birth of the British volunteer movement meant that the military resonances of the etymology of the word *alarm* ('To arms!') intersected daily with the word's more modern sense of sustained quotidian fear. Indeed, if we think of it etymologically, the word *alarm* is distinct from its synonyms - words like *fear*, *terror*, *surprise*, or *shock*, - in that *alarm* functions both as a feeling and an imperative - a call to action, or rather, a call to prepare for action, a call to arms.[10] *Alarm* is also distinct in that it participates in a literary tradition, as one half of the Elizabethan stage direction "alarums and excursions" used to indicate "martial sounds and the movement of soldiers across the stage."[11] Thus the word *alarm,* by the turn of the nineteenth century, brought together the military and the literary in an unusual way, and carried an array of connotations, temporalities, and approaches to action distinct from a more common fear. An "alarm" became a sub-genre throughout the eighteenth century, as the period saw a proliferation of broadsides, ballads, and pamphlets with titles that began with the words "an alarm to…" These alarms addressed citizens regarding a wide variety of topics, from public health ("An alarm to all persons touching their health and lives: or, a discovery of the most shocking, pernicious, and destructive practices made use of by many in this kingdom, who make and sell divers kinds of eatables and drinkables") to religion ("An alarm to unconverted sinners"). But the genre would become particularly useful once fears of invasion began to take hold of the nation, as a form of address that could literalize the term's etymology; "An alarm to the public, and a bounty promised to every loyal subject, who will come

[9] On the proximity between Clausewitz's requirements for military genius and models of aesthetic genius, see Watson 207-216. On the persistent link made between genius and attention, see William Hamilton who quotes Helvetius, Buffon, Cuvier, and Chesterfield on the "continued attention" necessary for genius (179).
[10] The temporality of alarm is complicated further by an obscure meaning of the term: "A sudden or unexpected attack; necessitating a rush to arms; a surprise; an assault" (OED). In this sense, the term can mean not just the fear of an attack, but the attack itself.
[11] Merriam Webster Dictionary, "alarms and excursions."

forward to repel the enemy," for example, used an alarm to promise, in 1798, "Arms and accoutrements promised to every man, gratis."

Alongside the emergence of alarm as a genre of text came an interest in alarmism as a concept – the sense that alarms could be used as a pretext to gain or maintain power. According to one historian of the period, William Pitt made "Alarm" a governmental "technique of oppression" (White 104). The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies the first use of the word "alarmist" in a self-appraisal by the most famous alarmist of the Romantic Period – Edmund Burke, who insisted, in a letter in 1793 to his fellow Parliamentarian William Wyndham, that "we must continue to be vigorous alarmists (*Correspondence* VII.415)."[12] The term was not immediately derogatory; in may 1794, the Duke of Leeds still took pride in identifying himself as an "alarmist of a long date, ever since the month of November, 1792." According to transcripts of parliamentary debates, the Duke of Leeds believed "he was convinced that if they did not now arm government with large powers, they would not long have any Habeas Corpus either to maintain or suspend" (*The Parliamentary Register* 331). According to one reader of the radical publication *Politics for the People,* by 1794 the word was "much in vogue," though its meaning "not precisely understood by many" (427). The positive connotations of the term quickly disappeared; as the 1796 pamphlet with the title *The Alarmist* complains, "the application of this title to particular Public Characters has fixed upon it a signification entirely opposite to that which it bears in the language of Those who originally invented the term" (vi).

The *OED* also notably attributes one of the first uses of the English word "terrorist" to Burke who, among other writers, warned the British in 1795 of the danger of the Jacobins ("Thousands of those Hell-hounds called Terrorists..are let loose on the people") ("Terrorist," def. 1a).[13] Yet, by 1803, the two terms collided and "terrorist" carried the possibility of its reversal and could refer, instead, to alarmists who *warned* of danger, rather than to the presumed danger itself. In other words, not long after the invention of the term, it became unclear whether the "terrorists" were those who might inflict violence or those who incited - by *speaking* about - fear and terror. For, according to the *OED*, by 1803 the term could designate not only "the Jacobins and their agents and partisans in the French Revolution, esp. those connected with the Revolutionary tribunals during the 'Reign of Terror,'" but also, unfavorably, "one who entertains, professes, or tries to awaken or spread a feeling of terror or alarm; an alarmist, a scaremonger" ("Terrorist," def. 2).[14] This linguistic ambiguity signals an important tension which emerged with the increase of invasion scares that followed the Peace of Amiens, a tension about the origin of fear and terror and about whether alarm comes from danger or from the act of *speaking about* danger. Only ten years after the invention of the word "alarmist" did it become clear that an alarmist could *cause*, rather than *prevent*, danger, an insight understood by many at the time, including Anna Barbauld, whose poem "Eighteen Hundred and Eleven" warns of "whispered fears, creating what they dread" (line 48). Mark Jones has referred to

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[12] Oddly enough, it is Wyndham who, in 1792, admitted to voting against party lines because "there was no real cause for alarm among the people…the only alarm that was felt had been created by government. Government must certainly have had strange and onderful powers indeed to produce the alarm every day expressed in different parts" (*The Parliamentary History* 35).

[13] See Marc Redfield's recent study of terrorism, *The Rhetoric of Terror: Reflections on 9/11 and the War on Terror.* Redfield traces our contemporary "war on terror" back to Burke's counter-revolutionary writing from the 1790s, where he finds "the terms of a modern politics of paranoia" (7). For Redfield's history of the words "Terror" and "Terrorist," see pp. 72-3.

[14] The secondary meaning is attributed to the Reverend Sydney Smith, who writes that "The terrorists of this country are so extremely alarmed at the power of Buonaparte, that they ascribe to him resources which M. Neckar very justly observes to be incompatible – despotism and credit" (Sydney Smith 183).

this aspect of alarmism, writing of the "'self-realizing' alarm – a conception roughly congruent with the Austinian performative," and pointing to the difficulty of making a nonperformative, "nonacting statement" in light of the question: "Can one discuss matters of alarm without becoming, ipso facto, alarmist?" (3, 6).

Debates in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords about the 1792 Alien Bill, which suspended habeas corpus for foreigners, prompted a vertiginous self-reflexivity about what Coleridge later called "the magnifying mists of alarm" (qtd. in Jones 72); many parliamentarians, demanding a consideration of the unsteady relation between swift political action and a feeling of fear of the French, questioned the link between the expansion of executive power and the rhetoric of alarm vital to the scares about invasion, as well as insurrection. At stake in these debates was not simply how to remedy the state of alarm, but also its elusive origin, since many recognized the possibility that it was a national alarm which "had been created by ministers themselves, and which they wished to be generally propagated and believed, in order that, taking advantage of the ferment of the people, they might carry measures which they would not dare to bring forward at any other period" (Great Britain 30.198). In a similar attempt to oppose the Alien Bill, James Maitland, Earl of Lauderdale, declared:

> that he was willing, by any reasonable measure, to quiet the alarms in the minds of the people, alarms which, in his conscience, he believed industriously excited and kept up by ministers; but when he saw such a bill as this, a bill that altered the established laws, that even interfered with treaties, and all this to provide against the suspected intentions of about nineteen persons, he could not help thinking that it was part of a chain of measures, purposely calculated to excite alarm among the people, and by rousing their passions, to extinguish their reason. (ibid. 30.163)

Maitland and his Whig allies had two goals: to quiet the public's alarm and to investigate its purpose and origin. The period saw both the heightening of widespread, contagious fear and its ungrounding; for, although we may now think of alarm as a feeling of destabilization and crisis, debates about alarm in the 1790s brought the unnerving possibility that alarm was "industriously excited" and "purposely calculated," and thus itself could not be trusted as a reliable feeling.

Two years after the Alien Bill passed, a nearly identical debate about alarm emerged surrounding the Suspension of Habeas Corpus Bill, which was essentially an expansion of the Alien Bill to English citizens, and which many of the earlier bill's opponents had already feared would follow in 1792. This time, Maitland identified an entire "system of alarm and terror"; he and other opponents of the bill questioned the supposed urgency of a bill responding to information which they had all known for years, and accused the ministers of "nursing the conspiracies till it suited their own purposes to bring them forward, for the purpose of keeping up a system of alarm and terror, in order to divert the attention of the country from the calamities and disgraces which their mal-administration had brought upon it" (ibid. 31.590). Alarmism, according to this logic, threatens to upset chronological time, inciting anticipation and dread about the threat of an event that may have already passed, or about an event which may have already failed to happen. In a lengthy diagnosis of this systematized terror, Charles James Fox argues that those in favor of the bill "knew that if the alarm should be suspended for a moment, and if men were allowed time and leisure for the exercise of their understandings, the war, and the principles on which it was undertaken, would be

scrutinized and discussed" (ibid. 31.554).[15] Echoing Maitland's claim from two years prior that alarm "extinguish[es] reason," Fox's assertion suggests that alarm and understanding are mutually exclusive, that alarm bypasses reason by rousing the passions; for alarm has its own temporality in which it fills the present moment with fear and thus prevents the relaxation necessary for reflection on, and understanding of, both the object of fear and the fear itself. And yet, implicit here is the fact that the alternative to alarm, a freedom from worry or care, complacency, also paradoxically entails an absence of reflection.

In his *Political Dictionary,* published in 1795, Charles Pigott presents a similar diagnosis of the manipulative politics of fear, punning on the echo between "tocsin" and "toxin," by defining "alarm" as "the *tocsin* of delusion; plunging Englishmen into all the calamities of war… a pretext for prosecutions, unconstitutional augmentation of the army, the introduction of foreign troops, barracks, &c. &c. &c." (2).[16] Pigott then provides a separate definition for "Alarmists," who he calls:

> miserable politicians, who have been dupes of the sound, terrified by the downfal [sic] of aristocracy in France; bewildered by apprehensions and fears for themselves, they have lost all sense of their duty towards the people, and have joined the conspiracy of courts against the interest of humanity. (2)

The passages I have already cited in the history of alarmism reveal contradictory positions on whether "alarmists" actually fear that of which they warn – themselves "dupes of the sound" – or whether the fear is solely calculated and fabricated.[17] The 1796 pamphlet with the title *The Alarmist* confirms Pigott's sense that the alarmists were themselves terrified, and defines the term as follows: "The *Modern Whigs* have coined the term *Alarmist* to describe One whose understanding is for ever

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[15] In *Waterloo to Peterloo,* R.J. White describes the "technique of repression generally known as 'Alarm.'" Taken over from William Pitt, White describes a systematic use of alarm to gain power and keep civilians in a state of fear and passivity:

> It consisted of a simple and invariable sequence of events. In the first instance, the Government announces that it is in possession of certain information, derived from unspecified sources, relative to actual or threatened disturbances in the country. Secondly, this information is entrusted to Secret Committees, generally of both Houses, for examination and report. Thirdly, the Houses receive reports from the Secret Committees, and, on the strength thereof, Government moves certain legislative action: the Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act for a specific period, and generally certain measures to strengthen the hand of the Executive in dealing with public assemblies and the press. At the end of the specified period, Government either moves the restoration of the Habeas Corpus Act or its suspension for a further period. When the emergency comes to an end, an Act of Indemnity is brought in the absolve Ministers from actions at law consequent upon their use of their temporary and exceptional powers. At this stage, a general debate takes place on Government's conduct during the period of 'Alarm.' At no stage does Government reveal the sources of its information (104-105).

[16] The argument that alarm served as a "pretext" began to take shape in the 1790s. Reverend Robert Hall, in his critique of alarmism and apology for the freedom of the press, writes about actions with the "*pretext* [of] the fear of republicanism" with "its *object* the perpetuity of abuses" (182).

[17] In *Imagining the King's Death,* John Barrell discusses this discrepancy, pointing to accounts of alarmism in the 1790s as both panic-stricken and coldly malevolent. Barrell's interest is in the role of the imagination in alarm, describing alarmism as "an imagination easily inflamed, and by a deliberate intention to inflame the imaginations of others" (18).

disturbed by visions of imaginary public danger, One, who labours to instill into the minds of the People the same vain terrors which infest his own" (*The Alarmist* vi). Here the term's definition pivots precisely on the alarmist's attempt to reproduce his own terror. Alternately, in his response to the proposed suspension of Habeas Corpus in Parliament, John Courtenay argues that the "secret committee of alarmists" did not actually believe the alarm that they calculated, insisting that it was their "aim and interest…to deceive and terrify the people, by plots and conspiracies, *which did not even exist in their own imagination*" (Great Britain 31:538-9, emphasis added). And in his 1793 "Apology for the Freedom of the Press," Reverend Robert Hall depicts the "whole project" of the government as "availing themselves of an alarm which they had artfully prepared, in order to withdraw the public attention from real grievances to imaginary dangers" (181-2). In discourses of alarmism, it remains unclear whether alarmists believe the threat they warn of or knowingly, "artfully" fabricate it. And yet, the distinction is neither necessary nor valid because of the slipperiness in fear itself, for even an artificial or fabricated fear can quickly cause a more authentic or a less controllable experience of fear. Recall again Barbauld's worry that "whispered fears" might create "what they dread." Collins's "Ode to Fear" reveals a similar dynamic since "Fear" personifies both an afraid character and the cause of fear, and the distinction between the two collapses. We might imagine this slipperiness in terms of what Wordsworth describes in "Tintern Abbey" as "eye, and ear, -- both what they half create, And what perceive" (lines 106-107). Here Romanticism's preoccupation with the imagination and aesthetic perception carries unexpected resonances with the political debates of the period. Wordsworth might not object to these connections. In fact, the later Wordsworth might be the first to admit that a half created fear could help the nation: "If a nation have nothing to oppose or fear without," he wrote in his 1811 letter to Pasley, "it cannot escape decay and concussion within" (60).

By refusing to believe that alarmists actually felt any alarm, Whig radicals aligned the British "system of alarm and terror" with the very system against which alarmists were attempting to protect the nation – French Terror. Indeed, one common rhetorical strategy involved citing the declaration, made by the French National Committee in September of 1793, to make "terreur à l'ordre du jour," to describe the British rather than the French: "the measure itself," argued Fox, referring to the suspension of Habeas Corpus, "is the most daring and impudent. It was true, that since terror was the order of the day (to use a French mode of expression) those opinions might be awhile stifled; but they would but rankle in secret; curses would follow, 'not loud but deep,' and what might be the final event no man could say!" (Great Britain 31:522).[18] The insurrection scare converged with heightened fears of a French military invasion as fears of French ideas, French arms, and a French system of alarm and terror merged to form one nebulous and pervasive state of alarm. "The danger," explains Fox, "whatever might be its degree, had two sources: first, the fear of the propagation of French opinions in this country; and, next, the fear of the progress of the French arms…." (ibid. 30: 220). To these, Fox adds a third form of Gallophobia which ungrounds the validity of the first two fears: a fear of French "terror." Fox reveals his own brand of alarmism as he warns about the power and danger of alarm itself:

> From day to day they [French "rulers"] circulated stories of alarms, and plots and conspiracies, and insurrections among the people, to inflame and agitate their minds, and to spread panic and terror over the whole country, that they might take advantage of their fears, and obtain unlimited power, to be exercised in carrying on

[18] See also Thelwall's comparison of Pitt and Robespierre, in which he writes that terror, in Britain, is the "order of the day" (*The Politics of English Jacobinism* 133). I discuss this phrase in more detail in Chapter four, because Godwin explains his publishing difficulties by characterizing the period with the phrase: "terror was the order of the day" (*Caleb Williams* xxiv).

> and confirming that very terror. They inspired the double alarm of danger from conspiracy, and danger from the exercise of their own unlimited power, exerted as it every day was, in the most shocking murders, with hardly the aspect or form of judicial trial. What was the conduct of the ministers here? Precisely in the same manner they circulated stories of alarms and conspiracies, to fill the public mind with fear, and, to use the jargon of the French, to make terror the order of the day. By spreading these false and idle alarms, they succeeded in obtaining powers destructive of the constitution, which, as in France, were to be exercised with such inhuman rigour, as to keep the country in double awe, and by fostering indignation and discontent, give rise again to new jealousies, which would afford occasion for still farther stretches of power. (ibid. 31:552)

According to Fox's analysis, the expansion of executive power deserves its own alarm.[19] Thus he identifies a "double alarm" and finds the country in "double awe" – in awe at the prospect of invasion and insurrection, and consequently in awe at the power exercised in response to the first alarm, an alarm which incapacitates the people and thus allows "farther stretches of power." "The remedy," argues Maitland "was far more alarming than the danger could possibly be" (ibid. 31:589).

This omnipresence of alarm, alongside the consistent threat of the contagion of French ideas and forces, pervaded everyday life and its literature; I will show, for example, in Chapter 3, how Charlotte Smith's prospect poems reveal that the simple and familiar aesthetic posture of watching the coast becomes fraught with the worry of what might arrive in the poet's field of vision, on the coast, at the nation's border. In a different register, Chapter 2 argues that the question of whether alarm comes from danger or from *speaking about* danger comes to inform Romantic models of language, as literary texts of the period start to investigate the threat of a language that surrounds and spreads alarm – as well as, as we will see, a model of language *as* alarm.

III. Romanticism's Watch

> They build up greatest things
> From least suggestions, ever on the watch
> willing to work and be wrought upon.
>
> - Wordsworth, *The Prelude*

The above lines from Wordsworth's 1805 version of *The Prelude* forge a connection between a mind "ever on the watch" and a fabrication or hallucination based only on suggestion; they suggest that the simple experience of keeping watch – so strained at the turn of the nineteenth century in England – might explain alarmism's tendency to "build up greatest things/ From least suggestions," and that *how* we watch might alter *what* we see or think we see. And yet this passage is not a criticism of alarmism's faulty relation to knowledge, nor a description of the demands for wartime vigilance.

[19] Mark Jones reminds us not to associate alarmism too exclusively with conservatism by pointing to the finance alarmism of Thomas Paine. Fox's alarmism about alarmism is another, albeit more complicated, example of this. See Jones 4.

Wordsworth is here celebrating and praising the "glorious faculty" of "higher minds": the imagination. We can nevertheless hear echoes of a militarized attention and of debates about alarm in the poet's apparently apolitical glorification of the transformative powers of the imagination. What does it mean, then, that Romanticism embraced an aesthetic imagination that aimed to "build up greatest things/ From least suggestions" at a time when political debates centered around precisely this threat? How can we understand a Romantic aesthetics of attention and watchfulness, a literary preoccupation with states of heightened attention, receptivity, and perception, in light of the wartime demand that every civilian keep constant and unremitting watch for the arrival of the enemy?

War-time watchfulness, as it emerged in the 1790s and the following decade, makes the sense of war and the demands war made on the senses, on *aesthesis*, one particularly generative point of entry for thinking about how and why attention became a site where aesthetics, politics, and ethics intersect. In response to the demands that war made on the senses during this period, there emerged a series of aesthetic investigations of what Wordsworth called "the organs of attention" in Romantic writing, enquiries made through figures of keeping watch, figures of heightened attention and intensified watchfulness. I seek to uncover a poetics of attention pivotal to Romanticism. It is no coincidence, for example, that Keats claims that " –The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation & watchfulness in itself" (*Complete Works* 170-171) in the years following the rhetoric of watchfulness and alarm made evident by broadsides like "Union and Watchfulness, Britain's true and only security" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 131).[20] Likewise, it is not accidental that Coleridge would write that "there is no profession on earth, which requires an attention so early, so long, or so unintermitting as that of poetry; and indeed as that of literary composition in general" at a time when the demand for a constant military attention increased (*Biographia* 45). These connections are not simply coincidences, I'd like to suggest, because wartime alarm alters both how we watch and what we see. Thus for a poet like Charlotte Smith, writing at the height of the invasion scares, a quite familiar and comfortable aesthetic position, such as Collins' version of the prospect poem in "Ode on the Poetical Character" – "High on some Cliff, to Heav'n up-pil'd,/ Of rude Access, of Prospect wild" (lines 1-2) – becomes fraught with a wartime perception, a view of an imagined enemy, and of sounds and sights in the landscape signaling foreignness and possible danger.

The proximity between the wartime climate of alarm and heightened attention and the standard account of Romantic aesthetics goes beyond coincidences like the prospect poem's view of the coast or Wordsworth's description of imagination as "ever on the watch." Burke's own description, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful,* of the sublime, caused by a terror that does not "press too close" (92), as producing a mind "so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it" (101) echoes the sense of stupor and absence of reason or enquiry that critics of alarmism claimed was caused by alarm.[21] It is the safe distance necessary for the sublime, as well as the status of the sublime as a distinct aesthetic category that distinguishes it from the alarmism I am tracing here. I hope, instead, to show that the poetics of watchfulness and heightened attention do not remain as distinct aesthetic categories because they cannot be separated from the militarization of attention and debates about alarm during the period.

The aesthetic watchfulness I seek to uncover in Romantic literature and the militarized attention evident in the period's political and military documents are not identical; instead, I suggest

[20] The difference between an internal watchfulness ("in itself") and an outward one, watching for the enemy or the foreign, is crucial here.

[21] See, for example, *Politics for the People* 429.

that literary texts struggle during the period to distinguish themselves from the rampant alarmism and political manipulation to which they are nevertheless indebted. I argue that Romantic texts both borrow from and critique the forms of attention demanded by – and the kind of receptivity produced by – war-time alarm and anxiety, and ultimately propose an alternative form of attention, an ethos of attentiveness without fear, that resists teleology, definition, or conclusion, and that imagines attention as an end in itself. Instead of simply resisting the militarization of attention with an aesthetics of distraction, Romantic attention, I'd like to propose, imagines an aesthetic experience of keeping watch which refuses to predetermine or precipitate the object of its wait. In doing so, Romanticism asks us to rethink our concepts of defense and security, to question our ability to distinguish between defensiveness and vulnerability. Consider Coleridge's claim from his 1809-1810 *The Friend,* which finds postures of warfare and defense in everyday life*:* "That which does not *withstand,* hath *itself* no standing place. To *fill* a station is to exclude or repel others, - and this not less the definition of moral, than of material, *solidity*. We *live* by continued acts of defense, that involve a sort of offensive warfare" (*Collected Works* 4.1.97). Romantic watchfulness engages in a critical dialogue with the wartime demands of attention, alarm, and the heightening of sensibility, questioning the claims war made on the senses and the restrictions war made on how and to what one pays attention. This dissertation tracks figures of keeping watch and literary discussions of alarm to ask how Romanticism's attempt to occupy postures of keeping watch might engage or subvert the militarization of attention in England, and might propose alternate models for the mediation, anticipation, and perception of what "comes armèd through our watch," whether it be invading armies, emigrants, the sounds of birds, historical experience, or nothing at all.

The first chapter, "'Surprised into a Perception': Attention, History, and Elasticity," considers William Wordsworth and Thomas De Quincey's shared interest in a rhythmic movement between the contraction and relaxation of attention. Central is De Quincey's account of Wordsworth's phenomenological observation that a new perception arrives only at the moment when the "organs of attention" relax. Asking how poetry manages, deflects, and distracts the attention, the chapter articulates the promise of a perception produced through and at the moment of relaxation in the rhythms of Wordsworth's verse, in particular line breaks and enjambments that highlight the rhythms of attention built into verse form itself. The political context of Wordsworth's phenomenological observation and De Quincey's own interest in the military order to "Attend!" make clear that both authors' interests in a rhythm between watchfulness and its withdrawal are inextricable from the wartime demand of vigilance on the part of the English citizenry. De Quincey queries the possibility of noticing something *other* than that for which one waits; by doing so in a military context, he suggests that alarms of invasion preclude both other perceptions and perceptions of others. Wordsworth's attempt to experience the Revolution at the site of the September Massacres in Paris in *The Prelude* is only successful because of a similar rhythm between the contraction and the relaxation of attention; the poet produces historical perception in the intervals *between* two states of heightened attention: reading and keeping watch. Although Wordsworth experiences history as a "fear to come," I argue that his historical attention differs from that of alarmists because, while the alarmists precipitate the object of their alarm, the poet's alarm has no object, and relies instead on the spontaneity and elasticity of a mind altered by heightened demands on the attention.

The second chapter, "Cowper, Coleridge, and the Empty Sounds of War," turns from the poetics of attention to focus more closely on the discourses of alarm and alarmism in the period. Parliamentary debates around the term "alarm" often enacted the term's etymology as a call "to arms" and navigated the tricky space between the potential and the probability of danger. William Cowper's poem "The Needless Alarm" stages a debate about alarm through a dialogue between two sheep who present opposing opinions about the link between sound and signification. Cowper

privileges the "discreet ewe," who, I argue, presents an ethics of listening that tries to hear without hearing *something*. In light of Cowper's interest in *The Task* in the "sound of war," I show that the ewe's attempt to open the gap between the auditory and the epistemological mounts a critique of the period's epistemologies of war. The chapter then demonstrates that reading Coleridge's poem "Fears in Solitude, written in April 1798, during the Alarm of an Invasion" in response to Cowper's "The Needless Alarm" reveals Coleridge's awareness of the stakes of the gap between sound and signification during war, and highlights both poets' interest in the role – in poetry *and* alarmism – of "empty sounds." Though opponents of alarmism often characterized it as empty rhetoric or "empty sounds," the ethics of listening developed by Cowper and Coleridge identifies the problem of alarmism not as an emptiness, but as an excess. For these poems show that the real problem with alarmism lies in its rush to fill in empty sounds, in its inability to do what poetry does: allow sounds to *remain* obscure and empty of fixed meaning.

In the third chapter, "'Something Living is Abroad': Charlotte Smith and the Natural Enemy," I provide an account of Smith's poem *Beachy Head* as a response not only to the rhetoric of alarmism in the period, but also to the pervasive characterization of France as England's "natural enemy." The chapter demonstrates that the rhetoric of natural enmity is pivotal to the militarization of attention and alarm, since it determines and naturalizes the object of alarm: the French. Attuned to the unexpected intersections of national security, perception, and natural history, *Beachy Head* refigures the coastal prospect poem by highlighting the nation's natural vulnerability; gazing across the Channel from the rocks of Beachy Head toward France, Smith points to geological evidence in the rocks on which she stands that suggests that the two enemy nations were once one land mass which were split by a "vast concussion." For Smith, nature's history thus undermines any claim that France is the natural enemy since, she writes, "we can trace our origin no farther than to the people we despise and hate." The poem is preoccupied with figures of keeping watch, and yet the poet does not limit her watch to an enemy, but rather opens it to the potential arrival of animals, plants, immigrants, gypsies, and slight sounds, like that made by the sea-snipe which "just tells," she writes, "*that* something living is abroad." Smith asks how one might sense the arrival of the foreign without predetermining what it is, or how one can make sense of a foreign nation that one can neither perceive nor communicate with, but that hovers in the national imagination as a supposedly "natural" enemy.

Turning from poetry to the Gothic novel, the final chapter, "The Politics of Gothic Alarm," argues that William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* understand alarm as a form of subjection. Since, as the 1790s revealed, continual alarm often functioned as a means by which government gained power over the governed, both authors turn to the Gothic genre – the genre of alarmed heroes and heroines – to ask how alarm contributes to the preservation and, at times, expansion of power. I argue that, as an alternative to alarm as a form of subjection, Godwin and Austen investigate the possibility of a voluntary, unforced alarm. Godwin imagines an epistemologically-productive alarm by finding at the root of alarm a heightened attention that transforms alarm into a productive critical judgment. For despite his insistence that alarm is a form of imprisonment, Godwin also describes the scholar as "ever on the watch" and links Caleb William's redemptive agency at the end of the novel to increased powers of observation gained from years of alarm. Austen, however, is more skeptical about the potential productivity of alarm; her novel presents both a false sense of security and a number of false alarms and destabilizes our understanding of both. Austen's irony, I suggest, develops a critique of the possibility of voluntary alarm altogether. For the irony with which the novel treats Catherine's "craving to be frightened" echoes Godwin's claim in *Political Justice* that "every voluntary action is an act of obedience," and uncovers the paradoxical role of the word "volunteer" in the nation's "volunteer movement," a primary example of the militarization of attention in the period. Austen playfully blurs the

distinction between gothic conventions and the rhetoric of political alarm to make a subtle diagnosis of the way that a rhetoric of *voluntary* alarm can still implicitly participate in a system that uses alarm as subjection. The dissertation ends with a brief coda which considers the transformation of political alarmism in the twenty first century and finds in the poetry of Matthea Harvey an afterlife for the Romantic wartime poetics of attention. At stake in both periods and in both poetics, I suggest, is an unsteady dialectic of security and susceptibility, of vigilance and vulnerability, the recognition of which raises the question of how one ought to live in light of our everyday susceptibilities.

"Surprised into a Perception": Wordsworth's Attention, History, and Elasticity

> And, attention now relaxed,
> A heart-felt chillness crept along my veins.
>
> - William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*

> That portion of every day of our existence which is occupied by us with a mind attentive and on the alert, I would call life in a transcendent sense. The rest is scarcely better than a state of vegetation. And yet not so either. The happiest and most valuable thoughts of the human mind will sometimes come when they are least sought for, and we least anticipated any such thing.
>
> - William Godwin, *Thoughts on Man*

In his 1839 recollection of Wordsworth in *Lake Reminiscences*, Thomas De Quincey recalls an evening during the Peninsular War when he and Wordsworth went for a walk to await the mail carrier who they expected to arrive with the daily newspaper. According to De Quincey, the two writers used to walk each evening - "in the deadly impatience for earlier intelligence" – to meet the carrier of the London newspapers (*Lake Reminiscences* 74). On this particular evening, when, according to De Quincey, "some great crisis in Spain was daily apprehended," the two waited for over an hour with particular impatience: "At intervals," De Quincey explains, "Wordsworth had stretched himself at length on the high road, applying his ear to the ground, so as to catch any sound of wheels that might be groaning along at a distance" (ibid.). Stretched out on the road, with his ear firmly pressed to the ground of Dunmail Raise – a peak in the Lake District and the mythic site of a battle from the year 945 where, according to legend, a slain king is buried – Wordsworth listens for the arrival of the *Courier* so he can read the daily news of the current war.[1] But that which Wordsworth, according to De Quincey's narrative, calls his "intense condition of vigilance" – a phrase perhaps more likely to describe a posture in the current war itself than that of the quotidian wait for the post carrying news of it – is not only met with disappointment when the carrier does not arrive, but also encounters an effect that puts into question the very conditions and consequences of "vigilance" itself. For even though the gesture of stretching himself on the ground might seem the perfect caricature of attention, as though Wordsworth were acting out and literalizing the term's etymology (from the Latin *ad+tendere*, "to stretch towards"),[2] when Wordsworth reflects upon his own prior act, he

[1] De Quincey specifies no particular date - only that the event took place after 1807 and during the Peninsular War.

[2] See entry for "Attend" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The English *attention* carries the connotations of both the French *attendre, "*to expect, to wait for," and the Latin *attendere, "*to give heed to," but which literally means "stretching towards." The latter definition explains one of the definitions Johnson provides for attention: "the act of bending the mind upon any thing." The word thus straddles the passivity of what Johnson identifies as "the French meaning" – that of "to expect, wait for" - and the physical, active experience of literally bending or stretching the mind upon a thing.

remarks neither on the distention of his body, nor on the application of his ear to the ground. He is struck, rather, by what happens when he relaxes, or interrupts, his attentive stretch. According to De Quincey, Wordsworth observes:

> 'I have remarked, from my earliest days, that if, under any circumstances, the attention is energetically braced up to an act of steady observation, or of steady expectation, then, if this intense condition of vigilance should suddenly relax, at that moment, any beautiful, any impressive visual object, or collection of objects, falling upon the eye, is carried to the heart with a power not known under other circumstances. Just now, my ear was placed upon the stretch, in order to catch any sound of wheels that might come down upon the lake of Wythburn from the Keswick Road; at the very instant when the organs of attention were all at once relaxing from their tension, the bright star hanging in the air above those outlines of massy blackness, fell suddenly upon my eye, and penetrated my capacity of apprehension with a pathos and a sense of the Infinite, that would not have arrested me under other circumstances.' (74)

Wordsworth's emphasis on slackening rather than contracting the organs of attention, this spontaneous and surprisingly productive gesture of *no longer* paying attention, signals an important contribution on the part of a poet to the sciences of attention at the time, shifting the controversy in early psychology over whether attention is a voluntary act to the quality of the perception produced by an involuntary shift in, or withdrawal of, the attention. Wordsworth's observation anticipates Thoreau's later advice that "the more you look, the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest" (99).

A century later, Walter Benjamin would give an account of the "reception in a state of distraction" that characterizes modernity (*Illuminations* 240). Yet Wordsworth's observation differs from Benjamin's diagnosis of "reception in a state of distraction" in a number of ways, the most striking of which is that the poet is primarily interested in the moment of relaxation, of turning away, rather than in a sustained state of distractedness. Both models of inattention, though, acknowledge the impossibility of a sustained attention; this became a concern in the eighteenth century, perhaps in response to Enlightenment demands for a continuous, sustained attention, for writers like William Godwin, who expressed worry that "…the intellect cannot be always on the stretch, nor the bow of the mind for ever bent" (*Thoughts on Man* 123). Benjamin, too, whose work is indebted to the Romantic preoccupation with watchfulness, in a short fragment called "Habit and Attentiveness," (with a quite different argument from his "Work of Art" essay), describes the necessary rhythm between attentiveness and habit, writing that "all attentiveness has to flow into habit, if it is not to blow human beings apart, and all habit must be disrupted by attentiveness if it is not to paralyze the human being" (592). It is this aspect of Benjamin's interest in attention that speaks to Wordsworth: both writers describe a rhythm between strained attention and looking away.

And yet, though De Quincey's recollection seems to acknowledge the necessity of distraction, Wordsworth's emphasis is on neither the "state of distraction" nor its necessity, but on the productivity of the moment when attention relaxes – its reflex. Wordsworth is interested in the perception generated by the elastic rhythm between attention and its relaxations (which he, notably, does not call "distraction," at least according to De Quincey). Wordsworth's posture and the insight it produces is only one particularly rich moment in a poetic tradition that puts *attention* itself into question, by exploring its reflexes, interruptions, and inconsistencies, its absence and its excess, and its unusual position somewhere between exertion and passivity. In this chapter, I will show how this rhythm between watchfulness and its withdrawal allows Wordsworth to rethink the attentive posture in and to poetics, politics, and history, and the intersection of all three: this interest in the new

perception that arrives only with the relaxation of the organs of attention suggests first a new way of thinking about the experience of reading poetry, second a critique of the alarmist militarization of attention that only awaits one predetermined enemy, and third an alternative way of attending to historical events, historical experience that becomes accessible only in the intervals *between* looking.

I. Toward a Poetics of Attention

The elastic rhythm between attention and its relaxation was a shared interest among Romantic Era literary writers. We can hear a similar emphasis on the moment of relaxation as one of unexpected perception and feeling in De Quincey's own analysis of the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth,* a reading of Shakespeare's play grounded in a similar rhythm between tension and relaxation. According to De Quincey, the knocking at the gate in the play is a particularly powerful moment because it entails a relaxation from suspense and suspension. De Quincey writes that the "sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns" is never so "full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of human life are suddenly resumed" (84). Given the pattern that I will soon trace of defining attention *as suspension,* De Quincey's assertion that we are only aware of a suspension at the moment of recommencement is particularly resonant with Wordsworth's observation that we notice something once the attention relaxes.

Charlotte Smith makes a similar claim about the perception accessed at the moment of relaxation in her novel *Desmond*; instead of using the psychological or phenomenological language of attention, Smith invokes a state of alarm, which, in the context of her novel about the French Revolution, we can understand in both emotional and political registers. "The truth is," writes the novel's protagonist:

> whenever I am not suffering under any immediate alarm, my mind, possessing more elasticity than I once thought possible, recovers itself enough to look at the objects around me, and even to contemplate with some degree of composure, my own present circumstances, and the prospect before me, which would a few, a very few months since, have appeared quite insupportable. (311)

What is interesting about this passage is not only that an otherwise inaccessible perception comes in the moment of relaxation from alarm, but that the pause from alarm heightens the mind's elasticity altogether. Smith suggests, as Wordsworth does, that while attention increases sensitivity or receptivity, it is a receptivity that only works once the attention relaxes. Consider one final example of an interest in the elastic rhythms of attention: William Godwin devotes a section of his *Thoughts on Man* to "mental indolence," which he calls "the holiday of the faculties: and, as the bow, when it has been for a considerable time unbent, is said to recover its elasticity, so the mind, after a holiday of this sort, comes fresh, with an increased alacrity, to those occupations which advance man most highly in the scale of being" (125). This mutual interest among literary writers in a recovered elasticity, in sensing and expanding the mind's elasticity at the moment when the organs of attention relax, might have something to do with its proximity to the rhythms of reading, for all three author describe a rhythm between the strain and slackening of attention that is at work in the casual everyday movements of reading.[3] I'd like to suggest that Wordsworth's poetics heighten and draw

[3] In a section of Charlotte Smith's pedagogical text *Rural Walks* called "The Alarm," both of the alarms described in the text interrupt a scene of reading, disrupting an attention engrossed by reading with an

attention to this rhythm necessary to perception and built into the experience of reading, a rhythmic experience which Wordsworth likens to speech; as Brennan O'Donnell writes of Wordsworth, "verse formalizes the basic physical rhythm of tension and release, exertion and relaxation, in the speech apparatus itself" (33).

Wordsworth's work reveals an engagement with contemporary disputes in psychology and the sciences of attention: note the echoes, for example, of Wordsworth's famous lines "The eye – it cannot chuse but see/We cannot bid the ear be still;/ Our bodies feel, where'er they be,/Against or with our will" in William Hamilton's claim in his *Metaphysics* that "We cannot determinately refuse to hear by voluntarily withholding our attention; and we can no more open our eyes, and, by an act of will, avert our mind from all perception of sight, than we can, by an act of will, cease to live" (172).[4] The poet's interest in the rhythmic reflexes and relaxations of attention not only contributes to the scientific investigations of attention at the time but also raises the question of how his own poetry might demand, manage, deflect, or distract the attention, asking what kind of poetics of attention is at work in his own verse, and how the poet's phenomenological observation about relaxing his own organs of attention might inform the organs of his readers.[5]

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alternative demand on the attention. Compare the following passages, which mark the start of the first and second of the text's alarms respectively:

> Hardly had Caroline finished repeating these lines, which, except the hour of the day, gave to her imagination the reflection of the scene before her, when suddenly, from an excavation in the rock which had concealed them, came forward a group of gypsies, two men, three women, and several little ragged children, who all speaking together a language peculiar to themselves, began to beg; while the three girls, extremely terrified, walked on as quick as they could, searching, however, for what halfpence or small money they had about them, which they threw towards the importunate group. (93)

> Hardly were these lines finished, when, at the iron gate which separated the court before the house from the common on which it was situated, a grumbling voice was heard, hoarsely and rudely demanding admittance. Terror and affright were immediately visible on the faces of the three girls; nor was that of Mrs. Woodfield entirely exempt from the same symptoms. She desired them to listen. (95)

The similarities between these passages show Smith's interest in the structure of alarm, and in the rhythm between exertions of the attention, between alarm and relaxation. Alarm, according to Smith's analysis here, emerges when the attention is engrossed by one thing and interrupted by another. Furthermore, the fact that she chooses scenes of reading as the initial activity in both examples suggests that there is a particular relation between the rhythms of reading and the rhythms of attention that produce alarm.

[4] Hamilton is responding to the dispute over whether Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart had overlooked the distinction between voluntary and involuntary attention, to which the latter responded by claiming that "the phrase *involuntary attention* must appear a contradiction in terms" since even "unintended distraction… was the effect of a particular volition of the mind" (7).

[5] While there have been significant studies in recent years of attention as it pertains to psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, music and art history, its importance for literature has gone relatively overlooked. An exception to this is the recent work of Nicholas Dames, who has written about novel theory in the Victorian Period by looking at texts' rhythms of attention. Though Dames' approach puts more of an emphasis on cognitive science, I find interesting his definition of "novelistic rhythm" as "a continual oscillation between 'relaxing' subplots, or purely discursive passages, and the more rigidly hermeneutic drives of suspense and revelation that create a particularly rapt, if necessarily short-loved, form of attentiveness" (Dames, "Wave-Theories" 7). See also Dames' *The Physiology of the Novel*, and Arata's "On Not Paying Attention."

Before turning to the poetics of attention, we should acknowledge the complicated state of the term "attention" around Wordsworth's time, as well as its precarious history. For, by analyzing the function of the "organs of attention," De Quincey's Wordsworth is invoking a notoriously unstable term (which the addition of "organ" to the phrase only complicates further).[6] "Attention" is a concept notoriously difficult to locate or define, a receptive activity sometimes difficult to distinguish from its supposed opposites or perversions: if you pay attention for too long or too intensely, it threatens to become a blank stare surprisingly close to distraction. The term is often defined either as a simple, minimal precondition for other, more effective operations, or, when the focus is on attention itself, it tends to be defined negatively, as a withdrawal from another act, or a suspension of judgment, will, or thought. From Descartes' position on attention, described by Matthew Riley as "the freedom to suspend judgment on a proposition – even if we are prompted to assent to it by our unreliable senses and passions – until we experience the certainty of evidence" (11) to Simone Weil's definition: "*L'attention consiste à suspendre sa pensée…surtout la pensée doit être vide, en attente, ne rien chercher, mais être prête à recevoir dans sa vérité nue l'objet qui va y pénétrer*" ["Attention consists in suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object"] (*L'attente de dieu* 75-76), attention is often characterized as a pause, suspension, or interruption, and by extreme fixity, stillness, passivity, and silence. It is perhaps this sense of attention as suspension or interruption which makes verse, with its regular rhythms of interruption and caesura, an opportune tool for thinking formally about the rhythms of attention; the rhythms of poetry both engage and expose the rhythms and reflexes of attention.

"Attention" is also a highly unstable term because it constantly threatens to turn into a state that looks like distraction, or a blank stare, the latter of which Blanchot evokes when he warns and instructs his reader: "*L'attention devrait être comme exercée par ce récit de manière à l'arracher lentement à la distraction initiale sans laquelle pourtant il sent bien que l'attention deviendrait un acte stérile*" (*L'attente l'oubli* 17) ["The attention should be exerted, so to speak, by this narrative in such a way as to draw it slowly out from the initial distraction, without which, however – he senses it well – attention would become a sterile act"] (*Awaiting Oblivion* 9). As Jonathan Crary writes in his account of the emergence of attention as a problem in modernity, "attention always contained within itself the conditions for its own disintegration, it was haunted by the possibility of its own excess – which we all know so well whenever we try to look at or listen to any one thing for too long" (47). Benjamin, too, in "Habit and Attentiveness" alludes to this slippery continuum on which attention and distraction lie: "It might be presumed that the soul can be more easily distracted, the more concentrated it is. Yet isn't this concentrated listening not just the furthest development of attention, but also its end – the moment when it gives birth to habit?" (592).

At the height of the development of psychology, attention proved troublesome. In *Matter and Memory,* Bergson complains that an adequate definition of the term cannot be found, lamenting that, no matter how we attempt to locate it, "we always come back to a metaphor" (122); his contemporary Théodule Ribot, who devotes a whole volume to the psychology of attention, resorts to calling it "an attitude of the mind…a *formal* state" (110), a definition that he acknowledges is vague, and, by 1905, German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus had conceded that, unable to make sense of it, "attention is a real embarrassment to psychology" (qtd. in Crary 45n). It should perhaps

[6] Some recent examples of surveys of the topic include the opening chapters of Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture,* Matthew Riley's *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment*, and Gary Hatfield's "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology."Given the fact that the two are waiting for the newspaper, it is interesting to note that the word "organ" at the time could also have been read as a synonym for newspaper. In "The English Mail-Coach," De Quincey calls the mail-coach "the national organ for publishing these mighty events" (184).

come as no surprise, then, given the inscrutability of attention, that there is also an extensive tradition that understands attention as a theological act or a mystical operation of the mind, a "force of the soul" according to Charles Bonnet, and the "natural prayer of the soul" for an array of thinkers from Malebranche to Walter Benjamin to Paul Celan. This line of thought, while it may appear to be a quite separate understanding of "attention," cannot, however, be divorced from its more seemingly scientific or secular counterpart, for it appears in the most secular articulations of attention; even at the height of the late nineteenth century disciplinary demarcation of psychology, for example, the concept of attention *as prayer* appears.[7] I would like to suggest, however, that attention's radical transformations demonstrate neither its incoherence nor its meaninglessness as a term, but they point, rather, to the way in which attention designates a site at which history and aesthetics interpenetrate.

The Romantic Period, as it is typically defined, emerges precisely in the gap between two periods of intense discourse surrounding attention, one wedded to Enlightenment science and philosophy, the other to the medicalization and pathologization of psychology. Attention became a distinct object of study in the eighteenth century, with thinkers like Bonnet and Condillac in France, Wolff, Baumgarten, and Sulzer in Germany, and Reid and Hamilton in Scotland, where much eighteenth century British thought on attention emerged.[8] The invention of attention as its own category and problem is often, however, attributed to late nineteenth century psychologists such as Bergson, Ribot, James, Fechner, and Herbart**.** While these thinkers certainly initiated a remarkable eruption of studies devoted to attention, this eruption followed, borrowed from, and revived a quieter one a century earlier.[9] Rather than trace this lineage further, however, I would like to suggest that De Quincey's anecdote about Wordsworth, and the literary exploration of rhythms of attention in which it participated, reveals a third, unrecognized Romantic writing of attention that, occupying

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[7] Malebranche's aphorism "attention is the natural prayer of the soul" is cited numerous times in twentieth century formulations of attention: repeatedly by Simone Weil, in Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, and in Paul Celan's "Meridian Address." It is striking to note that this tradition of attention *as prayer* makes its way to Ribot's secular psychology as well, in his section on the "Morbid States of Attention," where he refers to the "Castillo interior" of Saint Theresa and finds there a description of the seven stations, or degrees of prayer, one must pass to arrive at the interior castle of the soul. These degrees of prayer are aligned with different degrees of concentration, and include "oral prayer," "mental prayer," "prayer of recollection," "prayer of quietude," "prayer of union," "prayer of rapture," and finally "to its furthermost degree of concentration, to *absolute* monoideism" (Ribot 97-100).

[8] See Riley's *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment* for an excellent account of these German thinkers.

[9] A number of critics have recently shown that the emergence of attention as a category came earlier than the late nineteenth century, as the predominant reading has claimed. Examples of the latter include Titchener, who locates "the discovery of attention" with the emergence of "experimental psychology" in the late nineteenth century, and Jonathan Crary, in his survey of attention studies, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture,* who agrees, locating the problematization of attention in the latter period, and putting much rhetorical weight on marking the 1870's and 80's as different from previous discussions of the topic. Crary's interest in limiting attention to this period is part of his claim that a particularly *modern* distraction was not a disruption of stable or natural kinds of attention that had lasted for centuries earlier, but was itself an effect and a constituent element of the many attempts to produce and maintain attentiveness in human subjects (Crary 49). One interesting exception to this tradition is David Braunschweiger's 1899 survey of eighteenth century attention, *Die Lehre von der Aufmerksamkeit in der Psychologie des 18. Jahrhundert,* and his claim that following Christian Wolff, literature on attention in the eighteenth century exploded. Recent shifts in focus that have started to account for earlier theories of attention include Gary Hatfield's "Attention in Early Scientific Psychology," Matthew Riley's *Musical Listening in the German Enlightenment: Attention, Wonder and Astonishment,* and Matthew Bell's *The German Tradition of Psychology in Literature and Thought, 1700-1840.*

the gap between two periods of intensified attention *to attention,* constituted a literary exploration of the limits and conditions of attention as such.

The eighteenth century discussions of attention often pivot upon anxieties about new forms of mediation, a worry perhaps most famously articulated in Wordsworth's diagnosis of the "state of almost savage torpor" caused by "the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies" – a remark that speaks to the "deadly impatience" with which Wordsworth himself awaits the arrival of the newspaper in De Quincey's anecdote (Wordsworth and Coleridge 395).[10] Joseph Addison anticipates Wordsworth's description of the "rapid communication of intelligence" by the increasingly popular news media when, in 1712, in the pages of the daily magazine *The Spectator*, he describes the psychological impact of such "communication" in terms of an alteration of the temporality of attention. According to Addison, when one reads the newspaper, one's "Mind is every Instant called off to something new, and the Attention not suffered to dwell too long, and waste itself on any particular Object" (2.134). Forty years later, in his weekly essay publication *The Idler*, Samuel Johnson describes the relaxation of attention allowed by the news media not in terms of rapidity, but rather, paying homage to the title of the periodical in which his words would appear, as a form of "idleness": "One of the amusements of idleness is reading without the fatigue of close attention, and the world therefore swarms with writers whose wish is not to be studied but to be read" (2.94).[11] These passages, filled with anxiety about what were then new media, but which we now take for granted, also demonstrate the extent to which our contemporary anxieties about attention – about distraction from new media today, about attention deficit disorder, for example, – are limited neither to our time nor our specific new media, but in fact echo those that accompanied

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[10] The act of waiting for the newspaper is in fact crucial to De Quincey's story and Wordsworth's theory of attention within it, and it's interesting to note that, according to De Quincey, Wordsworth used to read the newspaper several days after it was published, since it first arrived at Coleridge's and then slowly made its way to him. In her *Georgic Modernity,* Kevis Goodman has looked to Cowper's *The Task* to understand the role of the newspaper in the mediation of history in the eighteenth century, pointing to the position it occupies in the *meantime* or *meanwhile*, emphasizing "the fullness and heterogeneity of the meanwhile," and writing that the newspaper's "speeding up of communication renders ongoing history as a process in flux; time contracts such that 'now' is always on the verge of expiring into 'then'" (70). Mary Favret considers the experience of waiting for the news exemplary of the temporality of war in the Romantic Period, writing that the experience of wartime waiting "includes this wayward meantime, the "lost hours" or "dull morn" between one delivery of the news and the next. And this meantime brings with it affective and epistemological effects that fall out of or away from the reassurances of chronological time" (70). Favret historicizes this sense of a lag-time - that in which De Quincey and Wordsworth impatiently wait - writing that the "feeling was only exacerbated for those living through these Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, riddled as they were with starts and stops, failed treaties, foiled victories, and a cataclysmic Hundred Days poised to reverse history" (74).

[11] Kevis Goodman cites this passage in her *Georgic Modernity* along with Johnson's counter complaint, that "the most eager peruser of news is tired before he has completed his labour" (Goodman 103). Goodman's chapter on "Cowper's georgic of the news" provides an excellent account of what I am trying to gesture to here: the rivalry between mediums of information at a time when the culture of news became predominant, and the particular intervention poetry makes in this rivalry. Goodman's claim, though, is not, she writes, that the relationship between the aesthetics that offers a rival medium of information and the news is simply "the 'displacement' or 'negation' of contemporaneity for the 'self'; instead she is making the much more interesting argument that "it defines this consciousness as the heir, a crucial if residual carrier, of a world of information-in-flux, that teeming historical presentness that is 'not yet' fully formed as knowledge, but presses insistently, insinuating itself at the level of recurrent figure" (Goodman 105).

the emergence of the newspaper, of novels, of big cities – concerns that are perhaps endemic to the precariousness of our concept of attention itself and not determined by any specific media.

Wordsworth joins the attributes of increased speed and idleness in the course of describing the effect of new forms of writing upon literature, bemoaning the appearance of "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 395), a complaint that Goethe echoes when, in a letter to Schiller upon arriving in Frankfurt in August of 1797, he contrasts the concentration demanded by poetry to the distracted nature of journal reading, evoking the solitude demanded by the former and likening the latter to "the peculiar character of the public in a large city":

> It struck me as very remarkable what the peculiar character of the public in a large city is. It lives in an incessant tumult of getting and spending, and that which we call high mood can neither be produced nor communicated. All pleasures, even the theatre, are intended only to distract [*zerstreuen*], and the great fondness of the reading public for journals and novels arises precisely thence, that the former always, and the latter mostly, bring distraction to distraction [*Zerstreuung in die Zerstreuung bringen*]. I even think I have remarked a kind of shyness towards poetic productions, or, at least, in so far as they are poetic, which, from these causes, appears to me quite natural. Poetry requires, nay, exacts, collectedness [*Sammlung*]; it isolates man against his will; it forces itself on the attention repeatedly, and is in the broad world (not to say the great world) as inconvenient as a faithful mistress. (I.295)

Goethe's remarks make explicit that novels, tragedies, and newspapers "bring distraction to distraction," and that poetry both demands and summons attention, concentration, and isolation. This direct link between forms of mediation and modes of attention accompanied, perhaps not surprisingly, a growing awareness of the mediating role of language itself, prompting investigation of how absorption of the attention relates to the perception of mediation. Both Coleridge and the eighteenth century philosopher and theologian George Campbell put the two in an inverse relation: the less the medium "intervenes," they argue, the more the attention is absorbed. An imperfection or "dimness" of the medium thus disrupts absorption and transfers attention away from the object and onto itself. According to Campbell: "the least obscurity, ambiguity, or confusion in the style, instantly removes the attention from the sentiment to the expression, and the hearer endeavours, by the aid of reflection, to correct the imperfections of the speaker's language." For Coleridge, writing about Shakespeare, only a "great poet" has "the power of so carrying on the Eye of the Reader as to make him almost lose the consciousness of words – to make him *see* everything - & this without exciting any painful or laborious attention" (*Collected Works* 5.82). The quality and quantity of attention paid, according to these thinkers, is thus a result of the text rather than the reader; the burden is on the writer to create a text that carries the reader's attention while demanding neither too little nor too much.

In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge repeats the gesture made by both Wordsworth and Goethe of categorizing literary genres by the amount of attention a text demands and maintains, a tradition exemplified by Cicero's definition of verse, in *De Oratore,* as a type of writing that gives "equal attention…to the beginning, middle and end of a line [*versus aeque prima et media et extrema pars attenditur*]," and for which "a slip at any point weakens its force" (III.xlix). Cicero further opposes this use of language to that practiced in rhetoric, noting that, when listening to a speech, "few people notice the first part of the sentences and nearly everybody the last part: so as the ends of the sentences show up and are noticed, they must be varied, in order not to be turned down by the critical faculty or by a feeling of surfeit in the ear" (ibid.). Drawing on this distinction, Coleridge

faults Wordsworth's early poetry for not heeding Cicero's demand for an *equal* and *steady* attention in verse, and describes the unfortunate result in terms that are strikingly close to both Goethe's and Wordsworth's own characterization of journalistic language, lamenting a *crowding* of language that, failing to adhere to the formal stricture that separates poetry from rhetoric, threatens to dissolve the distinction between poetic language and the language of the crowd. In the literary context, however, the crowding of language has the opposite effect of that produced by the language of the crowd. It does not accommodate a paucity of attention, but rather demands too much. Coleridge writes that "the novelty and struggling crowd of images acting in conjunction with the difficulties of the style, demanded always a greater closeness of attention, than poetry, (at all events, than descriptive poetry) has a right to claim" (*Biographia* I.77). Coleridge often repeats this notion of poetry's right to claim only a limited amount of attention, (also faulting his own early work for demanding too much), but always affirms Cicero's definition of verse as, in Coleridge's words: "no other than the property of exciting a more continuous and equal attention, than the language of prose aims at, whether colloquial or written" (ibid. 2.15).[12]

The sense that poetry demands more attention, and a more continuous attention, than prose has survived in twentieth century poetics, from Paul Celan's description of the "the attention the poem pays to all that it encounters" (50) to D.H. Lawrence's assertion that "the essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and 'discovers' a new world within the known world" (Gilbert 1). Celan's remarkable claim comes in his "Meridian Address," a speech that borrows from and is in dialogue with the work of Georg Buchner. In *Acts of Attention,* Sandra Gilbert associates Lawrence's poetics of attention with British Romanticism, citing Keats' claim that the "Genius of Poetry must…be matured…by sensation and watchfulness in itself" (11-13). Gilbert locates Lawrence's poetry in "the anti-traditional tradition of originality, spontaneity, and sincerity that was first fully articulated by Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," and noting that "Lawrence's sense that the poet must be skillfully passive, like his belief in sophisticated innocence, recalls Wordsworth's advocacy of 'wise passiveness'"(12). This poetics of an attentiveness that merges heightened receptivity, anxiety, and alarm is a Romantic one, combining passivity and watchfulness with anxiety and alarm, with a strong afterlife in the twentieth century.

Indeed, if poetry emerged as the genre that demanded the most attention of any genre, the figure of the poet in the Romantic Period was characterized by his or her heightened, intensified attention and receptivity. Gilbert's invocation of Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" is appropriate, for the poet emerged as a figure marked by his vulnerability to that to which he attends. Consider, for example, the case of Keats, who famously defined the impersonality of the poet as a vulnerability or susceptibility to others that echoes the vulnerability which accompanies a heightened attention: "When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated" (279). Keats' description of the "I" that is "in a very little time annihilated" reveals an encounter with a strange triangulation of attention, distraction, and destruction through the figure of the poet, who *is* nothing (annihilated), but that to which he

[12] It is interesting to note that Coleridge also theorizes meter in the *Biographia Literaria* in terms of attention. According to Coleridge, "Metre in itself is simply a stimulant of the attention, and therefore excites the question: Why is the attention to be thus stimulated?" (69). He explains that metre tends to increase the "vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention" and that "where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a stair-case, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four" (66).

attends.[13] Keats' description of the poet's self-annihilation, as well as some of his own verse, such as the *Hyperion* poems, suggests an extravagant, indulgent, prolonged, and painful attention, one that illustrates Benjamin's idea that "attentiveness and pain are complementary" (*Selected Writings* 2.592). This is a very different Keats than that we find in "Ode on Indolence," which resists the "*Cura* or attentiveness" that, according to Tillotama Rajan, "will preoccupy Keats throughout his career" ("Keats" 340). Yet the still, silent, and suspended attentiveness of the poet in Keats' *Hyperion* poems suggests an interest in attentive versus inattentive forms of receptivity. Consider the poet who witnesses the reciprocal exchange of stillness and patience between Hyperion and the stars:

> 'Meanwhile I will keep watch on thy bright sun,
> And of thy seasons be a careful nurse.'—
> Ere half this region-whisper had come down,
> Hyperion arose, and on the stars
> Lifted his curved lids, and kept them wide
> Until it ceas'd; and still he kept them wide:
> And still they were the same bright, patient stars. (II, lines 350-353)

Or consider the first person account – as though the poet were mimicking Hyperion's watch – of still, sustained attention framing the scene in *The Fall of Hyperion:*

> I sat myself
> Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,
> And seeing ne'er forget. No stir of life
> Was in this shrouded vale, not so much air
> As in the zoning of a summer's day
> Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass;
> But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest:
> A stream went voiceless by, still deaden'd more. (308-316)

Attention seems both to produce and respond to stillness, motionlessness, and fixity here, as if Keats suggests a causal link between the poet's scrutiny - "More I scrutinized" (445) - and the stillness and fixity in the line which it precedes - "Still fix'd he sat beneath the sable trees" (446). Keats' still, fixed, sustained attentiveness, which he resists in much of the rest of his poetry, here presents a poetics of attention quite distinct from Wordsworth's: it seems to require no relaxation, unless we consider the poem's own interruption, its fragmentation, an acknowledgment of the impossibility of sustaining this kind of attentiveness. The pain to which, and with which, the poet attends extends to the painful stretch of a continuous, heightened attention, evoking a stillness and fixity Rajan calls "oppressively static" ("Keats" 335). The annihilation here suggests some amount of pain, violence, and difficulty that accompanies attention, and yet it does not seem to acknowledge

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[13] Although attention typically serves as a psychological or cognitive category that creates a thinking and acting subject, there is another line of thought concerned with the ways that attention can *decreate* a subject, to borrow Simone Weil's term, from Weil's goal of an attention that becomes so full that the "I" disappears ("*cette attention si pleine que le 'je' disparâit*") to Walter Benjamin's warning that attention "to blow [*sprengen*] human beings apart." See also Benjamin's comments on the link between "distraction" and "destruction" in his "Theory of Distraction."

either the necessity or the productivity of distraction – of relaxation and looking away – that both De Quincey's recollection of Wordsworth and Wordsworth's poetics affirm.

Wordsworth's theory of attention requires a different poetics, which emphasizes the moment when the organs of attention relax. In a sense, Wordsworth's claim for a receptivity dependent on relaxed attention challenges Coleridge's Ciceronian desire for a poetics that would provide "perpetual and distinct attention to each part," for it makes a lapse in the reader's attention the condition of perceiving anything other than that which one already expects. Indeed, De Quincey present the story about Wordsworth as a corrective to literary critics: in recalling this conversation between the two writers, De Quincey argues that Wordsworth's "Boy of Winander" has been "ludicrously misconstrued" by critics, who have neglected the "philosophical hint" that the poem offers about "the experience of the eye and the ear" (*Lake Reminiscences* 122). For Wordsworth illustrates his observation about the "organs of attention" by pointing to his exploration of the "same psychological principle" in the Boy of Winander's "gentle shock of mild surprise," which enters "unawares" in the very moment that *follows* the boy's heightening of attention, an attention so absorbed that he "hung/Listening":

> And, when there came a pause
> Of silence such as baffled his best skill:
> Then sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
> Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
> Has carried far into his heart the voice
> Of mountain-torrents; or the visible scene
> Would enter unawares into his mind
> With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
> Its woods, and that uncertain heaven received
> Into the bosom of the steady lake. (lines 16-25)

De Quincey is particularly concerned with the interpretation of this passage proposed by Francis Jeffrey, who locates the poem's focus in the boy's skill at mimicking the owls so accurately that he fools the owls themselves. The "dismal oversight" in this interpretation, according to De Quincey, is that the "very object of the poem is not the first or initial stage of the boy's history – the exercise of skill which led him, as on occasion, into a rigid and tense effort of attention – not this, but the second stage, the consequences of that attention" (123). The centrality of "Boy of Winander" to Wordsworth's poetics has been discussed by many critics, who have pointed to Wordsworth's early version of the lines in the first person, as well as the relation between the loss of correspondence with nature and the boy's sudden death. Readings, like that by Paul de Man in his essay "Wordsworth and Hölderlin," that link the loss of correspondence in which the boy "hung/listening" and his death as well as Wordsworth's own death might then, according to De Quincey's logic, speak to Walter Benjamin's claim, in his fragment "Habit and Attentiveness," that attention, without habit, threatens to "blow the human being apart," as though it is the intensity of the boy's listening that caused his death (de Man 50-58).[14]

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[14] Wordsworth confirms the link between a heightened anticipatory attention and death in one of his illustrations of the "spots of time." In Book XI of *The Prelude,* the poet recalls an experience when "impatient for the sight/Of those two horses which should bear us home," he sat on the highest summit to watch and wait:

> With those companions at my side, I watched,

Wordsworth's gloss on the poem in his "Preface" to the *Poems* of 1815 confirms De Quincey's recollection of Wordsworth's emphasis on the moment when the attention relaxes: "The Boy, there introduced, is listening, with something of a feverish and restless anxiety, for the recurrence of the riotous sounds which he had previously excited; and, at the moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit, he is surprised into a perception of the solemn and tranquilizing images which the Poem describes" (*Poetical Works* 472). It is clear that Wordsworth's celebrated poem thematizes the "moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit," but the question remains how literature might *formally* engage this insight. The difference between Wordsworth's gloss and the lines themselves reveal the importance of poetic form for pointing to, heightening, and emphasizing the "moment when the intenseness of his mind is beginning to remit." The rhythms of verse - of line breaks, enjambment, caesura - and the pace of reading condensed, poetic language produces a situation in which the reader is repeatedly "surprised into a perception," as the poet writes of the boy. The break between "pause" and "of silence," for example, insists that the reader pause at the word "pause" to experience the silences of verse and become like the boy, listening to the silence of the scene. Wordsworth recognizes that what he calls in a letter to Thelwall the "passion of metre" is "felt especially at line boundaries" because it evokes a feeling of physical restraint (O'Donnell 188).

The line break between "hung" and "listening" thematizes a heightened attention while showing how an identical anticipatory listening is built into verse form, as though the reader's attention hangs or suspends in the space from one line of verse to the next. In "Wordsworth and the Victorians," Paul de Man lists all of Wordsworth's uses of the verb "to hang," reads the poet's preoccupation with this verb as "*the* exemplary metaphor for metaphor, for figuration in general," and finds in the word "a full-fledged theory of metaphor as suspended meaning, as loss and restoration of the principle of analogy beyond sensory experience" (88-89). At an even simpler level, I'd like to suggest that this rhythm of loss and restoration is built into verse form, into the rhythms of line breaks and enjambments, and that this rhythm gains an elasticity there. It is a rhythm felt by all readers, but particularly by the reader of poetry as a tautening and relaxing of the organs of attention; the experience of listening for the next verse is a kind of hanging or suspension (think again of the tendency to define attention as suspension, as waiting). This is not saying much about poetry or reading that we do not already know; reading is temporal, and thus provides the reader with an experience of waiting and an exercise of the reflexes of attention. But Wordsworth's poetics accentuates and calls attention to the rhythms of attention and distraction that are present in any experience of reading. His awareness of the powerful perception that comes in the moment of relaxation suggests that his verse experiments with the very withdrawal from watchfulness that it thematizes.

> Straining my eyes intensely as the mist
> Gave intermitting prospect of the wood
> And plain beneath. Ere I to school returned
> That dreary time, ere I had been ten days
> A dweller in my father's house, he died,
> And I and my two brothers, orphans then,
> Followed his body to the grave. The event,
> With all the sorrow which it brought, appeared
> A chastisement. (XI: 360-368)

The child's experience creates a causal link between the "anxiety of hope" that strains his eyes "intensely" and the death which follows such anticipation, suggesting both a violence and loss consequent to extreme attention.

In his description of the way that we only feel suspended life in the moment of its recommencement, De Quincey writes that "the pulses of life are beginning to beat again: and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them" (*Confessions* 85). De Quincey's use of the word "parenthesis" here is crucial; for it reveals that the rhythms of sensibility and insensibility, of attention and its relaxation, are, firstly, rhythms of reading. Most recent critical work on readerly attention has focused on the reading of prose. Nicholas Dames, for example, finds in Thackeray "a rhythmic oscillation between attentiveness and distraction, or alertness and obliviousness, that characterized all reading, particularly all reading of novelistic narrative" (*Physiology* 77). Dames points to Barthes, who, also writing about prose, in *The Pleasure of the Text,* writes about a rhythm of reading established by prose – a rhythm of what is read and not read, what the prose reader skips over or inevitably cannot fully attend to (10-11). Dames claims that Thackeray both acknowledges and indulges this rhythm by offering readers "spaces to 'opt out' of attention" (83). Surprisingly, there has been much less interest in the attention of the reader of poetry. Is the line break and blank space around verse a "space to 'opt out' of attention"? Or does it serve as an anticipatory space in which the reader "hangs/ listening"? Does attention increase or decrease as the reader moves from one line to the next? The fact that attention is often figured as both engagement and suspension, as activity and interruption, suggests that both understandings of poetic form are possible, and that the rhythms of verse might, in fact, pivot upon an elastic movement between these two models of readerly attention.

II. Paying Attention to History

> But there is something else – call it a consistent eventfulness,
> A common appreciation of the way things have of enfolding
> When your attention is distracted for a moment, and then
> It's all bumps and history, as though this crusted surface
> Had always been around, didn't just happen to come into being
> A short time ago.
>
> - John Ashbery, "A Wave"

The quality of attention that De Quincey describes in his recollection of Wordsworth's ear to the ground is historical in two ways: Wordsworth presses his ear to the ground of that "narrow field of battle," as if listening for both the arrival of the news which will provide information about the current war in which England is engaged and the sounds of the battle of 945 which took place at the site where he waits. The image of Wordsworth's ear pressed to a mythic battlefield - one that, according to legend, still serves as the grave for a king - suggests a haunted relation to sites of history and death akin to Godwin's demand, in his "Essay on Sepulchres," to "indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with these men, by repairing to the scene which, as far as they are at all on earth, *they still inhabit!*" (*Essays* 12). As Mary Favret writes: "The archetypal setting for such a sublime encounter with history is the site of past battle. Stripped of arresting props, depopulated of actors, the now vacant battlefield lends itself all the more to promoting a viewer's historical imagination" (*War at a Distance* 213). The poet is pressing his ear to the ground to listen for the sounds of wars from the past, like the child in Benjamin's *Berliner Childhood around 1900*, who witnesses history by "steeping" his senses in history's material remains: "A looted shopwindow, the house from which a dead body had been carried away, the spot on the road where a horse had

collapsed – I planted myself before these places in order to steep my senses in the evanescent breath which the event had left behind" (*Selected Writings* 3.378). The gesture suggests a literalization of the sense of history, as though Wordsworth might hear of past wars by listening intently to the ground on which they occurred, while waiting for the news of current wars. Waiting for the news of war on a historic battlefield, it is as though his attention to history encompasses both history long past and the making of history in the present, or as if Wordsworth's posture of "wartime listening" (Barrell 132) promised sounds from any war, upsetting chronological time. Wartime listening refuses to distinguish past from present, the uncanny effect of listening at and to what De Quincey elsewhere calls "bas-reliefs of battle-fields; of battles from forgotten ages – of battles from yesterday – of battle-fields that, long since, nature had healed and reconciled to herself with the sweet oblivion of flowers -… battle-fields that were yet angry and crimson with carnage" (*Confessions* 230).

Wordsworth's posture also, of course, combines the attempt to listen to the past at its site of occurrence with current military positions of guarding and keeping watch; his position, with his ear to the ground, mirrors the precise demands made in a text titled "Address to the farmers, and brave inhabitants of the Weald of Sussex" published in *The Anti-Gallican* in 1804. The pamphlet instructs:

> Observe where the enemy takes up his quarters, approach at night as near as possible, and fire at the centinel; this will make the whole party stand to their arms, and by breaking their rest will distress them. A party formed for this laudable purpose, should, when they halt post a centinel in a tree to discover the enemy. At night, should the centinel be doubtful of any one's approach, let him put his ear to the ground. Every person going towards the enemy, or being where he has no obvious business, should be arrested and sent to head-quarters. (378)

Wordsworth's posture thus conflates the military demand that the centinel listen for the approach of the enemy with the civilian frustrations of waiting to hear news of a distant and inaccessible war, as well as with the difficulty of finding or sensing auditory traces of history in the landscape.[15]

De Quincey's anecdote about Wordsworth takes place in what Favret calls the "meantime" of war, that of a military wait for action and a civilian wait for the news; yet Wordsworth's claim for a receptivity dependent on the relaxation of the organs of attention complicates this experience, since, according to Wordsworth's logic, the *new* can only arrive when one stops waiting for it - at the

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[15] One of the privileges that the British maintained during the period of war was a privileged detachment from the war such that it was never directly visible. War was always "at a distance" as Mary Favret has put it, and thus difficult to either imagine or hear. One broadside is explicit about this distance: "It has been our peculiar privilege, through the whole of this unprecedented War, to triumph over our enemies without ever seeing them, without any exposure of our personal security, without any interruption of our domestic quiet" (*An Appeal*). De Quincey has his own account of how sound and listening mediate the political, echoing Wordsworth's gesture of bending his ear to the ground to hear historical experience:

> But the tears and funeral bells were hushed suddenly by a shout as of many nations, and by a roar as from some great king's artillery advancing rapidly along the valleys, and heard from afar by its echoes among the mountains. 'Hush!' I said, as I bent my ear earthwards to listen – 'hush!' – this either is the very anarchy of strife, or else' – and then I listened more profoundly, and said as I raised my head – 'or else, oh heavens! it is *victory* that swallows up all strife.' (*Confessions* 228)

moment when attention is relaxed.[16] At stake in the contrast between the newspaper and perception of the new is what De Quincey calls, in a different wartime context, the ability "*aliud agere,* to mind something alien, or remote from the interest then clamouring for attention" (*Works* 17.49). In a text published in 1850 in *Hogg's Instructor* called "Presence of Mind: A Fragment," De Quincey writes at length about the particular form of focused and controlled concentration demanded by war, likening the "modern military orders of 'Attention!' and 'Eyes strait!'" to "the Roman formula for summoning an earnest concentration of the faculties…*Hoc age*, 'Mind this!,'" an imperative De Quincey equates with "do not mind *that – non iliud age*."[17] He holds this formula responsible for what he considers the primary characteristic of the Roman character: "the morbid craving for action, which was intolerant of anything but the intensely practical" (ibid.). De Quincey mentions this Roman characteristic, outlined in the fragment as an opposition between military action and contemplative thought, as a warning to "we of the Anglo-Saxon blood," a group whom he characterizes as similarly unable to "to mind something alien." This challenge – to mind something other or alien – is precisely what Wordsworth aims for: to notice something *other* than that for which one waits. This raises the question of whether one can will this surprising and productive moment of inattention. Can one act so as to induce this kind of productive or active passivity? Although De Quincey praises Caesar for his preparation for "sudden danger (sudden but never unlooked-for)" (17: 53), he also, at least at the onset of "Presence of Mind," makes the connection between an ability to concentrate the attention and the growth of empire and "fearful" accumulation of power that he finds dangerous in its monomaniacal ambition.[18] This claim suggests that the stakes of his

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[16] In Charlotte Smith's "The Alarm," waiting for wartime news is directly linked to a divided attention and a state of alarm. Note the presence of three variations of the word *attention* in the opening sentence to "The Alarm":

> The Alarm. The dark and gloomy month of November was now arrived; but to outward appearances the family of Mrs. Woodfield gave less attention than usual, for they expected, by every post, to hear that Colonel Cecil, who was arrived in London and slowly recovering, would fix the day for setting out for their abode; and only his earnest desire, and the necessity of constant attendance on her family, prevented his sister from attending him in town.

The passage immediately brings to mind the waiting Mary Favret describes as the "wayward meantime" of wartime, "the 'lost hours' or 'dull morn' between one delivery of the news and the next" (70). The family devotes all of their attention to this wartime anticipation, waiting to hear news by the post of the Colonel, who has returned, wounded, from his service abroad. The sense that war, injury, and loss dominate the attention is clear here, as is the idea that an engrossed attention to one thing (the post) is a distraction from another (the weather), an observation we may take for granted, but which Smith emphasizes in order to show how alarm is produced through an inevitably divided attention, or through the movement from an attention to one thing to another.

[17] On De Quincey's use of "this" and "that" as signals for "self" and "other," see Barrell's *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey,* 10-11.

[18] Despite this connection, De Quincey elsewhere reprimands himself for his lack of presence of mind, writing in "The vision of sudden death":

> I pretend to no presence of mind. On the contrary my fear is that I am unusuall deficient in that quality as regards action. The palsy of doubt and [distraction] hangs like a guilty weight of dark unfathomed remembrances upon my energies, when the signal is flying for *action.* But on the other hand this accursed gift I have, as regards *thought,* that in the first step of any calamity the possibility of misfortune I see its total evolution. (*Works* 16. 475)

recollection of Wordsworth are higher than he lets on, since it reveals an interest in the kinds of attention demanded by, and excluded from, war. The phrase "*aliud agere,*" "to attend to something else," is particularly resonant given the sense that "*agere*" can mean not only "to do" in Latin, but also "to wage," as in "*agere bellum,*" to wage war. De Quincey's interest in the ability "*aliud agere*" suggests an implicit contrast with the decision "*agere bellum*," as if the choices were limited: either one wages war or one pays attention to something else.[19]

It may seem surprising to associate De Quincey with a concern for the perception of, or even an ethics of, alterity after John Barrell's influential study *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism,* a book which pathologizes De Quincey's relation to the "*aliud*," or otherness. There, Barrell characterizes De Quincey's work as an inoculation of the self with a small amount of otherness in order to immunize against the radically other - the East. According to Barrell's persuasive readings, De Quincey's work is concerned with how that which is first "other" can be brought to the side of the self by a third absolute other (10).[20] E.S. Burt offers quite a different understanding of De Quincey's relation to otherness in her essay "Hospitality in Autobiography: Levinas Chez De Quincey." Reading De Quincey's *Confessions* by way of Levinas, Burt claims that "De Quincey's I is hungry for the relation to the other that lets it come into being," and she finds in his writing an "encounter with the other [that] sets the I in crisis, shaking it out of its narcissistic complacency and endowing it with a sense of responsibility not limited by experience" (872). In response to Barrell's pathologization of De Quincey's imperialism and xenophobia, Burt suggests considering De Quincey's rhetoric in an ethical framework, and argues that De Quincey is critiquing the ideology that Barrell claims he participates in: "To stage an ideology in formation is not to speak for it," she insists (889). Burt concludes, invoking a Levinasian framework, that De Quincey's *Confessions* is "about encounters with the other in which the subject emerges in a community as an ethical being hostage and host to the other" and "about an I in the thrall of an alterity overwhelming it, and a community prey to racism, fear, false religion, ideology-making" (892). Wordsworth's work poses a similar challenge to the problem of whether postures of keeping watch participate in or implicitly critique ideologies reliant on alarmism and the militarization of attention. I do not presume to solve the problem of De Quincey's ambivalent relation to otherness here. His discussion of paying attention to *something else* in "Presence of Mind" also fluctuates in its approach to otherness, and it certainly does not present a consistent position on race, nationalism, or imperialism. (Only a page after aligning presence of mind with "fearful" power, he seems to admire it.) There is no question, in a text like "The English Mail-Coach," that De Quincey gives voice to a fervent nationalism. Yet "Presence of Mind" reveals De Quincey to be one of the few thinkers who makes explicit the links between presence of mind and power, between how we pay attention and how we respond to others, and who recognizes the subtle intersections of attention, ethics, and imperialism.[21] In this way, he not only participates in the shared Romantic era interest in attention's elasticity, but also helps us to understand how that elasticity affects historical and political modes of attention.

Indeed, given his concern in "Presence of Mind" for how war manages the attention, it is surprising that De Quincey leaves implicit the wartime climate in which he and Wordsworth were

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[19] Thanks to Kevis Goodman for pointing out this implication of the Latin phrase.

[20] Barrell reads "the anxiety necessarily attending lying in wait" and alertness to "the least noise" in the Dunmail Raise passage beside De Quincey's story "The caçadone." For Barrell, images of "wartime listening" seem to recall the scene of ambush in the caçadone –a scene of primal fantasy, where sexuality and violence converge as one corpse is stretched out across another (132-133).

[21] On De Quincey's opposition of power to knowledge, see Balfour's "On the Language of the Sublime and the Sublime Nation: Toward a Reading of 'The English Mail-Coach.'"

waiting together for the newspaper, as well as the presumably war-related content of the newspaper that failed to arrive that evening. He unemphatically locates the incident on one of many evenings "during the Peninsular War…when some great crisis in Spain was daily apprehended," even though he had already elsewhere likened the daily distribution of newspapers to "the opening of apocalyptic vials" (*Confessions* 184). Nor does De Quincey remark on the proximity between Wordsworth's "intense condition of vigilance" and the intense vigilance demanded of all civilians at the time to protect England against the threatened French invasion: "I would pluck from your minds the poisonous weed, security, and plant in its place vigilance and resolution," reads one characteristic pamphlet (Klingberg and Hustvedt 41). To conflate these two conditions of vigilance would suggest an appeal to relax such heightened wartime attention and a warning that the vigilant expectations of invasion preclude *other* perceptions - or perception *of others* - by excluding the ability "*aliud agere*."

Wordsworth repeatedly registers the problem of how to witness history – which often pivots on an unsuccessful attempt to steep his senses in the French Revolution – through figures of attention and inattention. In Book IX of *The Prelude,* he explains his initial indifference in Paris to the Revolution with the simple fact that his attention was engrossed in other things:

> But hence to my more permanent residence
> I hasten: there, by novelties in speech,
> Domestic manners, customs, gestures, looks,
> And all the attire of ordinary life,
> Attention was at first engrossed: and thus
> Amused and satisfied, I scarcely felt
> The shock of these concussions, unconcerned,
> Tranquil almost, and careless as a flower
> Glassed in a greenhouse, or a parlour-shrub,
> When every bush and tree the country through
> Is shaking to the roots – indifference this
> Which may seem strange, but I was unprepared
> With needful knowledge, had abruptly passed
> Into a theatre of which the stage
> Was busy with an action far advanced. (IX: 81-95)

Unprepared and thus unable to comprehend his spectatorship of the theatre of Revolution, Wordsworth ascribes his anesthesia and insensibility to the absorption of his attention elsewhere, in the novelties of foreign life, an inattention equated to carelessness, lack of concern, tranquility, and indifference.[22] The lines also put into question the reader's attention and indifference, deferring the arrival of the object of his indifference, so that the reader must become engrossed in the lengthy list of ordinary distractions: "novelties in speech,/ domestic manners, customs, gestures, looks" and cannot attend to the historical crisis despite the poet's indifference. Even when descriptions of revolutionary events do enter these lines, they always share a line with their own negation: "The shock of these concussions, unconcerned" or "Is shaking to the roots – indifference this." These pairings of concussion and unconcern, or of shaking and indifference, point to the difficulty of attending to history, and the way that major historical shifts can only be seen from a distance or

[22] The "shock of these concussions" echoes the "gentle shock of mild surprise" from "Boy of Winander." For a reading of these shocks in relation to trauma theory, see Cathy Caruth's interview with Geoffrey Hartman in *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment.*

from afar. It may seem obvious, but the sense that we can only pay attention to one thing at a time, and that attention can only hold so much, suggests quite simply the fundamental impossibility of paying attention to ongoing history*;* "history," writes Godwin in his "Essay on Sepulchres, "is necessarily limited, by the limited faculties of the human mind to take in and store up facts, and masses of facts" (*Essays* 27).

The phrase "I scarcely felt/ The shock of these concussions" suggests a slight registration of historical event, albeit very minimal. After all, the lines do follow an attempt to attend to the events, which fails: "in honest truth," he writes, "I looked for something that I could not find,/Affecting more emotion than I felt" (IX. 71-73). The words "shock" and "concussion" are vertiginous in the line, since both words, though describing external historical events, also suggestively resonate as descriptions of internal emotional or medical conditions, since they also carry the possibility of describing an event's effects on the mind of its witness. Both words are slippery since they can describe the event, but they can also describe a numbing or desensitizing of the mind that makes the event difficult to comprehend. Even though Wordsworth insists that he was indifferent, unconcerned, his use of the word "concussion" suggests that attention or concern may not have been entirely feasible. For "concussion" implies a description not only of the historical and political crisis and upheaval which he scarcely felt but also of an injury to the mind that causes such insensibility and prevents full attention, and in this sense, his description implies that a direct attention to a historical "concussion" may not be possible because even a scarce, slight encounter with it "concusses" the mind and thus averts the attention. For a "concussion," by definition, prevents sensibility and distracts the attention. John Abernethy, who refers to a concussion as "the immediate consequence of the shock" (58), lists, in his 1797 *Surgical and physiological essays,* the "whole train of symptoms following a concussion of the brain," which include those Wordsworth faced upon his arrival in Paris: a "state of insensibility" in which the patient is "inattentive to slight external impressions" or seems "as if his attention was occupied by something else" (59). There is thus a kind of metonymic slip from the shock of the political concussion to the mind which attempts to attend to it and, thereby, *is concussed*, as though trying to understand or diagnose a concussion replicates the condition on to the observing mind. Furthermore, a medical concussion is also an apt metaphor for an historical event, since it is distinct in this medical literature as an injury that is caused by external violence, but which nevertheless leaves no external marks, "a derangement…which does not leave such marks of its existence behind it as to render it capable of having its real nature ascertained by dissection" (132). Wordsworth will go on to characterize the site of historical violence as a similar illegible injury, which causes pain to those who try to read it, as though Wordsworth's "indifference" were itself a response to political concussion.

In her account of witnessing the Revolution in the Introduction to her *Poems*, Helen Maria Williams explains this strange difficulty of paying attention to historical "convulsion":

> I have seen what I relate, and therefore I have written with confidence; I have there been treading on the territory of History, and a trace of my footsteps will perhaps be left. My narratives make a part of that marvellous story which the eighteenth century has to record to future times, and the testimony of a witness will be heard. Perhaps, indeed, I have written too little of events which I have known so well; but the convulsions of states form accumulations of private calamity that distract the attention by overwhelming the heart, and it is difficult to describe the shipwreck when sinking in the storm.

Although "concussion" carries different resonances from "convulsion," Williams's worry about describing the shipwreck when sinking in the storm registers a similar difficulty of attending directly

to history that we hear in Wordsworth's metaphor of walking into a theater in the middle of the action. Both writers posit a certain distance necessary for a proper attention to history. Yet Williams presents a slightly different account of how political convulsion leads to the mental concussion of its witnesses. Williams' idea, that such convulsions "form accumulations of private calamity that distract the attention by overwhelming the heart," suggests that attention to public, political history is distracted by way of too much private calamity. Political and personal crises are in a causal relation with one another, but also in a competitive one, because they compete for attention. Both Wordsworth and Williams align an inability to keep up with historical events with the selectiveness of attention, and with the dialectic of attention through which an attention heightened is always also a distraction from something else – "an attention so absorbed," writes Anne-Lise François about Virgil, "it looks like heedlessness" ("Not thinking" 65).

We might assume from these lines which claim that his attention was absorbed elsewhere that if Wordsworth wanted to he could witness history simply by paying attention to it. Yet, when he comes back to Paris, this time engaged by the Revolution, he looks directly at the site of the September Massacres, but encounters only "mute leaves":

> I crossed – a black and empty area then –
> The square of the Carousel, few weeks back
> Heaped up with dead and dying, upon these
> And other sights looking as doth a man
> Upon a volume whose contents he knows
> Are memorable but from him locked up,
> Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
> That he questions the mute leaves with pain,
> And half upbraids their silence. (X: 55-63)

The pain of trying to attend to historical violence is registered here as blankness and incomprehension; history is a foreign language that is painful to translate. It injures its witness, spreading the concussion and its empty blankness from object to observer. Looking for a feeling that the poet cannot find, he is overwhelmed by what Keats calls, in "Drear nighted December," "the feel of not to feel it." The proximity between the poem's own dashes and the word "cross" and the sense of making something "black and empty" suggests as well that the poem performs this illegibility for its reader, crossing out black areas of verse.

The figures of reading and illegibility proliferate in the passages on the Revolution with varying connotations: they metaphorize a spectatorship of history in which a sign is registered but not understood, while they also, on a different level, ask more literally how language and books mediate history. The "mute leaves" act as both the poem's metaphor for an unavailable history and for itself. Wordsworth refuses the correlation between clear, descriptive language and historical experience advocated by Lord Kames, whose historiographical principle of "ideal presence" demands a use of language "spread out in a lively and beautiful description" which narrativizes history so that "incidents long past [are] as passing in our sight." Kames writes: "I am insensibly transformed into a spectator: I perceive these two heroes in act to engage: I perceive them brandishing their swords, and chearing their troops; and in that manner I attend them through the battle, every incident of which appears to be passing in my sight" (69). For Kames, attention and history can seamlessly coincide through a model of history as fiction. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, in contrast, deals with the impossibility of being "insensibly transformed into a spectator," and asks what kind of a spectatorship of history is actually possible, especially with a stage that is always "busy with an action far advanced." If Kames' history is one that passes before our eyes as in "ideal

presence," Wordsworth's history is marked by absence and is constantly pushing up against the limits of attention. Through figures of muteness and pain, Wordsworth's lines mark the limits of the poet's capacity to attend, and suggest that attention's finitude, rather than its fidelity, may be what makes experience historical.

In Wordsworth's account, the only affective availability of the Revolution comes to the poet when he retreats to his room at night and no longer attends to the site of history. History, following the physiological observation about the "organs of attention," arrives when he looks away from it, relaxing his attention. Upon closer inspection, this retreat contains within it an experiment with the rhythms of attention and distraction, since the feeling of history actually emerges in the relaxed intervals *between* two modes of heightened attention: reading and keeping watch. When the poet retreats to his room to relax after encountering the "mute leaves" at the square of the Carrousel, he begins to heighten his attention by keeping watch:

> But that night
> When on my bed I lay, I was most moved
> And felt most deeply in what world I was;
> My room was high and lonely, near the roof
> Of a large mansion or hotel, a spot
> That would have pleased me in more quiet times –
> Nor was it wholly without pleasure then.
> With unextinguish'd taper I kept watch,
> Reading at intervals. The fear gone by
> Press'd on me almost like a fear to come.
> I thought of those September Massacres,
> Divided from me by a little month,
> And felt and touch'd them, a substantial dread
> (The rest was conjured up from tragic fictions,
> And mournful calendars of true history,
> Remembrances and dim admonishments):
> The horse is taught his manage, and the wind
> Of heaven wheels round and treads in his own steps;
> Year follows year, the tide returns again,
> Day follows day, all things have second birth;
> The earthquake is not satisfied at once' –
> And in such way I wrought upon myself,
> Until I seemed to hear a voice that cried
> To the whole city, 'Sleep no more!' To this
> Add comments of a calmer mind – from which
> I could not gather full security –
> But at the best it seemed a place of fear,
> Unfit for the repose of night,
> Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam. (X: 54-83)

There is a lot to say about these lines, which David Bromwich aptly calls a "political 'spot of time'" (84), and which bring together literary and military forms of attention to incite both anticipatory fear and historical remembrance in the safe retreat of the poet's own room. Relaxation and retreat produce a feeling of what Kevis Goodman calls "historical presentness" because they allow the organs of attention to relax, providing a distance from which to conceive history. The movement

from the phrase "*these* concussions," that we saw earlier, to "*those* September Massacres" suggests that it was the proximity of the concussions – marked by "these" rather than "those" – that precludes both understanding and feeling. The phrase "those September Massacres" suggests that distance has made them nameable.

Although the poet writes of feeling and touching the September Massacres, we should note that this historical experience actually emerges as an experience of anticipation and alarm – "a fear to come," "a substantial dread," and as a voice that cries, citing Macbeth, "Sleep no more!"[23] He experiences history here as alarm rather than event. Wordsworth's experience of history is not in the perceptual present, as in Lord Kames's insistence that "I attend them through the battle, every incident of which appears to be passing in my sight," but as retrospective fear and dread, belatedly experiencing the anticipation of an event rather than its occurrence., something akin to De Quincey's desire for "the past viewed not *as* the past, but by a spectator who steps back ten years deeper into the rear, in order that he may regard it as a future" (*Confessions* 174).[24] These models of history are ones that prioritize the feeling of anticipation and alarm rather than imagine the ability to reproduce or represent past actions or events. For Wordsworth, it is the act of keeping watch that creates a temporality of anticipation, even if it is aimed toward the past; "he who waits," writes Benjamin, "He takes in the time and renders it up in altered form – that of expectation" (*Arcades* 107).

How then are we to understand this embrace of the structure of alarm in the context of wartime alarmism? David Bromwich reads Wordsworth's paradoxical anticipation of history literally, writing that the poet fears because he "expects the city's violence to come back," and, writing in retrospect, the later Wordsworth is certainly aware that there is more violence to come (84). Yet phrases like "conjure up" and "wrought upon myself" evoke a labor and artificiality at work in his state of alarm, and suggestively remind us of the proximity between conjuration and alarmism. The word "conjure," as one might expect, appeared in a number of critiques of alarmism in the period, since it evokes the groundless fabrication of alarm. Critics worried about the "phantoms of invasion conjured by" alarmists.[25] This interest in a watch that *conjures* fear thus puts the poet in surprising proximity to alarmism and the militarization of attention, pointing to an unexpected overlap between Romantic poetry and wartime alarm. And certainly the fact that alarmism is prevalent in the year Wordsworth writes the poem (1805), and not just in the year Wordsworth is recalling (1792), suggests that he is also providing an accurate depiction of his experience of history in the present.

Yet Wordsworth's lines differ in several significant ways from the political alarmism of the period and intervene in the rhetoric of watchfulness as defense. For one, the poem conjures an

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[23] Here we see converging the poet's sense of wakefulness and watchfulness, a distinction that tends to collapse through words like "vigilance." On Wordsworth's poetics of wakefulness and insomnia in his odes to sleep, see Sara Guyer, "Wordsworthian Wakefulness." Guyer argues that wakefulness is the "condition and effect of Wordsworth's poetry" and that "lyric figures effect an abyss of uninterruptable wakefulness at the very moment that they are marshaled to solicit sleep" (93). Guyer is particularly interested in apostrophe in Wordsworth's odes, which she claims effects wakefulness. "In failing to restore consciousness or return vital subjects and visible objects," Guyer writes, "lyric figures allow for insomnia to be witnessed without being overcome" (94).

[24] See also Derrida's *Spectres of Marx:* "Even if the future is its provenance, it must be, like any provenance, absolutely and irreversibly past. 'Experience' of the past as to come" (xix).

[25] For example, see the account in the European Magazine from 1803: "The secretary at war insisted that our Naval and Military Forces were much greater now than at the commencement of any former war; he could not but ridicule the phantoms of invasion conjured up by Mr. Windham" According to the notes to Coleridge's "The Men and the Times," Addington's Secretary at War, Charles Yorke, in the debate of June 6 1803, asserted that he refused to fear "those phantoms of invasion which Mr. Windham had conjured up" (424).

alarm without an object, experiencing the feeling of fear without a recognizable thing to fear. By refusing to precipitate the object of his anxiety, Wordsworth's alarm resists the teleological watchfulness of alarmism that considers the enemy's invasion its only object. Whereas alarmists hastily predetermine the object of their watch, Wordsworth here keeps watch without knowing what he watches for.[26] Yet it is also possible that the absence of an object in Wordsworth's conjured state of alarm comments upon a political alarmism that functions irrespective of an object of fear. This effectively objectless state of alarm speaks to the state of watchfulness incited by alarmists, in that it shows how alarm can unhinge from an actual threat, and dislocate from its object, moving from Freud's definition of "fear," which "requires a definite object of which to be afraid" to "anxiety," which he calls "a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one" (*Beyond* 29-30). In this sense, Wordsworth's lines about keeping watch may also expose the danger that alarmism will feed on itself instead of on any actual threat. In her account of the September Massacres written in 1793, Helen Maria Williams provides some more specific context for thinking about the role of alarm in the massacres. She recounts:

> A general insurrection of the mob, therefore, seemed to them [Robespierre, Danton, and their "band of conspirators"] the best mode of eventually accomplishing their purpose. And as no mob sufficiently great was to be procured by their own means, they contrived to make the Assembly itself ignorantly acquiesce in their diabolical projects. On the day, therefore, when the massacres began, the Commune appeared at the bar, and informed the Assembly, that at two o'clock they should order the alarm guns to fire, and the tocsin to sound, that the people summoned onto the Champ de Mars might from thence march directly to meet the approaching enemy, who were coming with hasty steps to Paris, after having cut off the four thousand men sent to the relief of Verdun. – This was a falsehood, contrived and calculated, as they hoped, to accomplish their purpose: but though the people were much agitated, they were not sufficiently wound up for such an enterprise. (*Letters* 161)

Wordsworth's use of the word "conjure," which was also popular in critiques of alarmism at the time, combines the senses of summoning, contrivance, and calculation in Williams' description.[27]

And yet the reading I have been suggesting overlooks an important aspect of these lines from *The Prelude*. For the poet is not simply keeping watch, but is actually alternating rhythmically between keeping watch and reading, two activities which heighten the attention. "I kept watch, reading at intervals," he writes. What exactly is the relation between keeping watch and reading in the passage? In the lines "With unextinguish'd taper I kept watch,/ Reading at intervals," there is an ambivalence as to whether the act of reading comes in opposition to keeping watch, as a relaxation from the exertion of the attention, or apposition, as though reading is another form of watching, as in Blanchot's advice to the reader to "keep watch over absent meaning" (*Writing* 42). Regardless, as if aware that a new perception will only come with the relaxation from an intense brace of the organs of attention, the poet creates a rhythm between watchfulness and withdrawal which itself produces, or *conjures up*, historical experience by way of the state of alarm it would have produced.

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[26] "The feeling that produces dread," writes Blanchot "is only accidentally linked to an object, and it reveals precisely that this object – on account of which one is losing oneself in an endless death – is insignificant to the feeling it provokes and to the man it is torturing" (*Blanchot Reader* 345).

[27] See Derrida's account of the word "conjure" in Marx in *Spectres of Marx,* in which he writes of a similar interest in rhythm and interval in Marx: "he is taking the pulse of history. And he is listening to a revolutionary *frequency*. In regular bursts, the latter alternates conjuration and abjuration of the specters" (112).

For De Quincey's account of Wordsworth's theory of a perception that comes only with the relaxation of the organs of attention – in its *intervals* – suggests that it is neither the isolated act of reading, nor that of keeping watch that allows him to "touch" the September Massacres, but rather the *intervals* between these exertions of attention. There is a sense here that history is finally *felt* by the poet because it is almost physiologically generated, produced through an exercise of bracing and relaxing the organs of attention.[28] As though experimenting with the theory of attention and its relaxation that Wordsworth discovered on the road, the poet conjures a state of alarmed historical perception through the contracting and relaxing movement back and forth – in intervals – between exertions of attention.[29] And if we look back at the passage detailing De Quincey's recollection, we can see the importance of the interval, since Wordsworth stretched himself on the road "at intervals."[30]

The lines, "The fear gone by/ Press'd on me almost like a fear to come," do not explain the role of reading, but instead turn the time of reading into a time of anticipation, and point to the way that the form of verse heightens and highlights the rhythms of attention and inattention at work in all reading. Here the relaxation of attention and the mediation of history converge with the rhythms of verse: the line break between the "fear gone by" and "Press'd on me almost like a fear to come" offers an interruption of the attention while suspending the return of the past, so that, at the end of the initial line, we believe that the fear is irrevocably *gone by,* until the next line turns that loss into an adjective modifying a noun that is suddenly no longer gone, but that returns, *presses,* with the urgency of anticipation - "almost like a fear to come."[31] Because the line breaks of verse heighten the

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[28] The word "feel" in both passages helps Wordsworth straddle the boundary between the emotional and the material, a distinction that the word "touch" calls attention to as a synonym for "feel." "A substantial dread" does similar work; is it a dread with substance or the substance that dread creates?

[29] Consider again the difference between Wordsworth's poetics of attention and that of Keats. Rajan argues that Keats' attentiveness to silence and stillness in the *Hyperion* poems discloses a negativity in history, thinking of this particular quality of attention as "an aesthetic practice in which poetry is the care of the self framed within the care of history" (346). The intense patience and waiting in Keats's poems is akin to waiting for history to emerge; Rajan explains "The poem figures the aesthetic as this oppressive watchfulness, this waiting in what Blanchot calls the 'absence of the work' for the clearing in which one is able, only momentarily, to 'see as a god sees' (*Fall;*. I:304). Waiting in the absence of narrative, the poet steps out of 'the grand march of intellect' (*Letters,* 1:282) and attends to detail. He picks out the artifacts of a lost culture as they lie 'all in a mingled heap confus'd.'" (348). Though the two approaches to history share an interest in attention, Wordsworth's emphasis on relaxation, retreat, and the interval stand out in contrast to Keats' intensity.

[30] Wordsworth's interest in the perception created in the interval anticipates Shelley's claim in "A Defence of Poetry" that "Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of even new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food" (682). Consider also the role of the word "intermitting" in Wordsworth's prior description of a "spot of time" in *The Prelude* produced through the experience of anxious waiting as another interval:

> With those companions at my side, I watched,
> Straining my eyes intensely as the mist
> Gave intermitting prospect of the wood
> And plain beneath. (XII: 300-304)

[31] Alan Liu has read this scene as replicating the same pattern he sees in the Simplon passage: an apocalyptic figuration that denies history (35). Mary Jacobus remarks on the importance of reading to the scene, writing

experience of anticipation, the reader experiences the past as something *to come*; in this way, the passage is as much about poetics and its deployment of enjambment as it is about history. For enjambment prompts the expectation that the line that has just gone by will be picked up by the line to come. Wordsworth theorizes the work of poetry – the exercise it gives to the organs of attention – through his use of the alternating strain and relaxation of the attention that is built into verse form.

For Wordsworth, the news, the new, can only arrive when one stops waiting for it, at the moment when the organs of attention are relaxed. While the political rhetoric at the close of the eighteenth century placed a heavy burden on the senses of the English people in anticipation of the enemy's arrival, militarizing the attention, these lines suggest that certain kinds of literary form and the reading response that they encourage by contrast opened up a space in which a consideration of the limits of attention and an experimentation with the mind's elasticity became possible. By refusing to precipitate the object of his anxiety, Wordsworth's alarm resists the teleological watchfulness of alarmism that considers the enemy's invasion its only object, and transforms watchfulness into a phenomenological and literary experiment. Suggesting that a tactile and affective experience of anticipating history may only emerge with the relaxation of the organs of attention, Wordsworth neither re-enforces nor dismisses the rhetoric of watchfulness and attention at work in Romantic-era alarmism. Instead, he acknowledges the failure and finitude of a direct attention to the ground of history, while asking how a withdrawal from watchfulness might allow one "to mind something else" *aliud agere*, to perceive something that one would not otherwise have noticed, an experience of the past as if it were still to come. For Wordsworth, the poetics of attention produces something *else* only in the moment of the interval.

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that "Wordsworth's aural hallucination seems as much the result of reading too late as of revolutionary disquiet" (41).

Cowper, Coleridge, and the Empty Sounds of War

I. The Dying Sound, th' Uninjured Ear

> But quiet and security are now at an end. Our vigilance is quickened and our comprehension is enlarged. We not only see events in their causes, but before their causes; we hear the thunder while the sky is clear, and see the mine sprung before it is done. Political wisdom has, by the force of English genius, been improved at last not only to political intuition, but to political prescience.
>
> – Samuel Johnson, "The False Alarm"

> But farewell now to unsuspicious nights,
> And slumbers unalarmed. Now, ere you sleep,
> See that your polished arms be primed with care,
> And drop the night-bolt. Ruffians are abroad,
> And the first larum of the cock's shrill throat
> May prove a trumpet, summoning your ear
> To horrid sounds of hostile feet within.
>
> - William Cowper, *The Task*

In "The False Alarm" and "The Task," Samuel Johnson and William Cowper mark the present moment – 1770 for Johnson, 1785 for Cowper – as a loss of security. And both bid farewell to security by listening. Johnson equates security with quiet, and figures a quickened vigilance as an ability to *hear* something without seeing it: "we hear the thunder while the sky is clear."[1] Cowper traces the movement from safety to danger through a casual transformation of the word "alarm," which moves from "slumbers unalarmed" to "your polished arms" (picking up on the term's etymology), and then finally to "the first larum of the cock's shrill throat." To hear an ordinary rooster's crow as a "larum" suggests a state of vigilance so heightened that one wakes every day ready to hear even the most ordinary sounds as a call to arms, "a trumpet, summoning your ear/ To horrid sounds of hostile feet within." Both authors register the sense of readiness, anticipation, and a heightened attention to danger as a form of listening; even before the ear is summoned, it is already listening, and it hears the most ordinary, daily sounds as alarms.

Cowper alludes, elsewhere in "The Task," to this particular correspondence between listening and alarm, between sound and war; book IV begins with the arrival of the newspaper carrier, "herald of a noisy world" (IV.5), and the pleasure the speaker gains from reading or hearing the news from a safe distance: "The sound of war/ Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me;/ Grieves, but alarms me not" (IV.100-102). Cowper figures safety as an unharmed ear that hears news of a noisy world only from afar: "the roar she sends through all her gates/ At a safe distance, where the dying

[1] Johnson's essay is not about an invasion alarm. It is in defense of the House of Commons' decision to reject the election of John Wilkes. See Bate's *Samuel Johnson* (444) and Briraj Singh's essay "'Only Half of His Subject': Johnson's 'The False Alarm.'"

sound/ Falls a soft murmur on th' uninjured ear" (IV.91-93).[2] Since the sound of war is dying by the time it reaches the poet, it is in a weakened form and no longer carries the threat of a noisy world. And yet we might also read the "dying sound" as the sound *of* dying, the sound of war that grieves, even if it does not alarm. As Kevis Goodman explains in her reading of these lines, the news – the "loophole of retreat" through which the poet reads – "admits the threat it parries" (98), and the same phrase that registers the safe distance of a dying sound might also subvert that distance precisely by revealing the sounds of death. The sound of war might be "dying" by the time it arrives via newspaper, but it also still successfully carries the sounds of the "dying," performing another injury on the speaker's ear.

Why this link between sound and war, between listening and alarm? Why does Charles Pigott define "alarmists" as "dupes of the *sound*"? What does war *sound* like, particularly in a country that does not experience a foreign invasion, but that constantly anticipates its arrival? In her account of the invasion scares at the turn of the eighteenth century and the volunteer movement that emerged in preparation for an invasion, Linda Colley explains the key role of music and noise in persuading Britons to volunteer to take up arms. "It is easy to forget," writes Colley, "how limited a range of sound was normally available to the mass of people at this time…So when recruiting parties brought their wind instruments, drums and cymbals into small villages, the effect was immediate and powerful" (307). Colley understands the emphasis on sound in descriptions of the volunteer movement in terms of men who, "surrounded by loud and exhilarating noises…saw in volunteering a window onto a broader and more vivid existence" (308). I'd suggest that the particular relation between hearing and war goes beyond the vividness or exhilaration of loud sounds, and speaks to attention and its militarization, since, as Valéry claims, "Hearing is the sense most/ favored by attention; it holds the/ frontier, so to speak, at the point/ where seeing fails" (Qtd. in Piombino 53). Consider Erasmus Darwin's emphasis on listening in his description of the "language of attention" in *Zoonomia:*

> The eye takes in at once but half our horizon, and that only in the day, and our smell informs us of no very distant objects, hence we confide principally in the organ of hearing to apprize us of danger: when we hear any the smallest sound, that we cannot immediately account for, our fears are alarmed, we suspend our steps, hold every muscle still, open our mouths a little, erect our ears, and listen to gain further information: and this by habit becomes the general language of attention to objects of sight, as well as of hearing; and even to the successive trains of our ideas. (148)

Sound may be privileged because of its particular relation to epistemology; we can hear a sound "that we cannot immediately account for." This epistemological uncertainty aligns sound with fear: Lord Kames explains that, "with respect to inanimate objects of sight, sounds may be so contrived as to raise both terror and mirth beyond what can be done by any such object" (I.43).

Ears, like those "uninjured" in Cowper's line, are often linked to discourses of security, defense, and vulnerability perhaps because they cannot be fortified as an eye can: "The ear," Geoffrey Hartman explains, "must deal with sounds that not only cannot be refused entry, but penetrate and evoke something too powerful for any defense" (*Saving the Text* 123).[3] At stake in

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[2] See Kevis Goodman's complication of this distance in her reading of these lines and the "loophole of retreat" through which Cowper reads the newspaper (*Georgic Modernity* Chapter III).

[3] Kevis Goodman cites the same phrase from Hartman, explaining that only half of Wordsworth's famous proposition "The eye it cannot chuse but see,/ We cannot bid the ear be still" is true. "The eye can close its lid, or avert the gaze," writes Goodman, "the ear has no such protection" (*Georgic Modernity* 138).

sound is what Hartman calls the "phases of vulnerability" through which ears must pass (*Saving the Text,* 123). The particular vulnerability of the ears – as organs which one cannot close – causes many writers to align sound with invasion and listening with war. Descriptions of sound and listening are often figured in military or defensive terms; consider Burke's account of the "sudden beginning or sudden cessation of sound" by which the "attention is roused" and "the faculties driven forward, as it were, on their guard" (*Philosophical Enquiry* 123). More recently, Michel Serres likens having a conversation to defending against the enemy, noise. According to Serres, the speaker and auditor of a conversation "exchange roles sufficiently often for us to view them as struggling together against a common enemy" (67). John Barrell's phrase "wartime listening," therefore, might not simply designate the way one must listen in and to war, but also points to the invasive power of sound and the warlike quality of listening itself.[4] In this chapter, I read Coleridge's poem "Fears in Solitude, written in April 1798, during the Alarm of an Invasion" beside William Cowper's poem "The Needless Alarm" to investigate how both poems, which explicitly thematize wartime alarm and wartime listening, respond to the unexpected proximity between alarmism and poetry, both of which are commonly associated with "empty sounds."

II. Cowper's Listening

Although Burke is credited with the invention of the term "alarmist" to indicate a person "addicted to raising alarms" who "hence…raise[s] alarm on very slight grounds, or needlessly," ("Alarmist," def. 1a), the issue was an urgent political and aesthetic one prior to Burke's coinage of the term in 1793. Taking its title from the idea of raising alarm "needlessly," Cowper's poem "The Needless Alarm," written sometime before December of 1791, explicitly questions the necessity and origin of alarm by staging a debate about sound. The poem presents an alarmist sheep, which Cowper calls a "mutton"; at the sound of the frightful noise of a hunter, the "mutton" urges the rest of his flock of sheep that, in response to the violent sound, "life to save, we leap into the pit" (line 104). The contradiction inherent in this phrase alone reveals the kind of irrationally rash action Cowper associates with alarmism and with alarm itself. It also explains why the sheep is a mutton: quick to imagine his own death, the sheep is already dead meat.[5]

The alarm that the poem allegorizes is a distinctly war-time alarm prompted by a sound indicating violence. Cowper's poem begins with a "peace" that "by kind contagion spread" (42), but the violent sound of the fox hunter prompts the sheep not only to panic but also to get into a military position – "huddling into phalanx" – from their fear of danger.[6] Cowper writes:

All seem'd so peaceful, that from them convey'd

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[4] Goodman and Mary Favret have also shown the way noise, as a "trope for communicative interference," becomes a figure for the "noise of history," the "entry of historicity," and the "felt experience of wartime" in the period. Other examples of the particularly strong relation between war and sound during the Romantic Period include Walter Scott's poem "Written under the threat of invasion in the autumn of 1804," which contains a sense of the sound of history: "The wind is hush'd, and still the lake -/ Strange murmurs fill my tinkling ears,/ Bristles my hair, my sinews quake,/ At the dread voice of other years," and Mary Robinson's allusion in her war poem "The Camp" to the "noise that every noise surpasses."

[5] The OED actually cites Cowper's use of "mutton" here as an example of using to term to mean "A sheep, *esp.* one intended to be eaten" ("Mutton," def. 2a).

[6] For an account of Cowper's fervent opposition to fox hunting, see Donna Landry's *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking and Ecology in English Literature, 1671-1831*(119-132).

To me, their peace by kind contagion spread.
But when the huntsman, with distended cheek,
'Gan make his instrument of music speak,
And from within the wood that crash was heard,
Though not a hound from whom it burst appear'd,
The sheep recumbent, and the sheep that graz'd,
All huddling into phalanx, stood and gaz'd
Admiring, terrified, the novel strain,
Then cours'd the field around, and cours'd it round again;
But, recollecting with a sudden thought,
That flight in circles urg'd advanc'd them nought,
They gather'd close around the old pit's brink,
And thought again – but knew not what to think. (lines 41-54)

Unlike the "sound of war" in *The Task* that, brought to the poet by way of the daily newspaper, "Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me;/ Grieves, but alarms me not" (IV. 100-101), the sound of violence here, likened ironically to music, throws the sheep into a state of utter fear and into military postures of anticipation, and produces an experience of thinking without thought – they "thought again – but knew not what to think." Though the sheep respond to the sounds of hunting in the poem, both the scope of their fears and the poem's allegory allow us to hear the sounds of war in the brass claws and fangs imagined by the alarmist mutton:

But ah! those dreadful yells what soul can hear,
That owns a carcase, and not quake for fear?
Daemons produce them doubtless, brazen-claw'd
And fang'd with brass the daemons are abroad. (99-102)

The poem goes on to stage opposing arguments about the relation between sound and signification, dramatizing Kevis Goodman's insight that, for Cowper, "different ways of hearing are…different ways of knowing" (*Georgic Modernity* 86). The "mutton" and the "ewe," wearing "periwigs of wool" (75) stage their own nearly parliamentary debate about the sound of alarm. "'Friends!,'" the mutton begins, in an appropriately oratorical form of address, "'I never heard/Sounds such as these, so worthy to be fear'd'" (83-4). Picking up on the privileged connection between alarm and the ear evoked in the eye rhyme of "fear'd" and "heard," the mutton continues (and makes the rhyme a true rhyme): "But ah! those dreadful yells what soul can hear/ That owns a carcase, and not quake for fear?" (99-100). The word "carcase" recalls Cowper's joke with the word "mutton"; the alarmist's imagination entails a precipitous violence, as if he becomes a carcass from the *sound* of violence rather than from the violence itself.[7] The fact that Cowper calls the mutton "statelier than the rest" of the sheep implies a suggestive though humorous link between a collective, contagious alarmism that rushes to imagine violence and stately power and authority (81). In fact, Julie Ellison has written of Cowper's dedication to reading transcripts of parliamentary debate in the newspapers. Cowper writes of:

the grand debates,

[7] Consider Burke's observation in his *Enquiry*: "For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain" (101).

> The popular harangue, the tart reply,
> The logic, and the wisdom, and the wit,
> And the loud laugh – I long to know them all;
> I burn to set the imprison'd wranglers free,
> And give them voice and utterance once again. (*Task* IV.30-35)

Arguing that Cowper "translated newspapers into poetry" (222), Ellison explains that Cowper "is interested in the arguments that culminated in the fall of the Fox-North ministry, but he positively savors the "loud laugh" recorded in Woodfall's parliamentary report of Pitt's handling of an opponent in November 1783" (230). According to Ellison, Cowper's particular interest in the sound of Pitt's laugh reveals a "palpable craving for their voices" (230).

The "discreet ewe" responds to the alarmist mutton by pointing to the senselessness of leaping to their death out of fear of death, advocating the position later espoused in the poem's anti-alarmist moral to the poem: "Beware of desp'rate steps. The darkest day/ (Live till to-morrow) will have pass'd away." The ewe's sobering voice in the dialogue also provides an alternate approach to sound and noise, claiming that "Meantime, noise kills not" (115), a line which itself asks the reader to endure a dissonant "noise" in the poem's rhythm since it uncharacteristically ends a sentence in the middle of a line and is followed by a pause. The ewe proposes that:

> Sounds are but sounds, and till the cause appear,
> We have at least commodious standing here.
> Come fiend, come fury, giant, monster, blast,
> From earth or hell, we can but plunge at last. (119-120)

The "meantime," the time of waiting, is thus the time of listening without knowing what one listens to; this is the time in which sounds can be heard as "but sounds," with neither a cause nor a violence: "Meantime, noise kills not." Sounds might die, in other words, but they don't kill. This objectless listening transforms the objectless thinking in which the sheep paradoxically engage in the line "And thought again – but knew not what to think," for thinking without knowing *what* to think finds its correlate in the ewe's listening, a listening *with,* without knowing what to listen *for,* though the latter pointedly resists the confusion and fear of the former. The debate between the mutton and the ewe thus allows Cowper to stage two opposing positions about the work of listening and the interpretation of sound, and to expose the alarming gap between sound and signification, anticipating Pigott's definition of alarmists as "dupes of the sound." The alarmist mutton rashly conflates the sound of danger with the danger itself, while the more moderate ewe preserves the gap between the two and insists that they wait to see what the frightening sound might indicate.

In contrast to the alarmist mutton's hallucinatory listening, the ewe presents an ethics of listening without knowing to what it is she listens, proposing a form of patient listening that refuses to precipitate its object or to take up "arms" prior to knowing the cause of alarm. Cowper is responding to the concept Susan Stewart reminds us of, that "when we hear, we hear the sound *of something,*" and asking about the possibility of hearing without knowing what that something is, courting a form of uncertainty less often available to sight (100).[8] We can also hear a form of

[8] Stewart goes on to discuss the gap between the auditory and the epistemological in ways important to this discussion: "the continuity of sight does not provide an analogue to this attribution of source or cause in sound reception. And we do not pinpoint sound in space. We see properly only what is before us, but sound can envelop us; we might, as we move or change, have varying experiences of sound's intensity, but it will not readily 'fit' an epistemology of spatiality, horizon, or location" (100).

listening similar to the discreet ewe's in Freud's explanation of the task of the analyst, which he describes as "simply…not directing one's notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same 'evenly suspended attention' [*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*]…in the face of all that one hears." Freud justifies this technique of listening with a suspended attention by reminding his reader: "It must not be forgotten that the things one hears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later on [*Bedeutung erst nachträglich erkannt wird*]" ("Recommendations 111).[9] Cowper proposes a similar relationship between listening and interpretation, or sound and sense, presenting a form of hearing that postpones understanding and that embraces the meantime of noise – "meantime, noise kills not." Cowper thus critiques alarmism by proposing an ethos of a suspended attention that extends the distance between, and potentially breaks the link between, the auditory and the epistemological.

While the poem thematizes the opposition between a precipitous, alarmist form of listening and a "discreet" listening that suspends understanding, the poet only gains access to this debate *by listening* to the "speech" of the sheep. In this way, the poet performs his own heightened imaginative, anthropomorphic listening that hears language in the sheep's silence, and thus comes suggestively close to the mutton's tendency to "build up greatest things/ From least suggestions" and to hear *more* than others might. We might think of this listening as the inverse of lyric apostrophe, what Jonathan Culler calls "the trope of addressing what is not an actual listener" (*Literary Theory* 104). Cowper's poet calls attention to his own heightened intensified listening when he interrupts the reported dialogue between the animals to return to the poem's frame narrative, which pivots precisely on the "ears" of the poet. The poem's opening lines include the following discussion of the poet's ears:

> But corn was hous'd, and beans were in the stack,
> Now, therefore, issued forth the spotted pack,
> With tails high mounted, ears hung low, and throats
> With a whole gamut fill'd of heav'nly notes,
> For which, alas! my destiny severe,
> Though ears she gave me two, gave me no ear. (23-28)

Cowper is playing here with the way that one might "have an ear" for something.[10] Yet the lines also recognize that hearing changes based on its context, and that not everyone has the same "ears." Though the speaker has no ear for hunting, for the "heav'nly notes" of the "spotted pack," he does have a peculiar ear for the speech of sheep, which is perhaps enhanced by the very sympathy that makes hunting unappealing. Cowper frames the tale of the mutton's alarmism with a first-person account of the unusual way that the poet – "the man to solitude accustom'd long" – perceives

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[9] Freud continues: "In this way we spare ourselves a strain [*Anstrengung*] in our attention which could not in any case be kept up for several hours daily, and we avoid a danger which is inseparable from the exercise of deliberate attention [*von dem absichtlichen Aufmerksamkeit unzertrennlich ist*]. For as soon as anyone deliberately concentrates [*anspannt*] his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select [*auswählen*] from the material before him; one point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness [*man fixiert*] and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations. This, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive" ("Recommendations 111-112).

[10] See Charles Lamb's "Chapter on Ears" for another example of this.

animal and plant life, and thus investigates how the act of listening changes over a lengthened period in solitude:

> The man to solitude accustom'd long
> Perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue:
> Not animals alone, but shrubs and trees,
> Have speech for him, and understood with ease;
> After long drought, when rains abundant fall,
> He hears the herbs and flow'rs rejoicing all;
> Knows what the freshness of their hue implies,
> How glad they catch the largess of the skies;
> But, with precision nicer still, the mind
> He scans of ev'ry loco-motive kind;
> Birds of all feather, beasts of ev'ry name,
> That serve mankind, or shun them, wild or tame;
> The looks and gestures of their griefs and fears
> Have, all, articulation in his ears;
> He spells them true by intuition's light,
> And needs no glossary to set him right. (55-70)

What distinguishes the alarmist mutton's hallucinatory perception that rushes to hear danger in an empty sound from the poet's ability to hear or imagine the speech of animals, shrubs, and trees? How might we differentiate between the poet's intuition and the sheep's? (And how do we differentiate them both from the political intuition about which Johnson spoke in the quote from "The False Alarm" I cited in the epigraph?) The poet's intuitive perception is also described as a form of hearing: "he hears the herbs," he "perceives in ev'ry thing that lives a tongue," and even the "looks and gestures" have "articulation in his ears." And yet the poet's heightened listening is distinct from both the mutton's alarmist rush to hear danger and the ewe's ability to hear sounds without knowing what they are sounds of. The poem makes an implicit contrast between the poet's heightened perception and that of the alarmist politician, yet the two overlap enough to raise important questions about the link between Romantic aesthetics and an alarmist tendency to hallucinate and intensify perception.[11] Cowper's poem implicitly asks whether Romantic poetics might be contiguous with the heightened attention of alarmism and manipulative fear that he allegorizes in a stately mutton and that he calls elsewhere "the art of sounding an alarm" (*Task* IV. 146). Does poetics rely on a form of perception accessed most readily through fear? Does it separate itself from alarmism? And if so, how?

Although the fact that the poet can *hear* looks, gestures, herbs, and flowers resembles the hallucinatory perception perpetuating the mutton's alarm, the poet insists that this anthropomorphic listening comes, easily, from "intuition's light," from a habit acquired in solitude; it is an intensification of perception, but it requires no work or strain of the attention for it is easily engendered by sympathy, habit, and "heedless" rather than "needless" alarm. The poet presents a form of hearing that is imaginative and intensified, but that is guided by the "light" of an "intuition" formed out of a habit of living in silence and solitude, and divorced from contagious, collective fear.

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[11] The poet opposes his form of attention to the *needless* alarm that the poem thematizes by claiming that the interjection about how the man of solitude perceives "was *needful* as a text" (71). The contrast of needless and needful also raises the question more generally of the relation between text and alarm, and the necessity of each.

We might think of it as an extreme attentiveness reliant on neither fear nor effort. The poet's position thus triangulates the opposition between the mutton and the ewe, by suggesting that the habit of attention to phenomena over time will train the intuition and allow a heightened, almost mystical perception that is neither alarmist nor hallucinatory but that can be accomplished heedlessly. Cowper's poem reveals one way that Romantic poetry's interest in heightened forms of receptivity, in hallucination, and in a retreat into solitude might not be limited to the apolitical retreat often linked to Romanticism, but might instead engage in what was a widespread debate about alarmism, war, and wartime listening. In resistance to the politics of alarmism that imagines heightened wartime listening only as a precursor to fear-based action, Cowper provides an alternative form of aesthetic watchfulness that separates listening from both civilian fear and military action, a listening he finds in the acute sense acquired from a heedless yet attentive intuition.

III. Coleridge's Fears

For Coleridge, who called Cowper "the best of modern poets," the solitude in which Cowper hears voices is inseparable from fear (Newey 46). Coleridge's poem "Fears in Solitude," published with the subtitle "Written in April, 1798, during the Alarm of an Invasion," is probably the most well-known of the numerous poems written about or under threat of invasion in the 1790s and yet, as Peter Larkin writes, it is one of the least discussed of Coleridge's conversation poems.[12] Like "The Needless Alarm," Coleridge's poem takes up the question of what war sounds like. He figures noise as invasive, describing the poet's "silent spot" and "silent dell," so as to emphasize how:

> It weighs upon the heart, that he must think
> What uproar and what strife may now be stirring
> This way or that o'er these silent hills –
> Invasion, and the thunder and the shout,
> And all the crash of onset; fear and rage
> And undetermined conflict. (lines 33-38)

The line "Invasion, and the thunder and the shout" demonstrates the same alarmist precipitation of the cause of sound that we saw from Cowper's mutton; the thought of "invasion" comes prior to having even heard the "thunder and shout," as though the thought of invasion comes before any sounds, or thoughts of sounds. As though directly responding to Cowper's ewe, who insists that "sounds are but sounds," the poem goes on to present mere sound as an escape from danger, a relief in which the poem luxuriates, hoping that the menace of the enemy passes like the gust of wind "which heard, and only heard/ In this low dell, bowed not the delicate grass" (201-202). Sound in both poems marks the potential of a threat that is present and heard (or heard of), but that may never be seen. Both poems articulate the peculiar position that Mary Favret theorizes as "war at a distance," of England engaged in a war that remains abroad, far off, and invisible; war is heard, or more likely, heard *of,* but not seen.

"Fears in Solitude" has presented its readers with a variety of obstacles, difficulties ranging from its status as either "Poetry" or "Oratory" to the politics that the poem may or may not reveal. Critics have struggled with the poem's "instability as a document of alarm, signifying patriotism and

[12] For a wide selection of war poetry written about or under the threat of invasion, see Bennett's *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism 1793-1815.*

anxiety, bellicosity and revulsion," and often encounter trouble deciphering the poem's politics because of the apparent contradiction between its criticism of war and incitement of patriotic fervor (Rawlinson 118). The former emerges as a disapproval of the "clamour" for war, when Coleridge laments that:

> We, this whole people, have been clamorous
> For war and bloodshed; animating sports,
> The which we pay for as a thing to talk of,
> Spectators and not combatants! (93-96)[13]

The latter – the lines of patriotic fervor – pivot on Coleridge's call to British men to "stand forth" and fight the French enemy:

> Stand forth! be men! repel an impious foe,
> Impious and false, a light yet cruel race,
> Who laugh away all virtue, mingling mirth
> With deeds of murder; and still promising
> Freedom, themselves too sensual to be free,
> Poison life's amities, and cheat the heart
> Of faith and quiet hope, and all that soothes
> And all that lifts the spirit! Stand we forth;
> Render them back upon the insulted ocean,
> And let them toss as idly on its waves
> As the vile sea-weed, which some mountain-blast
> Swept from our shores! (139-150)

For many critics, this identification of the French as the "impious foe" indicates a crucial shift on Coleridge's part from his earlier support of the French. As early as August of 1799, an unsigned review claimed that "without being a ministerialist, Mr. Coleridge has become an alarmist. He pictures the horrors of invasion, and joins the war-whoop against what he calls 'an impious foe'" (Jackson 49). Paul Magnuson reads the entire volume *Fears In Solitude,* which also included "Frost at Midnight" and "France: An Ode," as a self-defense, "presenting simultaneously the author and publisher of 'Fears in Solitude' as both patriots and Christians" so as to "take the heat off both." The poems would then, for Magnuson, "be a public defense against attacks upon both that had been made merely weeks before the volume was composed" (4). Reading the explicitly patriotic lines as a form of self-defense against censorship, Magnuson calls Coleridge's rhetorical oscillation in the poem an "acrobatic feat of remaining in the public debates, when other radical voices had been silenced or exiled" (7). In other words, critics have not been able to decide whether patriotic phrases like "impious foe" are actually satiric performances of the empty rhetoric and warmongering that Coleridge worries about at other points in the poem.

Similarly, by focusing on alarmism as a public sphere performance, Mark Jones also doubts the sincerity of "this hackneyed passage, so different from the rest of the poem," and suggests that the phrase "impious foe" refers, surprisingly, not to the French, but to the British: "It does refer to

[13] Coleridge's critique of this spectatorship of war from a distance finds an interesting present day echo in Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*. There Sontag writes: "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering of more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists" (18).

the prevailing image of the French," Jones claims, "but it also refers to the British themselves, or to what they have become…Having long viewed the French as monsters, the British have, to paraphrase Blake, 'become what they beheld'" (86). Given the poem's interest in mere sound and in speech and clamor that invite war, it is important to note how much this passage does sound different from the rest of the poem, clichéd in a way that Coleridge's language rarely does. I will return to this sense of "empty sound," but note for now that "Stand forth! be men!" stands out in the text as more of an impersonation of the typical empty rhetoric the poem describes than a change of heart, though the poem doesn't mark it as such. In this sense, the poem challenges our ability to hear or distinguish empty sounds.

Debates about the "impious foe" passage participate in a broader discussion of *what* fears, in particular, the poem's title describes.[14] In 1809, Coleridge referred to his poem as "Fears *of* Solitude," a misquotation which suggests a relation between fears and solitude that goes beyond a description of setting and challenges the very premise that the poet's fears are ever those of an invasion.[15] The subject of Coleridge's fears calls attention to the end of the poem, where the poet is *startled* into a new kind of perception, which echoes the anthropomorphic perception that Cowper relies on, but which Coleridge realigns with fear through the slight and momentary experience of being startled. Emerging from the silent dell, after the alarm of invasion, Coleridge's poet explains:

> I find myself upon the brow, and pause
> Startled! And after lonely sojourning
> In such a quiet and surrounded nook,
> This burst of prospect, here the shadowy main,
> Dim tinted, there the mighty majesty
> Of that huge amphitheatre of rich
> And elmy fields, seems like society –
> Conversing with the mind, and giving it
> A livelier impulse and a dance of thought! (212-220)

[14] Mark Canuel has recently argued that Coleridge's poem traces a shift in fears, citing Coleridge's wish that, after repelling the "impious foe": "we return/ Not with a drunken triumph, but with fear,/ Repenting of the wrongs with which we stung/ So fierce a foe to frenzy!" (150-154). Canuel reads these lines, which conclude the poem's most patriotic moment, as marking a "gradual figurative modification and consolidation of that emotion to suit the poet's reworking of retributive justice" (22). Canuel sees the poem shifting from a generalized fear of the other, and identification of France as the demonic or "impious" enemy, to a new fear: "one that is metonymically connected to other fears, while simultaneously, relentlessly, and persuasively sharpened into a single fear of having done wrong." Jones, who emphasizes alarm as a performative speech act, understands the poet's fears differently, arguing that "'Fears' are primarily fears of public-sphere performativity and its unruly dissemination of power." He claims that Coleridge "portrays the invasion as *caused by* an unwitting communal speech-act" and sees "performative speech as the crux both of Britain's vulnerability and of its chance of self-defense" (14). According to Jones's reading, the poem's failure to take a clear stand serves as "an exercise in not doing things with words" (16) and reflects the poem's attempt to "render itself 'harmless.' Alongside countless alarms aspiring to incite action, it aspires to be an aid to reflection." Indeed, the opposition in the parliamentary debates between alarm and reflection, or understanding, points to the strong sense that an "aid to reflection" might function as the most effective critique of alarmism.

[15] Andrew Cooper reads the misquotation as "a poignant indicator perhaps of his fear of exclusion from the nation" (101).

Unlike in Cowper's poem, Coleridge's heightened receptivity and ability to converse with the scene in quiet solitude is indebted to a kind of fear: the experience of being startled. If Cowper's speaker distinguished his heightened listening from that of the alarmist mutton by having no fear, Coleridge cannot maintain the same distinction. In fact, Coleridge elsewhere suggests that the simple act of paying attention itself is inseparable from terror; as he writes in *The Friend,* "where no interest previously exists, attention (as every schoolmaster knows) can be procured only by terror: which is the true reason why the majority of mankind learn nothing systematically, except as schoolboys or apprentices" (17). In much the same way that Coleridge finds everyday behavior structurally indebted to warfare, writing that "we *live* by continued acts of defense, that involve a sort of offensive warfare," he finds fear and alarm inextricable from the mere act of attention, anticipating Philip Fisher's explanation of Charles Darwin's theory that "surprise, the eliciting of notice, becomes the very heart of what it means to 'have an experience' at all" (17).[16] Thus the poem's closure with the experience of being startled into a heightened perception refigures the role of fear in the poem, linking the heightening of perception to the momentary experience of being startled, and locating attention itself in the pause prompted by surprise. The enjambment between "pause" and "startled" in Coleridge's lines also shows, as Wordsworth does, how both suspension and fleeting surprise are built into verse form. Coleridge is elsewhere explicit about the role of surprise in the susceptibility of the reader's attention, writing that meter works by the "continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited" which he claims "tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention" (*Biographia* 66).

It is important, however, to consider the difference between the experience of being startled and the alarm in the poem's title and the kinds of insight each produce. We might think of the difference between startling and alarming as a temporal one, in terms similar to those Christopher Miller uses to distinguish alarm from surprise: "The difference between alarm and surprise" writes Miller, in an essay on Austen, "is, in part, a function of time: the former is a state of sustained fear or anxiety; the latter is a briefer flare of feeling, a passage to some other emotional or cognitive state, and an experience that can be a source of either discomfort, or pleasure, or both" (240).[17] This temporal distinction is significant in light of the particularly manipulative temporality of alarmism that fills the present moment with fear and thus prevents the relaxation necessary for reflection on, and understanding of, both the object of fear and the fear itself. If being surprised or startled entails a briefer flare of feeling than being alarmed, it might make room for a reflection inaccessible during a period of alarm. The word "startle" implies a briefer fear, and often one that is already gone, whereas alarm, functioning with the imperative "to arms," suggests more of an open-ended, preparatory fear. We might think of the difference as that between what Freud calls "fright" and what he calls "anxiety": "'Anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid. 'Fright,' however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise" (*Beyond* 29-30). Coleridge, too, seems to distinguish between these different kinds of fear and preparation; "alarm," a public, institutionalized, collective, and militarized state of preparation, would thus be akin to Freud's anxiety, which is supposed to protect the subject against fright. By pointing to the productivity of

[16] Fisher points out that for Charles Darwin, in his book on the expressions of the emotions, mere attention is patterned by fear.

[17] It is interesting to note that Miller points to the military senses of the word 'surprise': "In its earliest sense, the word 'surprise' meant the military strategy of attacking without warning, from the French *surprendre* (to seize, or more literally, to overtake); but that meaning quickly migrated into the cognitive realm." (240).

being startled in a poem about an alarm of invasion, Coleridge contrasts the two types of fear and the forms of attention they produce. Thus, while the poem critiques alarmism, lamenting the manipulative rhetoric of war, it also maintains an interest in the state of heightened perception and receptivity that marks wartime alarm. In contrast to Cowper, Coleridge finds that receptivity inseparable from a kind of fear, an experience of being startled that makes room for reflection.

IV. The Empty Sounds of Alarmism

O Watchman! Thou hast watched in vain.
- Coleridge, *The Watchman*

The apparent contrast in Cowper's poem between "*needful* text" and "*needless* alarm," and the final lines of the poem prior to its moral – "I…Much wonder'd that the silly sheep had found/ Such cause of terror in an empty sound,/ So sweet to huntsman, gentleman, and hound" (129-131) – suggest a concern about the distinguishability of language from noise, and the possibility that a text might function as an alarm. The proximity between alarm and language – both of which threaten to function as "empty sounds" – hovers throughout "The Needless Alarm," in its descriptions of the hunter's "crash" as "sound," "noise," "clamour," the "speech" of his "instrument of music," and the "yells by tongues of daemons utter'd," descriptions which conflate the alarmist's rhetoric with the sounds of alarm bells, tocsins, and the noise of violence itself. Coleridge also uses the phrase "empty sounds" as a figure for political rhetoric, to describe terms for war that people use, but fail to really understand:

> The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers
> From curses, who knows scarcely words enough
> To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,
> Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute
> And technical in victories and defeats,
> And all our dainty terms for fratricide;
> Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues
> Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which
> We join no feeling and attach no form!
> As if the soldier died without a wound;
> As if the fibres of this godlike frame
> Were gored without a pang; as if the wretch,
> Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,
> Passed off to Heaven, translated and not killed; -
> As though he had no wife to pine for him,
> No God to judge him! (108-24)

The criticism of wartime rhetoric gets complicated here as it shifts registers: when people use language as mere abstractions, without feeling or form, they begin to think of other people *as language* – death becomes a kind of translation. "Empty sounds," according to these lines, are words which we speak, but of which we do not understand either the referent, feeling, or consequence. These sounds or noises are akin to empty rhetoric, and they are not alarms, as in Cowper's poem, but they might as well be, according to the logic of war-time alarmism I have been tracing, by which alarm fills the public's imagination and prevents the "time and leisure" necessary "for the exercise of

their understandings," through which, were it possible "the war, and the principles on which it was undertaken, would be scrutinized and discussed" (Great Britain 31:554). In other words, alarmists were successful precisely by desensitizing the public to the meaning of their own words. The affective force of their language works by occluding its references. Indeed, in light of these lines, it is difficult not to hear Coleridge's "Stand forth! be men!" as an illustration or ventriloquism of the empty sounds of war-mongering.

The phrase "empty sound" is typically used to complain about rhetoric detached from authenticity, without "feeling" or "form," as Coleridge would have it. Yet it also marks the uncertain space between sound and signification that Cowper's discreet ewe suggests holding open. In fact, the phrase appeared repeatedly during the eighteenth century to describe both political alarm and poetic language. Consider Samuel Johnson's writing on both topics: in "The False Alarm," which begins with the assertion that "One of the chief advantages derived by the present generation from the improvement and diffusion of Philosophy, is deliverance from unnecessary terrours, and exemption from false alarms," Johnson assures his reader that "a few weeks will now shew whether the Government can be shaken by empty noise." "Unnecessary terrour," "false alarm," and "empty noise" converge in the essay, echoing Cowper's interests in the noise and necessity of alarm. But Johnson's allusion to "empty noise" also echoes his description in the 1755 preface to his *Dictionary* of the difficulty he encountered defining certain kinds of words. There he writes that:

> Other words there are, of which the sense is too subtle and evanescent to be fixed in a paraphrase; such are all those which are by the grammarians termed *expletives*, and, in dead languages, are suffered to pass for empty sounds, of no other use than to fill a verse, or to modulate a period, but which are easily perceived in living tongues to have power and emphasis, though it be sometimes such as no other form of expression can convey. (xxiii)

Johnson's link between "empty sounds" and expletives is particularly relevant here since it points to an unnerving proximity between poetry and empty sounds, and to the way that poetic language might seem empty when words are used to "fill a verse." Expletives might *seem* empty, "*are suffered to pass* for empty sounds," but, at least in living tongues, they have particular "power and emphasis." In other words, Johnson points to the way words might be labeled "empty sounds" simply because they have a sense "too subtle and evanescent to be fixed in a paraphrase." This confusion seems to occur most often in poetics; Johnson defines *expletive* in his *Dictionary* as "A word or syllable used merely to fill up a vacancy," but the explanation in his introduction points to the specific resonance that the term does have in poetics, where it functions as a word used merely, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* to "help out a metrical line." Coleridge, too, discusses the possibility "to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters…in mere aid of vacancy…in order to prevent the appearance of empty spaces" (*Biographia* I.57). According to this model, one difference between poetry and prose might seem to be that the former needs empty sounds, or noise, and thus maintains an unexpected proximity to the way alarm was figured by its critics. And yet, Johnson's admission of the subtlety and evanescence of the words he defines suggests that what might look like emptiness in poetry is actually obscurity or density, providing more "power and emphasis," rather than less. Similarly, Coleridge makes sure to distinguish his description of tautology cited above from "the *apparent* tautologies of intense and turbulent feeling, in which the passion is greater and of longer endurance, than to be exhausted or satisfied by a single representation of the image or incident exciting it" (*Biographia* I.57). The relation between poetry and empty sound is delicate; though some verse allows empty sound to remain empty, other poems uses

what might *seem* empty to accumulate meaning, to gain power, emphasis, and a proliferation of "intense and turbulent feeling."

The suggestion that poetry might contain empty sounds is not surprising. After all, critics have historically defined poetry by its emphasis on sound; Burke characterizes "*compounded abstract* words" as "mere sounds," writing in the section of his *Enquiry* devoted to "The common effect of POETRY, not by raising ideas of things" of these abstract words: "whatever power they may have on the passions, they do not derive it from any representation raised in the mind of the things for which they stand"; "Such words are in reality but mere sounds"; and "The sounds being often used without reference to any particular occasion, and carrying still their first impressions, they at last utterly lose their connection with the particular occasions that gave rise to them; yet the sound without any annexed notion continues to operate as before" (188-189). Roman Jakobson writes in "Linguistics and Poetics" that "Poetry is not the only area where sound symbolism makes itself felt, but it is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely" (87). And Jacques Roubaud asserts that "the breaking of the bond between word and sound, which occurred during the fourteenth century, brought about a new *double form* called *poetry"* (18).

Hearing language as sound rather than signification entails an attention to the medium of language itself, according to George Campbell in *Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Campbell explains that: "Without perspicuity, words are not signs, they are empty sounds; speaking is beating the air, and the most fluent declaimer is but a founding brass and a tinkling cymbal" (267). For Campbell, words become "empty sounds" when they lack perspicuity, creating an ambiguity which distracts the reader or listener's attention by exposing the medium of language itself. In other words, a lack of clarity divides our attention between sound and signification and causes us to hear words as "sounds," for: "if there be any flaw in the medium, if we see through it but dimly, if the object be imperfectly represented, or if we know it to be misrepresented, our attention is immediately taken off the object onto the medium" (ibid.). For Campbell, ambiguity, confusion, and obscurity in rhetoric divide the attention between the object of representation and the medium of language itself; and it is attention to the latter that makes words into "empty sounds." While Campbell's focus is on rhetoric, he goes on to admit that poetry might actually benefit from the "empty sounds" that would only distract the audience of rhetoric. Campbell writes:

> Yet there is a sort and a degree of obscurity which ought not to be considered as falling under this censure. I speak not of those sentences wherein more is meant than meets the ear, the literal meaning being intended purely to suggest a further meaning, which the speaker had chiefly in view….what I here principally allude to, is a species of darkness, if I may call it so, resulting from an excess of vivacity and conciseness, which to a certain degree, in some sorts of composition, is at least pardonable. In the ode, for instance, the enthusiastic fervour of the poet naturally carries him to overly those minutenesses in language, on which perspicuity very much depends. It is to abruptness of transition, boldness of figure, laconism of expression, the congenial issue of that frame of mind in which the piece is composed, that we owe entirely the "Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn." Hence proceeds a character of the writing, which may not unhappily be expressed in the words of Milton, 'Dark with excessive bright.' (II. 267-9)

This distinction between poetry and rhetoric raises the possibility of a poetics of obscurity, a "species of darkness," which might seem like "empty sounds," empty of certainty, but full in another

sense, overflowing with "excess of vivacity and conciseness" – the same "power and emphasis" that Johnson found.[18]

Despite Cowper's warning against experiencing terror from an empty sound and Coleridge's critique of wartime rhetoric as empty sounds, both poems raise the question of poetry's use of empty sounds. Cowper's emphasis on empty sound in "The Needless Alarm" comes through his distinct use of tautologies, which, as Wordsworth reminds us in his note to "The Thorn," expose our attachment to words *as things*. In his note to "The Thorn," Wordsworth explains why repetition and tautology "are frequently beauties of the highest kind. Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 388). For Wordsworth, as for Coleridge in the *Biographia,* there are two kinds of tautology: "virtual tautologies," which consist of using different words for the same meaning, and thus produce empty sound, and "apparent tautologies," repetition, which produce fuller, denser meaning.[19] In "The Needless Alarm," Cowper uses apparent tautology because the meanings of words shift as repetition accumulates. The sheep "thought but knew not what to think" and "puzzling long at last they puzzle out"; the speaker admits: "though ears she gave me two, gave me no ear"; and the ewe argues that "sounds are but sounds." The first three tautologies all function in the same way, so that the second iteration of each word negates the first. Sounds become empty from repetition, but by unhinging and repeating them, they gain meaning rather than lose it. The final tautology is even more self-reflexive; we could imagine Gertrude Stein taking Cowper's joke to the next level: "sounds are but sounds are but sounds are but sounds" until the word "sound" becomes nothing but an empty sound, echoing James Merrill's reminder that "looked at too long, words fail,/phase out" (240). The self-reflexivity of this final tautology is instructive: by repeating the word "sound," Cowper both thematizes and performs the way repetition can dislodge a sound from its signification, unfix a word from any single meaning. Tautology may look like empty sound but it, in fact, accumulates signification.

Coleridge's poem is filled not only with the empty clichés he seems to critique, but also with the "empty sounds" of exclamatory language, of expletive, most often in the form of the empty apostrophic "oh" or "o," sounds which – as with Coleridge's account of a heightened poetic perception – cannot be separated from fear in the poem. Coleridge's repeated recourse to the empty "O" in the poem is distinct: "Therefore, evil days/ Are coming on us, O my countrymen!" (123); "Father and God! O! spare us yet awhile!" (130); "O Britons! O my brethren!" (155); "But, O dear Britain! O my Mother Isle!" (177); "O divine/ And beauteous island!" (193-4); "O soft and silent spot!" (208); "O green and silent dell!" (228); "O my god!" (32). He also shifts, at a few points, to

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[18] Jean-Paul Sartre present a similar model of poetry in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* where he claims that responsible prose, as opposed to poetry, is the only way to write politically and to engage with history. The dangerous opacity and materiality of poetry, according to Sartre, lacks the transparency necessary to use language as a tool and thus must be "cured": "*Si les mots sont malades, c'est à nous de les guérir.* (If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them.)" According to Sartre: "*Les poètes sont des hommes qui refusent d'utiliser le langage…[qui] considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes*" (poets are men who refuse to use language…who consider words as things and not as signs). Sartre uses the metaphor of prose language responsibly passing through a transparent window to its intended meaning. He writes: "Since words are transparent and the gaze traverses them, it would be absurd to slip in amongst them unpolished panes of glass." Sartre opposes materiality to responsibility and instrumentality, presenting a direct, clear-cut passage from sign to referent as the only way for writing to responsibly engage with politics and history.

[19] In her essay "'Uncertain disease,'" Kevis Goodman explains this distinction and discusses Wordsworth's attempt to "harness[ing] (apparent) tautology's capacity to unfix words from single meanings and to 'unravel' thought" (web).

"Oh": "Oh! 'tis a quiet spirit-healing nook!" (12); "Oh! my countrymen!" (41); "Oh! blasphemous!" (70).[20] Apostrophe, like tautology, has a way of calling attention to the emptiness of poetic sounds, to the way a sound might do something without properly meaning or referencing any one thing; according to Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophes both attempt to make something happen and expose that happening as based on verbal devices – as the empty 'O' of apostrophic address: 'O wild West Wind'" (*Literary Theory* 107). For Culler, there is something embarrassing to literary criticism about this trope, the "empty 'O,' devoid of semantic reference," which he attributes to "the obviousness that apostrophe is a figure, an empty 'O,' for which one can scarcely make cognitive or transcendental claims of the sort that are routinely made for metaphor" ("Reading Lyric" 99).

Apostrophe is also interesting here because it speaks to the heightened, imaginative listening at work in both Coleridge and Cowper's poems. Barbara Johnson defines the trope as "a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness" (185). In other words, it is part of the same gesture through which the prospect, for Coleridge, "seemed like society/ conversing with the mind" or through which Cowper's poet hears debate in the sheep's silence. Johnson writes that apostrophe is "almost synonymous with the lyric voice" (185), suggesting that it moves beyond address to evoke a more general sense of animation. And yet apostrophe also implies the reverse, for it may turn the addressee's "silence into mute responsiveness," but it also calls attention to the utter silence and non-responsiveness of the addressee. Thus the difference between giving a speech to his countrymen and addressing them *in absentia* in a silent dell – "O my countrymen!," "O Britons!" "O my brethren" – is that the poem calls attention to the fact that Coleridge is sure not to receive a response.

Poetry thus reveals a proximity to alarm, not only in its interest in a form of attention heightened enough to hear conversation in silence and solitude but also in its dependence on noisy, non-signifying elements of language that keep open the gap between sound and signification, since listening to a sound devoid of sense extenuates that gap. Yet the difference between poetry and alarmism is that the latter does not actually allow sound to remain obscure; for despite its reputation, alarmism rushes to fill sound in with a referent while poetry empties sounds of their certainty. In this sense, only poetry can do what the discreet ewe demands: hold open the gap between sound and sense. Even though alarmist rhetoric was decried as "empty sounds," alarmism actually refuses to leave sounds empty. According to Johnson and Campbell, neither does poetry, but by extending the gap between sound and sense, the sound becomes empty of a single, definite sense, and full, instead, of sense "too subtle and evanescent to be fixed." Poetry thus emerges not as an imitation of, but as an alternative to, alarmism, maintaining the heightened receptivity and attention offered by states of fear and surprise, but refusing the epistemological assumptions alarmism makes with that fear. Though opponents of alarmism often characterized it as empty rhetoric or "empty sounds," the ethics of listening developed by Cowper and Coleridge identifies the problem of alarmism not as an emptiness, but as an excess of rhetoric. For these poems show that the real problem with alarmism lies in its rush to fill in empty sounds, in its inability to do what poetry does: allow sounds to *remain* obscure and empty of fixed meaning. Both Cowper and Coleridge thematize alarm's supposed use of empty sound, only to highlight a poetic use of sounds which function apart from their

[20] In *A World of Difference,* Barbara Johnson discusses "the bridge between the 'O' of the pure vocative, Jakobson's conative function, or the pure presencing of the second person, and the 'Oh' of pure subjectivity, Jakobson's emotive function, or the pure presencing of the first person" (187). The distinction seems to work for Coleridge's poem, except for when Coleridge writes "Oh! My Countrymen!" which seems to hint toward apostrophe, even if it could remain the "Oh" of pure subjectivity.

significations, sounds which stray from signification, and thus recuperate the idea of sound "empty" of fixed meaning, and yet full of obscurity.

"*That* Something Living is Abroad": Charlotte Smith and the Natural Enemy

I. The Prospect of Invasion

> Yet more remote
> Where the rough cliff hangs beetling o'er its base,
> All breathes repose; the water's rippling sound
> Scarce heard; but now and then the sea-snipe's cry
> Just tells that something living is abroad
> And sometimes crossing on the moonbright line,
> Glimmers the skiff, faintly discern'd awhile,
> Then lost in shadow.
>
> - Charlotte Smith, *Beachy Head*

In her final poem, *Beachy Head,* published posthumously in 1807, Charlotte Smith uses the prospect poem, a popular genre of the eighteenth century, to explore the political stakes of a sound that tells only "*that* something living is abroad," without identifying *what* that something is (line 114). Smith's poem exposes an overlap between the military posture of keeping watch for an invasion and the literary posture often figured in the genre as a position of surveillance and command. "So extensive are some of the views from these hills," Smith writes, describing the land surrounding the cliff on the Sussex coast called Beachy Head, "that only the want of power in the human eye to travel so far, prevents London itself being discerned" (*Poems* 238n.). At stake for Smith in the prospect poem is the view that emerges when she looks out from the coast toward France, imagining the distances between Sussex and France, between the coast and London, or between France and London. Smith's concern speaks to the way in which the militarization of attention during the Romantic period insisted on and determined one teleological form of keeping watch that looked exclusively for one specific enemy: the French, England's supposedly "natural enemy." In contrast to a vigilance that keeps watch solely for the enemy's arrival and that allows perception of nothing or no one else, I will argue in this chapter that Smith's poem suggests that *how* we keep watch determines who or what we encounter, rather than the other way around. Attuned to the unexpected intersections of national security, perception, and natural history on the English coast, *Beachy Head* aligns the prospect poem with the nation's vulnerability rather than its security; and through a *natural* history that undermines the political rhetoric of *natural* enmity, Smith suggests that the turn to nature typically associated with Romantic poetry is not an apolitical retreat into solitude, but is instead a serious inquiry into the political rhetoric of the period.

The prospect poem is the literary genre perhaps best suited to respond to the militarization of attention; it offers "greater extensiveness of view" than the landscape poem from which it differs because of its "lack of frame" (Deane 100-101). The prospect poem explores and brings to poetry what Erasmus Darwin calls the "general language of attention" with all the connotations of protective and alarmist instincts Darwin details, including "the organ of hearing to apprize us of danger" and the "fears" that are instinctually "alarmed" (148). In his exploration of the "militarization of thinking," Samuel Weber writes that "to survey is to command at a distance" and "the one who surveys is also the one who keeps and protects" (7). Taking up this militarized surveyal, John Barrell, who defines the

prospect as "what is in front of you…in a fixed and opposite position to the observer," also gestures toward the proximity between the prospect poem and military strategy and movement, reading Thomson's phrase "commanding height" as "borrowed of course from the language of military tactics, and by no means used, by eighteenth century poets, without a sense of embattled hostility to what is being commanded, the landscape below"(*Idea of Landscape* 23-25). Many poems that directly address the "prospect" or possibility of invasion find significance in landscapes which offer commanding prospect views: Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude" takes place in a dell, "amid the hills," but ends as "the prospect widens" and the poet remarks "how wide the view!" – as though the poet can finally, after his reflections on the alarm, encounter that which Wordsworth, in his invasion poem "Anticipation, October 1803," calls "even the prospect of our brethren slain."[1] The prospect poem's resonances shifted as the stakes of the landscape did; and the word "prospect" took on new connotations as it emerged in pamphlets with titles such as *The prospect; or, the great advantages which the common people of England are likely to gain, by a successful invasion from the French* (1798).

Charlotte Smith wrote a number of coastal prospect poems, in which the mere view off the coast of England frames an imagination haunted by both past and present war and an inquiry into wartime perception. In "The Alarm" in *Rural Walks,* Smith describes how the sight of a fleet sailing by conveys "only painful ideas," since the soldiers would, inevitably, "become mangled carcasses for the prey of the monsters of the deep, and dye, with their blood, the waves over which they were now so gaily bounding" (76). Similarly, in her 1784 sonnet "The Sea View," the relaxed posture that begins as the reclining of the shepherd watching the horizon provides the opportunity to spot "far seen," the "war-freighted ships," which "flash their destructive fire – The mangled dead/ And dying victims then pollute the flood" (12-13). These lines are echoed more than twenty years later by Smith in *Beachy Head,* when she describes the beacons: "Seen afar off/ Like hostile war-fires flashing to the sky" (227-228). A simple, aloof contemplation of the coast, she writes, recalls the bay, which once "received/ The new invaders" (124-5). And in "The Forest Boy," the coast becomes a view from which to look back on for the departing soldier: "With useless repentance he eagerly eyed/ The high coast as it faded from view" (96-97). The coastline, for Smith, is inseparable from the sights and sounds of war, whether real or imagined.

The particular settings Smith selects for her prospect poems suggest that at stake in the prospect view is not simply visions of war but also the nation's vulnerability to France. For Smith, the view from the coast is inextricably linked to its proximity to France, and thus to the wars with and enmity for the French that persisted throughout Smith's lifetime. "[I]n crossing the Channel from the coast of France," Smith explains in the first footnote to *Beachy Head*, "Beachy-Head is the first land made" (217n.); in this liminal position as the first land encountered in the journey from France to England, the cliff figured prominently in the national imagination at the time as a border space rife with questions of immigration, commerce, smuggling, fishery, shipwrecks, war, and,

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[1] On the significance of this line in Wordsworth's poem about the anticipation of invasion, see Colin Pedley, "Anticipating Invasion." For a reading of the entire poem as Wordsworth's desire for invasion so that he can finally experience a finished event, see Mary Favret, *War At a Distance* 78-79. David Bromwich suggests that the high cliffs of *Tintern Abbey* reflect a desire to escape the preparations for invasion. In *Disowned by Memory,* Bromwich recalls a comment David Erdman made in the audience of a lecture: "At the time Wordsworth made his tour [1798], both he and Coleridge were on the run – as we would call it today, draft-dodging. He could see the militia everywhere marching and counter-marching; drilling, against the panic idea of a French invasion. What are his thoughts? He feels hatred and distrust of his country and he wants to hide. And now, here are the cliffs near the Abbey. He imagines climbing some way up; but no, he can see a hermit there; it's not secluded *enough*, so he climbs higher up – 'thoughts of more deep seclusion.' Even one other person in all of England is too much for him. This is all wound up with fear of his country and guilt about France" (77).

perhaps primarily, anxieties about a French invasion. In her 1793 poem "The Emigrants," Book I takes place "On the Cliffs" in Brighthelmstone in 1792, directly across the Channel from France, and Book II "on an Eminence on one of those Downs, which afford to the South a View of the Sea" in April of 1793. This position affords a view of the sea, which means a view of the arriving French emigrants, "Banish'd…From their distracted Country, whence the name/ Of Freedom misapplied, and much abus'd" (97-99), and for whom Smith imagines "how sad/ It is to look across the dim cold sea" (156-157). The prospect from the coast does not solely mark a stable national position from which the English can look toward France, but can instead become the site from which French immigrants look back toward home.[2] Of particular concern for those keeping watch for an impending French invasion are the arriving waves of French emigrants who aroused demands for attention as both suspicion and sympathy. In his 1794 polemical poem *The Pursuits of Literature,* J. Mathias explains his approach to this dilemma:

> I have compassion for the unfortunate; I have charity for plundered exiles; I have pity, and would wish and would give relief to the wretched and the suffering; I have veneration for the truly pious of every persuasion in the Christian faith… But I have, and it is an Englishman's duty to have, a watchful eye upon the insinuating or domineering spirit of the Romish church… I call upon the guardians of our church and states to be watchful, and to regard with attention the proceeding of ALL THE EMIGRANTS. (Qtd. in Garnai 103-104)

This passage is striking in its underhanded opposition of attention and watchfulness to pity and compassion, revealing a direct conflict between national security and sympathy, and mobilizing the same rhetoric used to protect against invasion to protect against immigrants and incite suspicion of the foreign within the nation. Smith's poem worries that the exiles "became/The prey of dark suspicion and regret" (II.244-245). It is interesting to note that the dates which mark "The Emigrants" bookend the Alien Bill, the bill about foreigners that sparked debates in 1792 about security and hospitality: "The safety of the state was not to be sacrificed to hospitality" (*The Parliamentary History* 157).[3]

The first lines of *Beachy Head* address the military demands for watchfulness that pervaded the political rhetoric at the turn of the nineteenth century; the poem presents a figure keeping watch from the cliff, looking out toward France, England's neighbor and enemy. Keeping watch atop "the rough cliff" of Beachy Head, the speaker of the poem becomes a kind of sentinel or watchman, with eyes "intently fix'd" (523).[4] But on what, exactly, do or can her eyes fix? The posture of keeping

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[2] For a different discussion of Smith's subversion of the prospect poem, see Jacqueline Labbe's "Locating the Poet in *Beachy Head*." Labbe argues that "Smith's use of authoritative positions in the poem, such as the prospect view, are undermined when she juxtaposes speakers to an almost satirical effect" (158). I agree with Labbe's claim that the multiplication of speakers deauthorizes any one in particular, but I read the prospect genre less in terms of authority, and more as a dialectic of security and vulnerability.

[3] See Amy Garnai "The Alien Act and Negative Cosmopolitanism and Renaud Morieux "'An Inundation from Our Shores': Travelling across the Channel around the Peace of Amiens."

[4] Though the phrase describes Parson Darby at the end of the poem, it is appropriate to the poem's speaker throughout. Smith here echoes what Kevis Goodman finds in Cowper's *The Task*: "the 'eager eye' futilely scanning the horizon for moving specks," and "the peering, poring, scanning eye that collapses space by dwelling intently on such distant objects felt as almost-but-not-quite-present" (97). Goodman's reading is particularly apt here in that it locates this blank gaze as the "*condition* for the entry of ongoing history's absent

watch, looking out over the horizon, replete with connotations of invasion threats, war, and smuggling, repeats throughout the poem, tying together the various figures otherwise related only through the poem's site-specificity: "Contemplation" who "High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit" (117-118); the Revenue officers whose watchfulness the shepherds and labourers must elude in their contraband trade with the opposite coast (225n.); "The guardian of the flock," whose "watchful care" is necessary "to keep the flocks from trespassing" (459); the "stranger" who sat and stared "On the hill top so late…eyes intently fix'd" (507-523); and Parson Darby, keeping watch on the coast for shipwrecks to aid, with a sympathetic attention so strong that his "heart/ Was feelingly alive to all that breath'd" (687-688). While the posture of a figure keeping watch on the coast mimics the paradoxically passive yet defensive posture of the thousands of soldiers stationed on the coast in anticipation of the aggressive arrival of the French, Smith's poem multiplies postures of watchfulness that aim for neither security nor defense.

Beachy Head reveals an interest in the momentary and slight phenomenality of the foreign. It is fluent in Darwin's "language of attention," in the ways that animals look for and signal potential danger (148). The poem tracks and records both human and animal signals and sounds of otherness in the coastal landscape, signs of impending danger and approaching foreigners without taking action against them or spreading alarm about their arrival. In fact, the poem is far more interested in the natural and political histories of the mediation of danger and alarm than in any current or actual threats of invasion, exploring the epistemology of mediation that, according to Mary Favret, *is* "the epistemology of modern wartime" (*War at a Distance* 12). Where Darwin looks to fieldfares, which "as they are associated in flocks, and are in a foreign country, have evident marks of keeping a kind of watch, to remark and announce the appearance of danger" (153), Smith devotes a footnote of her poem to the Yellow Wagtail or "The social bird" which the French call "*La Bergeronette,* and say it often gives them, by its cry, notice of approaching danger" (237n.). She also looks beyond the "natural" language of attention to the "beacons formerly lighted up on the hills to give notice of the approach of an enemy." "These signals," Smith explains, "would still be used in case of alarm, if the Telegraph now substituted could not be distinguished on account of fog or darkness" (227n.). Smith thus brings together the bird's cry, the beacon, and the telegraph not simply to alarm her reader, though this may have been one effect of the poem, but also to collect mediators of danger, a gesture that differs significantly from that of an alarm; by accumulating the various ways one might become aware of danger, Smith denaturalizes any single alarm and de-authorizes any single sense of danger.[5]

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but immanent force" (*Georgic Modernity* 98). Smith is explicit about her indebtedness to Cowper, dedicating "The Emigrants" to him, "the sublimest of our poets" (134).

[5] Smith's evocation of beacons points to the recent establishment of beacons along the coast. In a letter to Lord Lieutenant in 1803, Lord Mulgrave describes the necessity of establishing fire beacons.

> As it is most desirable and essential on the near approach or actual landing of the enemy, that the quickest intelligence of such an event should be generally diffused, it is judged expedient for this purpose to establish fire beacons, on the most conspicuous and elevated points of the country, which suggessively taking up the signal, beginning with the head quarters or the point fixed upon by the general in command, will in a very short space of time communicate it to the more distant part of the country and on which signal every one is to assemble at his known place of rendezvous, and then expect and receive orders for his further proceeding from the general or other officer under whose command the several volunteer and other corps are placed, and to whose quarters on the first alarm of such an event, the commanding officer of each corps is to disptch a mounted officer or non commissioned officer for specific instructions. (Ashcroft 88)

Beachy Head was well-known in the British imagination in the eighteenth century as a site that would have immediately raised anxieties about the island's proximity to the French enemy and thus of the possibility of a French invasion. The cliff, the site of the battle of Beachy Head in 1690, marks the English military defeat that figured as the starting-point to many eighteenth century histories of invasion, texts that often blurred the genres of history and military pamphlet by merging the history of invasions of Britain with strategies for coastal defense and national security, as if the narration of the history of invasions would itself protect and secure the coast.[6] This peculiar logic, by which the best defense against invasion is to reiterate prior vulnerabilities and thereby "feel…the full extent of your danger" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 32), created a sense of historiography *as defense,* which made a site like Beachy Head one particularly vexed intersection of history, security, and vulnerability. Smith's poem participates in – and plays with – this sense of historiography. She combines geography with military and political histories of invasion, using the site specificity of the poem as a chance for lengthy footnotes that provide a history of Britain, while nevertheless resisting the temptation to find security in the narration of history.

In popular literature during the period, the rocks of Beachy Head symbolized a tall and impenetrable defense against invasion. A local guide-book to East-bourne published in 1787, for example, explains that "the rocks, which reach far out into the sea, are the destruction of many fine ships and lives," as well as a convenient landing place for smugglers, and includes a poem about Beachy Head's protective quality with lines like: "On Albion's austral bounds, on Sussex's strand,/A range of rocks defend the adjacent land/ From vile invaders and insulting waves" and, referring to the rocks, "the treachorous French with envy on them gaze/ Chagrin'd to see such walls they can't eraze" (Eastbourne 22). Similarly, a broadside in the form of a song from 1803, "Britons' Defiance of France," figures the firmness of the rocks on the coast as a metonymy for the firm British resistance to invasion: "Firm as the rocks that skirt our coast/ At all her threats we smile" (Klingberg and Hustvedt 65). Thomas Park, a poet, editor, and biographer who wrote a sonnet addressed to Charlotte Smith in 1797, wrote another sonnet in the same year with the title "Written on the Sands below Beachy-head," in which he addresses Beachy Head as "England's wide defense":

> With giant-port high towering o'er the main,
> Beachy, thy cliffs in massy grandeur rise
> Like some cleft castle, which with calm disdain
> Still braves the outrage of inclement skies:
> The daws that round thy chalky summit soar
> Are dimly seen, and feebly heard their cries,
> While the hoarse tide that flows with hollow roar,

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[6] In a note to *Beachy Head,* Smith provides a history of the 1690 invasion, concluding that "the French, from ignorance of the coast, and misunderstanding among each other, failed to take all the advantage they might have done of this victory" (224n.). For a more detailed account of how invasion was "threaded through its [Britain's] history and origins," see Rawlinson 116-117. Some examples of texts that merge history with strategy include *A compleat history of French invasions, from the Revolution to the present time. Containing a particular account of the intended descent in 1690, after the Battel of Beachy Head.*; Williams, Joseph, Esq. *An essay on invasions and defence of the coasts; with short tracts on various temporary subjects; particularly a review of the King of Prussia's Conduct*; Stuart, C.. *A history of all the real and threatened invasions of England, from the landing of Julius Cæsar, to the present period; to which is annexed a copy of Mr. Dundas's letter respecting invasion and plan of defence*; Granville, Charles. *A synopsis of the troubles and miseries of England, during the space of 1800 years; being a compendious history of all the invasions, rebellions.*

Round many a fallen crag indignant sighs,
And steeps in foam yon sable-vested chain
Of rocky terrors; England's wide defence
Against her foes; where oft th' invading Dane
Fell a stern victim to his bold pretence;
Where proud Iberia's vast Armada fled,
And with its countless wrecks th' unsated ocean fed. (1-14)

Charlotte Smith opposes this familiar topos by finding in the rocks cause for national susceptibility rather than security. Smith is interested less in what the rocks of Beachy Head defend against than in what they disclose; for she uses the rocks in the landscape not only to stand on and look out from, but also to point to a geological history which subverts this divisive and defensive function.

II. The Vast Concussion

Haec loca vi quondam et vasta convulsa ruina
Dissiluisse ferunt quum protenus utraque tellus
Una foret.

[These lands, they say, were once an immense unbroken mass
but long ago - such is the power of time to work great change
as the ages pass - some vast convulsion sprang them apart.]

- Virgil, *The Aeneid*

Smith challenges the tradition of figuring the rocks at Beachy Head as a firm and wide defense against the enemy; her attention to Beachy Head excavates the very rock on which the poet sits and finds in it, not a firm protective wall intimidating the French enemy, but an originary geological openness to neighboring France. For instead of finding in the landscape a firm defense against the French, the opening lines of *Beachy Head* show how the rocks conceal the natural history of a geological concussion that once delineated the British coastline, dividing the British nation from France, and thus point to a time when Britain and France were one indistinguishable land mass. Smith's poem begins with an address to the rock:

On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!
That o'er the channel rear'd, half way at sea
The mariner at early morning hails,
I would recline; while Fancy should go forth,
And represent the strange and awful hour
Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent
Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,
Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between
The rifted shores, and from the continent
Eternally divided this green isle. (1-10)

Smith provides a note to the passage, explaining that the lines "allud[e] to an idea that this Island was once joined to the continent of Europe, and torn from it by some convulsion of Nature,"

though confessing that she "never could trace the resemblance between the two countries" (217n.).[7] In contrast to Hannah More's characterization of the woman who reclines and "fanc[ies] how things will be once their [the French] army has got footing in old England," the poet here reclines and fancies a natural history that shows the two nations' originary proximity. Thus she begins her poem about Beachy Head not by gesturing toward its capacity to protect or secure the nation from France, but by tracing a geological history – a history found in the very material supposed to protect the nation – that suggests that England was once, in fact, indistinguishable from France, its enemy.[8]

One surprising predecessor of Smith's poem is a millenarian poem by the Reverend James Creighton from 1788 titled *Millenial liberty, or a prophetic view of the Messiah's kingdom, a poem: written at Dover cliffs, whilst the author was looking towards the coast of France, July 1st, 1788*. Combining geography, politics, and history in a prospect poem as Smith does, Creighton positions the speaker of his poem "standing on Shakespeare's Cliff, near Dover, and looking towards the coast of France, reflecting on the time when Caesar invaded Britain," a time central to both Smith's poem and to the military histories of invasion written in the eighteenth century (2). Creighton speculates from both Caesar's perspective and from that of the Britons, writing of the latter:

> Their land invaded, and their public weal!
> This, this enkindled all their patriot zeal;
> For, Britons always sensibly could feel!
> They therefore stood embattl'd on the coast,
> To check the insults of a foreign Host. (7)

The rhyme of *coast* and *host* repeats throughout *Millennial Liberty,* capturing an important triangulation of concerns raised by coastal prospect poems with a view toward neighboring France; the word *host*, of course, comes from the Latin *hostis*, meaning stranger, enemy, and, in medieval Latin, it had the sense of army, or warlike expedition ("Host," def.). The relation between coast and host is therefore not just an aural one, but is conceptually central for thinking about the complex relations between war, enmity, hospitality, immigration, and foreignness that become urgent at national borders. Creighton's direct address to the French from the British coast makes clear that he is interested in a potentially sympathetic relation and conversation between the two nations: "To you I look, th'Inhabitants of *Gaul*/ With pity look; and loudly on you call" (9).[9]

Yet the most striking echo between Creighton's messianic prospect poem and Smith's quieter *Beachy Head* is that between the opening lines of Smith's poem that I cited earlier, with their accompanying footnote about the geological concussion that once divided the two nations, and the following lines and note from the close of *Millennial Liberty*:

> The beacon now is lighted on a hill,

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[7] Smith's lines echo those from *The Aeneid* cited above. In his essay, *On Cannibals,* Montaigne also cites these lines from Virgil. Both Smith and Montaigne find in a prior geological proximity the suggestion of an unrecognized proximity to peoples otherwise considered barbaric or altogether other.

[8] For a reading of Smith's "scientific modesty" as a "resistance to theory," and particularly an English resistance to continental theory, see Noah Heringman's "'Very vain is Science' proudest boast': The resistance to geological theory in early nineteenth-century England."

[9] The suggestion that the two nations should attend more closely to one another is made by Voltaire in his statement: "Would each Nation attend a little more than they do, to the Taste and Manners of their respective Neighbours, perhaps a general good Taste might diffuse itself through all Europe from such an intercourse of learning, and from that useful Exchange of Observation" (Qtd. in Ogee 5).

That all around may see it, if they will:
The trumpet sounds – 'glad tidings, days of grace!'
And calls back rebels to the Prince of peace;
Ye nations, listen, hear it from afar;
Cease, cease from tumult, and intestine war!
…
Alas! how long did bigotry and pride,
Intrigue of Courts and Ministers divide
These lands so near, yea once in nature join'd*;
And shed the blood of thousands of mankind. (16)

(* It is evident that these lands were once joined; but whether they were severed at the Deluge, or by any other concussion of the earth, cannot now be ascertained.) (16n.)

Both Smith and Creighton's footnotes to their verse make a point of presenting the possibility of a prior union between Britain and France, while maintaining the uncertainty of this natural history, allowing only enough possibility of a prior union to expose what Creighton calls "the folly of national prejudice" (2). For Creighton, the natural history in which the two nations were once joined provides a proximity between the two nations that allows not only friendship and peace but also a sense of political contagion which prompts Creighton's advice to the French to "*catch*…the spirit of British liberty" (2, my emphasis). The poem's messianic imaginary rests on the hope that British liberty will spread globally by way of this often forgotten communicability with neighboring France: "May English Liberty soon spread to *Gaul,"* the poem concludes, *"*From thence to *Spain, to China,* and *Bengal*" (17).[10] Matthew Bray has claimed the presence of a slightly different messianism in *Beachy Head*. In "Removing the Anglo-Saxon Yoke: The Francocentric Vision of Charlotte Smith's Later Works," Bray argues that Smith subverts British historiography in *Beachy Head* to point out that, in fighting the French, the British are fighting none other than themselves. Bray details numerous ways in which Smith's historiography, particularly her choice of examples for narrating the history of the site of Beachy Head, not only emphasizes a prior union between England and France, but celebrates a history of French invasion and British vulnerability and thus welcomes the potential arrival of the French.[11] While Bray ultimately makes the startling argument that, for Smith, "Napoleon, as the second conqueror of England, may be the messiah" who will force England to recognize its historical and political ties to France, I would argue that Smith, in fact, requires neither the messianic view Creighton takes, nor a military invasion to enable such a recognition.

Smith's poem does not give either direct advice to the French to "catch the contagion of British liberty" or to the British to welcome the French invaders. If she suggests an interchange between the two nations, it is a subtle exchange propagated by the quotidian realities of commerce,

[10] Creighton's poem was written in 1788, prior to the eruption of fears of a political contagion moving in the opposite direction from France to England.

[11] According to Bray, Smith's extensive narration in *Beachy Head* of the history of the Normans subverts the patriotic Anglo-Saxonism of Smith's time that would have considered the Norman Conquest a "short-lived, tyrannical yoke upon nascent Anglo-Saxon liberties" (156). In fact, Bray claims that any allusion to the Norman conquest in the post-Amiens period would have immediately brought to mind fears of a second French conquest by Napoleon, and that Smith's invocation of the Norman Conquest was not meant, as in patriotic historiography of the time "to bury it in the past as an example of the disastrous consequences of national irresoluteness," but rather, Bray argues: "to praise it, and, by unavoidable historical analogy, to praise Napoleon"(156).

immigration, and war. Although Smith's opening lines echo Creighton's allusion to the prior union of the two nations, the poet is characteristically modest about the implications of the geological hypothesis described in 1751 by Nicolas Desmarest as "a revolution that, rapidly or insensibly, appears to have detached Great Britain from the continent of the Gauls" (1) and as "the revolution that ruptured the Isthmus…that would have made the Bretons into inhabitants of a new world" (13).[12] The word "revolution," central to Desmarest's geological treatise as well as to other contemporary theories of the earth, is conspicuously absent from Smith's poem, hovering as an unspoken measure of the geographical, geological, and political distances between Britain and France by 1807.[13]

III. Resisting the "Natural Enemy"

> Mr. Burke said, that…France had always been considered as the natural enemy of this country; it was the only nation from which we had anything to fear, and in this point of view was always to be considered as an object of jealousy and precaution.
>
> - Debates in the House of Commons on the Alien Bill (1792)

> National prejudices and hatreds seldom extend beyond neighbouring nations. We very weakly and foolishly, perhaps, call the French our natural enemies; and they perhaps, as weakly and foolishly, consider us in the same manner. Neither they nor we bear any sort of envy to the prosperity of China or Japan. It very rarely happens, however, that our good-will towards such distant countries can be exerted with much effect.
>
> - Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Although Smith does not make explicit the political implications of the "vast concussion" in her poem, she had already unambiguously and pedagogically explained the stakes of this originary "vast concussion" eight years prior to *Beachy Head*, at a time when it was less risky to do so openly, by pointing to the way that it delegitimized the most popular British epithet for neighboring France at the time: the "natural enemy." In her children's book *Minor Morals interspersed with sketches of natural*

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[12] My translation. As Martin Rudwick notes, Desmarest won a prize for his essay *L'ancienne jonction de l'Angleterre a la France, ou, Le Détroit de Calais: sa formation par la rupture de l'isthme sa topographie et sa constitution géologique* despite the fact that it was entirely based on written sources and "he himself had never yet seen the sea." Skepticism about "theories of the earth" was thus not unfounded (*Bursting* 203). Nevertheless, geologists took seriously the idea that the two nations were once one land mass, despite uncertainty about how the two coasts were split. Georges Cuvier asks in a letter to Pfaff in 1791: "if therefore they were once united, how have they been separated? This cannot have happened by any rupture, nor by a complete subsidence of what was in the middle, nor by a simple flexing" (Rudwick, *Cuvier* 8).

[13] Ideas of revolution emerge in the opening lines to "Beachy Head," both metaphorically and metonymically, as that which geologically convulsed England into being and as that which more recently politically convulsed the nation to which England was once attached (both literally and figuratively). The terms become even more entangled when one considers that France itself is being *re-formed* as a nation by revolution at the time of the poem, opening up a strange parallel between England's origin in geological revolution and the origins of the Napoleonic Empire in political revolution. On the geological use of the term "Revolution" at the time and its intersection with the political sense of the word, see Alan Bewell's *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment,* where he writes that "By the 1790s, geology had assumed the status of *the* preeminent science of revolution" (246).

history, historical anecdotes, and original stories, published in 1798, the text's pedagogue, Mrs. Belmour, suggests to her nieces and nephews:

> My information indeed says, that this island called Britain was peopled from Gaul, as that part of the Continent was then named which we now call France: - so you see we can trace our origin no farther than to the people we despise and hate. There is a remote tradition, which tells that this island (so little a while since esteemed the mistress of the world) was, by some violent concussion of the earth, severed from the Continent, and it must have been precisely from France. There are fanciful people who imagine that vestiges still remain of this fact in the disposition of the rocks of the opposite shores, and say, that there is a chalk bed between Dover and Calais, which seems a sort of continuation of the Downs on either coast. I own I did not discover the resemblance of the soil on the margins of the two kingdoms. (263)

Mrs. Belmour's recourse to the same geological theories with which Smith begins *Beachy Head,* theories that suggest that "we can trace our origin no farther than to the people we despise and hate," comes in *Minor Morals* as a direct refutation of her nieces and nephews' assumption that France is their "natural enemy." The passage I have just cited presenting the geological theory of violent concussion responds to the following discussion of whether England would do better without the butcher or the soldier:

> Fanny: 'Why, the butcher: for, if we had no mutton and beef, we could live upon bread and rice, and pies and puddings and fruits; but if there were no officers nor soldiers, the enemies of England would come and kill us all.'
> Mrs Belmour: 'But is it necessary for England to have enemies?'
> Julius: 'They say the French are our natural enemies.'
> Mrs. Belmour: 'And what does that mean? What is a natural enemy?'
> Julius: 'An enemy, I suppose, that Nature has made.' (*Minor Morals* 260)

Julius' hesitation answering the question "What is a natural enemy?" points to the surprising difficulty of defining a term that was nevertheless part of the everyday political discourse in England, and underscores the conceptual awkwardness of an enmity *made by* nature. In the context of *Minor Morals*, this dialogue, which appears in the section "Slight Historical Etchings," seems to ask what it would mean to see the "natural enemy" placed between "the life of an insect" and "the progress of a flower" on the list of natural life observed and classified throughout the rest of the book. Smith's turn to the geological history that finds in England's history an originary proximity to France not only reveals the political implications of the geological concussion dividing the two nations but also suggests that Smith's broader interest in "nature" and landscape, and her recourse to the prospect poem, is intimately tied to her interest in nations and to an attempt to expose what Creighton called "the folly of national prejudice."

The "natural enemy" emerged as a ubiquitous epithet for France at the start of the eighteenth century.[14] In efforts to rouse British citizens to prepare for, and dread, the French invasion that was

[14] For a detailed history of the prolonged eighteenth century antagonism between Britain and France, with some attention to the discourse of the "natural enemy," see Jeremy Black, *Natural and necessary enemies : Anglo-French relations in the eighteenth century*. It's interesting to note that Black attributes the first use of the term "natural enemy" with respect to France to a letter from Stair to Stanhope in 1717 in which it is the French who consider the British their natural enemies. Stair, writing from France, writes that "the general bent of this kingdom is against us, they consider us their natural and necessary enemies." In 1722, *The Freeholders Journal* reported that the French

considered – at every moment – imminent, one broadside, typical of this trend, calls the French "our natural and irreconcilable enemies," and warns that "France, our ancient rival, our bitter enemy, seeks to pour her ferocious multitudes, inured to blood and rapine, upon our Coasts, in order, not merely to ravage and plunder, but to put an end to our existence as a Nation" (*An Appeal* 4). The force of the epithet "natural enemy" rests on this intersection of natural and national, as if a natural enemy signals a particularly existential threat to the foundation of the nation itself. The concept of the natural enemy can be traced back to Plato's attempt in *The Republic* to distinguish a war between Greeks and Barbarians, in which the latter are the natural enemies of the former, from hostility among Greeks, who are split into factions, but not by enmity (162). The earliest English use of the concept with reference to nations, rather than animals, appears to come in a speech given by Cromwell to the Major-Generals in 1656, in which, asserting his intent to "speak Things" rather than words, he declares: "Why, truly, your great Enemy is the Spaniard. He is a natural enemy. He is naturally so; he is naturally so throughout, - by reason of that enmity that is in him against whatsoever is of God" (509, 511). Carl Schmitt would later cite Cromwell's naturalization of enmity as exemplary of "the high point of politics" (67-68), the most extreme form of recognition of the friend-and-enemy relation, a distinction which Schmitt considered indicative of "the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation" (26) and therefore essential to politics itself, which he located not in the battle, but in the friend-and-enemy distinction that makes battle possible. And Jacques Derrida then responds in *The Politics of Friendship* by suggesting that we think "a politics, a friendship, a justice which *begin* by breaking with their naturalness" (105). Cromwell's concept was revived in England during the eighteenth century as an epithet, not for Spain, but for France, and despite this shift, the designation of France as the natural enemy appears to have been very much taken for granted. Even during peacetime, France was, in British political rhetoric, what Cromwell had called, in contrast to an "actual enemy," a "virtual enemy" (519) – an enemy against whom there might not be a war, but whose enmity is nevertheless always present, ineradicable, and therefore natural, in the sense of necessary, permanent, and innate.

Cromwell's assertion that he is *speaking things* underscores the performative alarmist force of the epithet "natural enemy," a force that anticipates Mark Jones' claims that "an alarm (the term derives from a military call to arms) has always been in essence a performative utterance, independent of its validity as a statement" and that "an alarm that can produce its own referent is neither true nor false" (3). Indeed, late eighteenth century attempts to refute the enmity produced by the term "natural enemy" often reveal frustration with the way that the term gains rhetorical force precisely by precluding enquiry, signification, or understanding. Thomas Paine discusses the term "natural enemy" in his 1776 "The Crisis," writing that it:

> has been often used, and always with a fraudulent design; for when the idea of a natural enemy is conceived, it prevents all other enquiries, and the real cause of the quarrel is hidden in the universality of the conceit. Men start at the notion of the natural enemy, and ask no other question. The cry obtains credit like the alarm of a mad dog, and is one of those kind of tricks, which, by operating on the common passions, secures their interest through their folly. (176-177)

Paine figures the words themselves as an alarm, a notion at which "men start" and a trick which is persuasive by preventing understanding. His concern is that even though "there does not exist in nature such a principle" as the "natural enemy," and the expression is, therefore, "an unmeaning

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were "our naturall foes…with whom we have been at variance ever since the days of William the Norman," and a year later *The True Briton* claimed that "France and Briton are as natural enemies, as old Rome and Carthage were, and the power of the former can never be increas'd with safety to the latter" (99).

barbarism, and wholly unphilosophical," it is nevertheless forcefully persuasive, obtaining credit "like the alarm of a mad dog" and precluding both enquiry and explanation. By the 1790s, the epithet, which appeared repeatedly in alarmist broadsides, did indeed work like an alarm, both in the figurative sense of inciting fear and panic, and in the etymological sense of a call to arms against the French. Anna Barbauld would later call the epithet a "solecism in terms," which assumed that humans "were like animals of prey solitarily ferocious" (*Sins* 23-24), and Paine echoes this, arguing that "even wolves may quarrel, still they herd together. If any two nations are so, then must all nations be so, otherwise it is not nature, but custom." Despite Paine and Barbauld's consensus that the term is "unmeaning," their inability either to decisively refute the epithet reveals its persistent rhetorical force. Consider the approaches Charles Pigott takes to defining the term in his *Political Dictionaries.* In one version of the dictionary from 1795, Pigott writes:

> *Enemy* (natural). --- *National Enmities* have been always produced and encouraged by kingly and priestly policy. The wolf is the *natural enemy* of the lamb; the vulture of the dove. *By instinct they are so. They must live;* but one people can never be the *natural enemy* of another; unless we consider mankind in the same savage light as the vulture and the wolf. A nation is no more than a member of that large family, the human race, and can only flourish in proportion with the felicity and welfare of the whole. What greater absurdity can be imagined, than that a people who owe all their prosperity to commerce, that is to say, to their connections with other people, should call themselves the *natural enemy* of this or of that people, and indeed of every thing that is not confined within their own circle! Is it not evident that this abominable prejudice is kept up by a gang of *plunderers* and *monopolizers,* under protections of CHURCH and STATE, who find their advantage and emolument in it? (19)[15]

[15] Pigott's question in his definition about commerce points to an important alternative approach to refuting the term the "natural enemy" provided by the economic relationship between the two nations and the relation between the two coasts structured by trade. James Andrews writes in 1789:

> Far from being intended by nature for foes, one would rather imagine that the two countries were meant to be in perpetual alliance. Each possesses the very commodities of which the other is destitute. The coal, the beer, the wool of Britain, are as much wanted in France, as the wine, the oil, and the fine linen of the French are wished for in England. We allow too, to each other reciprocally, the most respectable and engaging qualities. We deny not to our Gallic neighbours, gallantry in battle, military science, politeness of behaviour; and, above all, we unanimously allow them pre-eminence in every elegant accomplishment. On their parts, they grant to us sincerity, bravery, and a generous philosophy, which, in all their dramas, where a Briton is introduced, forms the striking feature of his character. Are two nations thus circumstanced with respect to each other, formed to be 'Natural Enemies?' Shame on the expression! It is absurd, unnatural, and little less than blasphemous, as it conveys an idea precisely contradictory to that benevolence in the Supreme Being, which we are bound, as Christians, to look upon as one of his essential attributes. (231)

In her essay on Smith, Theresa Kelley notes that, by 1806 the English had decided to blockade the transport of goods to and from Napoleonic France (290). Charlotte Smith also engages the economic relationship between the two nations and coasts in *Beachy Head,* writing about Revenue Officers who watch for contraband trade with the opposite coast (225n.), since normal commercial relations are suspended, and the "commerce of destruction" (188).

Later in the text, Pigott revises the definition with ironic brevity: "*Natural Enemies* (to England) --- A nation that governs itself without a king, upon the principles of honour, virtue, and eternal justice" (83). Both definitions play on the movement from a *natural* enemy to a *national* enemy, but the second one ironically admits the impossibility of making sense of the irrationality of a term that works through force, through "kingly and priestly policy," and gives up on the task of explaining its history or arguing against it. Pigott's dictionary is vertiginous in its intertwining of radical politics and irony, but what is clear from these two definitions is the shift from aiming to explain and delegitimize the term "natural enemy," in the manner of Paine or Barbauld, to ironically hijacking the term to praise the enemy. The second definition reveals an understanding that the expression works by preventing its own definition, a rhetorical structure that Gil Anidjar claims characterizes all assertions of enmity. In his *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy,* Anidjar writes about the absence of a history of the enemy, which includes the absence of a definition of the enemy (67), noting what he calls "something like the disappearance of the enemy, its having vanished from philosophical and political reflections almost from the start" (xxiii). The discussions and definitions of the term at the turn of the nineteenth century do reflect on the problem of enmity, attending to what Anidjar refers to as "the excess of the question of the enemy in relation to war" (xxiii), even if only by exposing the frustration and difficulty of defining the term "natural enemy."

Pigott's second definition at once concedes and exposes the fact that the term "prevents all other enquiries," that it works by the force of alarmism rather than logic or signification. While Paine's assertion that the idea "prevents all other enquiries" underscores the forceful aspect of a political rhetoric that is effective by deflecting criticism and understanding, the alphabeticization of Pigott's satirical political dictionary means that the entry following "*Enemy* (natural)" is, suggestively, "*Enquiry,*" a term Pigott begins to define as follows: "*Enquiry*. --- According to the modern construction, signifies Sedition" (19). This definition resonates with the entry preceding it, for the transcripts of the 1794 proceedings of the treason trials of Tooke, Hardy, and Thelwall bear witness to this more dangerous way that the expression "natural enemy" prevented enquiry by the 1790s. Each transcript cites a letter written in May of 1792 from the Constitutional Society to the Jacobins in Paris, congratulating them on the "glorious Revolution" (to suggest that the French Revolution echoes the Glorious Revolution of 1688), and claiming that "instead of that universal benevolence which the morality of every known religion declares, he [the Englishman] has been politically bred to consider the species [the French] as his natural enemy, and to describe virtues and vices by a geographical chart" (*Trials* 206). We can also hear suggestive echoes of this same complaint in Los' lament in Blake's *Jerusalem* that: "they accumulate/ A World in which Man is by his Nature the Enemy of Man" (185).

Of those accused of treason, it is John Thelwall who most thoroughly pursues the problem of "natural enmity," attempting the difficult enquiry and putting pressure in 1795 on the claim that the term makes to nature. Thelwall devotes a number of pages in *The Tribune* to discussing the term:

> How comes it then that nationality has so long abused our understandings? How came it that at one period of our history we were in the habit of calling every man a Frenchman that was not an Englishman, and considering every man whom we called a Frenchman as an enemy or a wild beast? How comes it that we are still instructed to consider every Frenchman as the natural enemy of this country, unless he be the avowed supporter of the most abominable despotism that ever disturbed the tranquility of the world?
> Natural Enemies!!!——Citizens, I know not hardly what sort of construction to put upon these fanciful syllables— these superstitious denominations—this cabalistic jargon!— I will not talk of ideas: the purposes of tyranny and superstition are best served by making use of words that have no ideas annexed to them: and therefore it

> is that this unmeaning cant—this contradictory nothingness—this mystical non sense has been invented. (59)

It is important to note that Thelwall's observation that the term consists in "words with no ideas annexed to them" coincides with Cromwell's admission that he aims to "speak Things" rather than words and fascination with an epithet that works by force rather than meaning. Of course Thelwall's criticism of the word without the idea carries different emphasis than Cromwell's desire for a forceful language. But both authors in this way bring to mind Cowper and Coleridge's interest in poetry and alarmism's alliance with empty sounds. Thelwall then goes on to expose "this contradictory nothingness" by putting pressure on the word "natural" in the epithet:

> What is this nature? Tell me ye sophists, ye who first abuse our ears, that you may afterwards abuse our understandings, and then, by way of climax, deprive us of our rights and our existence! tell me, I say, ye juggling sophists, what do you mean by nature? Do you mean to create a fourth deity to add to your Trinity? Do you mean to represent to us, under the denomination of nature, some undescribable divinity whose laws you pretend to propound, though you pretend not to know the volume in which they are written? If this be the sort of meaning, or no meaning, which you affix to the word nature, I confess you come forward with a logic so subtle that I cannot *answer* you – because I cannot *comprehend* you. But if, by *nature* you mean the deductions and calculation drawn from the harmonized system of the universe – the laws of general interest deducible from what I call nature, that is to say, the phenomena of the world, then do I say that *natural enmity* is nothing more than a contemptible and unintelligible affectation of speech, a false metaphor, in which the epithet and the substantive are at war, and destroy each other. (59)

In the final sentence of this passage, Thelwall figures the expression's irrationality and lack of logical meaning as a linguistic violence that mirrors the violence of the war that the term enables. Natural enmity is an example not only of the destructiveness of language but of language's capacity to self-destruct. But it is Thelwall's simple question "What is this nature?" (58) that stands out as the pivotal though surprisingly difficult question necessary for an enquiry into the natural enemy, and central for investigations of how to define the natural enemy, of whether the grounds of enmity are natural or unnatural, and of how to distinguish between naturalism and nationalism, or natural histories and national histories.

The political stakes of asking the simple question "What is this nature?" in an enquiry into the "natural enemy" suggest that we might think of the turn to nature typically attributed to Romantic poetry not as an isolated, asocial retreat into the natural world, but as a rigorous engagement with Thelwall's question, an enquiry into the natural history of nations, foreign relations, and foreignness itself, or of the tenuous intersections of nature and nation in distinctions like that between the naturalization of plants and citizens or between geologic and political revolutions.[16] I would like to suggest that the lines I have been discussing from Charlotte Smith's final "nature poem" engage in this precise enquiry in order to critique the militarization of attention which demanded that civilians keep watch exclusively for a natural enemy, for the rhetoric of natural enmity both determined and

[16] Smith asks implicitly about naturalization in her poem "To a geranium which flowered during the winter." There she discusses the plant which is a "native of Afric's arid lands" (1) and then "naturalized in foreign earth" (21). The poem is part of Smith's *Conversations Introducing Poetry,* and the conversation following the poem also reveals an interest in race and the naturalization of foreign people.

naturalized the object of political alarmism during the period. In addition to her rejection of the term through geology in *Minor Morals,* Smith objects to the term "natural enemy" elsewhere in her prose work, noting in her 1794 novel *The Old Manor House,* when Orlando arrives in France after a long military journey fighting the war in America, that "France, contrasted with his banishment in America, seemed to him to be part of his country, and in every Frenchman he saw, not a *natural* enemy, but a brother" (378). Smith italicizes "natural" there, as well as in the preface to her 1792 novel *Desmond,* where she modestly worries that "the slight skirmishing of a novel writer can have no effect [on those] who still cherish the idea of our having a *natural* enemy in the French nation; and that they are still more *naturally* our foes, because they have dared to be freemen" (7-8). I propose, however, that it is not until her final poem *Beachy Head*, published posthumously in 1807, that Smith rigorously, though subtly – through the slightness of "slight skirmishes" and "slight historical sketches"– explores the convergences and divergences of naturalism and nationalism, and investigates the history of nature that undermines the rhetoric of *natural* enmity.

IV. Smith's Natural Histories

As I have already shown, the opening lines of *Beachy Head* recall a natural history that implicitly undermines the rhetoric of the natural enemy and thereby show that the British can trace their origin no farther than to their supposed enemy. The violent convulsion that once divided Britain from France provides Smith with an entryway to enquire into the pervasive rhetoric of the natural enemy; how, she asks, can we think of France as our natural enemy if nature's history itself shows that the two nations were once united? How could the two nations be naturally antagonistic, have a "*natural* antipathy," if the British can "trace [their] origin no farther than to the people [they] despise and hate" (*Minor Morals* 261)? Yet, as Smith's skeptical insistence that she herself can find no resemblance between the two countries suggests, she also does not embrace the alternative to antipathy: sympathy, an option made available by texts like Mathias' opposition of pity and watchfulness, and by David Hume's connection between sympathy and geographical contiguity in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (316-320).[17] Instead, she diverts both the arguments about natural

[17] British sympathy for France poses an interesting challenge to eighteenth century theories of sympathy. According to Hume, in his *Treatise*, the origin of national unity can be traced to a resemblance between citizens that is based on sympathy, rather than soil or climate. Hume points to:

> …men of the greatest judgment and understanding, who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions. To this principle we ought to ascribe the great uniformity we may observe in the humours and turn of thinking of those of the same nation; and 'tis much more probable, that this resemblance arises from sympathy, then from any influence of the soil and climate, which, tho' they continue invariably the same, are not able to preserve the character of a nation the same for a century together. (316)

Paradoxically, Hume's theory that sympathy *enables* the resemblances between citizens of a single nation and thus produces national unity follows an earlier claim in the *Treatise* that sympathy itself can only emerge through prior resemblance and contiguity, conditions that pose a bit of a challenge for France, since it is not visible from the borders of England. Hume writes: "we must be assisted by the relations of resemblance and contiguity, in order to feel the sympathy in its full perfection"(320). Thus Smith's persistent interest in tracing the connection between two nations *without resemblance* resists Hume's model of a sympathy grounded in physical or visual likenesses and

enmity and about sympathy and finds instead an impersonal, geological relation toward England's neighbor premised on nature's history rather than natural enmity.

Beachy Head details numerous histories of invasion, often by way of the particular fossils and traces such migrations left behind, but avoids an argumentation that she aligns with war and popular nationalist historiography. Theresa Kelley has shown how the poem dramatizes an impasse in Romantic historiography created by the presence of two historiographical models: the grand, linear march of history and the narrative description of minutae, fragments, and particularities, the second of which, according to Kelley, often appeared in the eighteenth century as local natural histories written by women (278). *Beachy Head,* Kelley claims, aims to move between these two levels, and reveals the difficulty of writing history when it records at so many discordant levels, from both above and below (289-290). The problem of enmity I have been describing aligns the historiographical oppositions Kelley outlines with the tension between national security and geological proximity in the poem. While Smith at times ventriloquizes the nationalist rhetoric of defense, her engagement with local natural histories and her turn to minute particulars in nature, to fossil remains, puts pressure on the framework in which defense can be imagined. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that *Beachy Head* does contain strong gestures toward national security. For example, following a description of the Normans landing on the British coast, Smith writes: "But let not modern Gallia form from hence/ Presumptuous hopes, that ever thou again,/ Queen of the isles! shall crouch to foreign arms" (143-145). Kelley suggests that the "patriotic riff may be designed in part to forestall renewed public hostility toward critics who had long been exercised about her Gallic and revolutionary sympathies" (295).

Smith reveals a sophisticated sense of how forms of historiography participate in political gestures of security and war; in *Desmond,* she makes the direct connection between the ideology of historiography and the rhetoric of natural enmity:

> I might, indeed, read history; but whenever I attempt to do so, I am, to tell you the truth, driven from it by disgust…almost every page offers an argument in favour of what I never will believe, - that heaven created the human race only to destroy itself, and that, in placing the various species of it in various climates, whence they acquired various complections, habits, and languages, their Creator meant these men should become the natural enemies of each other, and apply the various portions of reasons he has allotted them, only in studying how to annoy and murder each other. (151)

The grand, linear march of history is a problem for Smith not simply because it argues that enemies are natural, but more importantly because, simply, "almost every page offers an argument." For, regardless of her sympathies with France, Smith is not interested in arguing that Britain and France are natural allies or friends, but only in uncovering the dispersed traces of natural life that discredit the ideological claims made through alarmist historiographies. Instead, Smith offers a historiography of slightness – of slight sketches, minor morals, and slight skirmishes – that refuses to attribute to nature or to history a polemic, even while she is aware of her presence as a public actor and is conscious of her public persona.[18] If we consider this refusal of polemic in light of the Greek

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encourages what Jacques Khalip describes as the ability to "find community precisely with those persons one cannot see or solicit" (907).

[18] The speaker of *Beachy Head* might be compared to Rei Terada's description of the "the solitary, apologetic figure of the phenomenophile, who is afraid of what he might have to say when called upon to endorse the world and tries to avoid that moment by lingering in object perception, looking away at something too slight to present a demand – some wavering reflection or trick of light" (18).

Polemos, or war, it becomes clear that finding an argument in history and an enmity in nature is, for Smith, one and the same war-like gesture.

The "vast concussion" passage of *Beachy Head* follows a poetic tradition of looking to nature for the natural conditions of enmity and nationalism. Consider Collins's "Ode to Liberty," which recalls that "The Gaul, 'tis held of antique story,/ Saw Britain link'd to his now adverse strand" (66-67), as well as Cowper's assertion in "The Task" that: "Mountains interpos'd/ Make enemies of nations, who had else,/ Like kindred drops, been mingled into one" (2.17-18). Yet the tentative suggestion of a shared origin with the enemy is only where *Beachy Head* begins. Rather than directly pursuing either the geological theories or the political polemic at stake in this "vast concussion" of the earth, Smith's poem goes on to collect a series of figures of intense and focused attentiveness to the historic coastal site of invasion. Though the poem does not directly address the rhetoric of the natural enemy, it is preoccupied with the forms of attention demanded on the British coast in anticipation of that enemy's invasion. By pointing to the geological flux that formed this particular sense of foreignness, Smith is not simply repeating Rousseau's claim in *The Social Contract* that "men are not naturally enemies" (145). Rather, she critiques the rhetoric of the natural enemy in order to resist the mode of keeping watch required by alarmism, a watchfulness with a predetermined and exclusive object, and provides instead an alternate form of attentiveness open to other relations to the foreign. Smith insists, in this sense, that how and what we are able to attend to *is,* in fact, what mediates the political. Instead of allowing a teleological model of attention, she asks how one might sense or imagine the arrival of something or someone foreign without already knowing what it is or protecting against it. And she asks how one can sense, or make sense of, a foreign nation that one can neither perceive nor communicate with, but which nevertheless hovers in the national imagination as both neighbor and enemy.

While vision is often obstructed looking out from the cliff and the poet comes up against the "want of power in the human eye," geology opens up temporally expansive views that produce a proximity that remains, nonetheless, spatially inaccessible. Critics have rightly pointed to Smith's lament in *Beachy Head,* "Ah! very vain is Science' proudest boast" (390), and considered the poem what Anne Wallace calls a critique of the "inefficiency of science and history" (79), or as Noah Heringman writes, a "challenge to the new geology's claim of expertise and professionalism" and "a morally grounded rejection of geology in favor of botany" (*Romantic Rocks* 276). Here, though, Smith takes recourse to both geology and botany, withdrawing from the wide expanses of the commanding prospect view to focus on the minute particulars of scientific language and observation, engaging in what Cuvier calls "one of the most fascinating subjects on which the attention of enlightened men can be fixed" (Qtd. in Rudwick, *George Cuvier* 185).[19] The following passage begins with a prospect view, the "widely spreading views" from the top of the cliff, but finds the "strange and foreign" through a geologically and thus temporally expansive view down into British soil:

> Ah! hills so early loved! in fancy still
> I breathe your pure keen air; and still behold
> Those widely spreading views, mocking alike
> The Poet and the Painter's utmost art.
> And still, observing objects more minute,
> Wondering remark the strange and foreign forms
> Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous soil

[19] Cuvier is describing geology. Rudwick notes that in an earlier draft, Cuvier wrote "human attention," which he later revised to "the attention of enlightened men" (185).

Mingled, and seeming of resembling substance.
Tho' surely the blue Ocean (from the heights
Where the downs westward trend, but dimly seen)
Here never roll'd its surge. (367-378)

The problem with which these lines end – that sea-shells appear where "surely the blue Ocean…never roll'd its surge" – alludes to the geological convulsion that the poem begins by imagining, a concussion that defined or redefined the conditions of the "strange and foreign." The fossils found by "observing objects more minute" are emigrants, "strange and foreign forms," forms which signal an invasion of the foreign that is only available to an eye trained by geology or botany.[20] What, then, is the relation between this expansive view outward and the even more expansive geological view inward into the earth and into a past prior to the human? Is geological perception a replacement for the vast views that promise a glimpse of London, but fail to produce a *view* of France? Smith upends human scale, finding the miniscule as a register of the historically vast. It becomes unclear, among this variety of modes of perception, if the poem's speaker is keeping watch spatially or temporally – over the coastline or over history itself. For looking out toward France historicizes the conditions of alterity by way of a view into the earth itself, invoking a moment when even a distinction between England and France was impossible. Keeping watch over Beachy Head, Smith is subverting the protective spatial function of keeping watch by exposing England to its own non-human, natural history beside, and inextricable from, that of France. In fact, the emphasis on the strange and foreign returns a few lines later in the poem, where Smith writes:

What time these fossil shells,
Buoy'd on their native element, were thrown
Among the imbedding calx: when the huge hill
Its giant bulk heaved, and in strange ferment
Grew up a guardian barrier, 'twixt the sea
And the green level of the sylvan weald. (384-389)

Still focusing on the fossil shells found on the coast, Smith here returns to the protective function of the landscape and again imagines the geologic production of a "guardian barrier." And yet these barriers do not simply keep out the strange, since they have the strange – "strange ferment" – at their origins.

In "The Emigrants," the prospect view and the entire landscape is marred by war and the unfortunate condition of its emigrants. The prospect holds no promise for the poet, who only hears the trumpet's call to arms which drowns out the sounds of the landscape:

What is the promise of the infant year
To those, who (while the poor but peaceful hind
Pens, unmolested, the encreasing flock
Of his rich master in this sea-fenc'd isle)
Survey, in neighbouring countries, scenes that make
The sick heart shudder; and the Man, who thinks,
Blush for his species? *There* the trumpet's voice

[20] The passage also interestingly recalls the "resemblance between the two countries" that the poet does not find in the opening lines of the poem, by pointing to the "resembling substance." Resemblance emerges here not between the present day English and French, or their landscapes, but in the "pale calcareous soil/Mingled" - that is, only by way of minute geologic perception.

Drowns the soft warbling of the woodland choir;
And violets, lurking in their turfy beds
Beneath the flow'ring thorn, are stain'd with blood. (II. 62-71)

If, in "The Emigrants," the sounds of nature are drowned out by the sounds of wartime alarm, *Beachy Head* registers the sounds of nature *as* wartime sounds, not as the trumpet's voice, but as an alternative way to hear foreignness that resists appropriation or understanding. Attending to the sights and sounds of the foreign in the coastal landscape, the poet hears the cry of the sea-snipe, which, despite the violent connotations of its name, does not designate a danger or an enemy's arrival, but "just tells," she writes, "*that* something living is abroad" (114, my emphasis).[21]

Yet more remote
Where the rough cliff hangs beetling o'er its base,
All breathes repose; the water's rippling sound
Scarce heard; but now and then the sea-snipe's cry
Just tells that something living is abroad;
And sometimes crossing on the moonbright line,
Glimmers the skiff, faintly discern'd awhile,
Then lost in shadow. (111-117)[22]

The word "just" appears throughout *Beachy Head* to indicate the temporal movement of the poem, as in the lines "afar off/ and just emerging" or "like a dubious spot/ Just hanging in the horizon." Yet at this point the word "just" signals the slightness of the signification – the cry *barely* tells *that* something living is abroad, and provides no additional information. Rei Terada's distinction between "object perception (something crosses my gaze) and fact perception (a dragonfly is passing in front of me)" might be a useful way to think about Smith's insistence here that the sound *just tells* that something living is abroad (object perception) without specifying *what* is abroad (fact perception) (19). The poem is, as this passage suggests, less concerned with who is abroad or what danger the enemy threatens than it is with the mediation of foreignness itself, with how one knows or senses the simple fact "*that* something living is abroad," without moving to protect against it.[23] By limiting sense perception and the information it provides, Smith allows an encounter with the foreign prior to the decision that the foreignness in question is either dangerous or antagonistic. Smith's lines reveal that what Terada describes as "the romantic and post-romantic discourse of mere appearance" occurs in sound as well; according to Terada, this discourse "reflects, positively and negatively, a subterranean practice of phenomenophilia in which the most transient perceptual objects come to be loved because only they seem capable of

[21] It is interesting to note that the word "snipe" took on its violent connotation at the end of the eighteenth century: the *OED* attributes its meaning of "To shoot or fire at (men, etc.), one at a time, usu. from cover and at long range" to a 1782 publication by G. SELWYN: "Now people have been shot by platoons and in corps, the individual will be popped at or sniped, as they call it, from time to time. See *OED,* "Sniper." Also relevant is an 1800 publication of Aesop's fables in which the moral of a fable about shooting a snipe, entitled "The Snipe Shooter," is that "we often miss our point by dividing our attention" (Dodsley 183).

[22] The second line echoes Horatio's description in *Hamlet* of the cliff that the ghost might lead them over: "What if it tempt you toward the floor, my lord,/Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff/ That beetles o'er his base into the sea,/And there assume some other horrible form,/Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason/And draw you into madness?" (I.4 69-74).

[23] Smith further highlights the limitedness of this sensory information by explaining in a footnote to these lines that, though the sailors call the bird a Sea Snipe, she can find "no species of sea bird of which this is the vulgar name" (221n.).

noncoercive relation" (4). Smith's noncoercive relation to sound, which recalls Cowper's ewe who listens without knowing what she hears, resists the militarization of attention that leaves open the question of *when* the enemy will arrive, but can allow no uncertainty as to *what* will arrive: it is always, naturally, necessarily, the enemy.[24] Smith traces the outline of a soldier's watchfulness and waiting, but leaves the attentive posture open as a willingness *not* to know or protect against who or what is abroad. Opening the poem by undermining the familiar posture of military watchfulness allows Smith to inflect all of these vigilant figures with the question of how the militarization of attention during the Napoleonic Wars – the sudden demand not only to stand "at attention" but also to keep watch and wait for the enemy's arrival – intersects with aesthetic and ethical forms of attention and might foreclose perception of something other than an enemy.

The attention to the signal which "just tells *that* something living is abroad" suggests that the "moonbright *line*" – on which the skiff "glimmers," "sometimes crossing," "faintly discern'd awhile,/Then lost in shadow" – might be Smith's answer to Helen Maria Williams' demand for a "*line* of connection across the divided world." In her *Letters Written in France* (1790), Williams likens politics to navigation, and figures a new kind of politics as a ship sailing on a "line of connection":

> Perhaps the improvements which mankind may be capable of making in the art of politics, may have some resemblance to those they have made in the art of navigation. Perhaps our political plans may hitherto have been somewhat like those ill-constructed misshapen vessels, which, unfit to combat with the winds and waves, were only used by the antients to convey the warriors of one country to despoil and ravage another neighbouring state; which only served to produce an intercourse of hostility, a communication of injury, an exchange of rapine and devastation. – But it may possibly be within the compass of human ability to form a system of politics, which, like a modern ship of discovery, built upon principles that defy the opposition of the tempestuous elements (' and passions are the elements of life' -) instead of yielding to their fury makes them subservient to its purpose, and sailing sublimely over the untracked ocean, unites those together whom nature seemed for ever to have separated, and throws a line of connection across the divided world. (149)

There is clearly a strong affinity between Williams's turn to the horizon to unite those "whom nature *seemed* for ever to have separated" and Smith's narrator's posture keeping watch over the horizon for a sign that something living – and something other than the "natural enemy" – is abroad. Yet Smith's position is not quite as optimistic or assertive as Williams'; for Smith, the possibility of a positive politics is only "faintly discern'd awhile,/Then lost in shadow," and the "moonbright line," evocative of the lines of poetry as well as the lines on the horizon, is only a slight "line of connection." Smith rethinks the political by reframing how and to what she pays attention, a subtle gesture marked simply by a refusal to know in advance what it is she waits for.

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[24] See Steven Goldsmith's description of Lyotard's insomniac night watchman who "acts by listening, by tuning his critical judgment to such a fine pitch of agitation that he might just hear conflicts which cannot yet be spoken in the entrenched idioms of the present" ("Blake's Agitation" 789). Particularly relevant to Smith's slight intervention by way of listening to sounds of foreignness is Goldsmith's claim that this insomnia "may constitute a public intervention so inaudible as to seem nonexistent" (789).

"To Govern me by Terror": The Politics of Gothic Alarm in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* & Godwin's *Caleb Williams*

I. The Politics of the Gothic

> Dismiss me from the falsehood and impossibility of history and deliver me over to the reality of romance.
> - William Godwin, "Of History and Romance"

In a letter published in a public journal in 1798 under the title "Terrorist Novel Writing," an anonymous author complains about the recent rise of what would later become known as "gothic" novels, for he worries about books that carry "the young reader's imagination into such a confusion of terrors, as must be hurtful": "I allude, Sir, principally to the great quantity of novels with which our circulating libraries are filled, and our parlour tables covered, in which it has been the fashion to make *terror* the *order of the day,* by confining the heroes and heroines in old gloomy castles, full of spectres, apparitions, ghosts, and dead men's bones" (Clery 183-4). Although this complaint was familiar during the 1790s, the phrase in italics moves beyond the borders of the strictly literary by alluding to the notorious declaration, in September of 1793, by the French Revolutionary Government, to make terror "*l'ordre du jour*." By May of 1794, the same phrase had entered British Parliamentary debates as an unexpected description, not only of the Terror in France, but also of what R.J. White has described as the "technique of repression generally known as 'Alarm,'" the British alarmism which warned of French terror, exposing the irony with which, by attempting to keep the French away, the British – mimetically – let them in (104). In the pages of Woodfall's account of the debates in Parliament for 1794, Charles James Fox openly accuses Parliamentarians of circulating alarms with the purpose of increasing their own power:

> What was the conduct of the ministers here? Precisely in the same manner they circulated stories of alarms and conspiracies, to fill the public mind with fear, and, to use the jargon of the French, to make terror the order of the day. By spreading these false and idle alarms, they succeeded in obtaining powers destructive of the constitution, which, as in France, were to be exercised with such inhuman rigour, as to keep the country in double awe, and by fostering indignation and discontent, give rise again to new jealousies, which would afford occasion for still farther stretches of power. (*Great Britain* 31:552)

Whig critics of British alarmism thus inverted the very phrase alarmists used to accuse the French to expose the way that both governments induced fear in order to obtain power and to make explicit that alarm functioned as a form of subjection since political fear compelled obedience. The following year, William Godwin used the same expression to explain the decision, "in compliance with the alarms of booksellers," to remove the original preface to his novel *Caleb Williams*: "Terror

was the order of the day;" writes Godwin, referring to a period only a few years prior, "and it was feared that even the humble novelist might be shown to be constructively a traitor" (xxiv). Echoing the gothic convention of literary terror present in the novel itself, as well as the title character's pervasive paranoia that he will be "shown to be a traitor," Godwin suggestively blurs the distinction between political terror in England, the literary terror of the gothic, and the publication terrors of both authors and booksellers. Put in the literary contexts of "Terrorist Novel Writing" and the "alarms of booksellers," the word "order" begins to look more and more like a synonym for literary "form" or "genre"; as "terror" became the political order of the day, it also curiously became the narrative order - the *form* or *genre* - of the day.

The gothic novel is a literary form *ordered* by various competing, overlapping, and interdependent states of terror, horror, and alarm; it is, according to Philip Fisher, "a form generated by the experience of fear. By describing fear, it induces fear in its reader" (*Vehement Passions* 9).[1] This form is shaped by the experience of alarm that it inflicts simultaneously on its characters and its readers. In the preface to *The Castle of Otranto,* published in 1764 and widely considered the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole explains the form of the novel in terms of a continuous demand on the attention that is generated by an engine of terror:

> There is no bombast, no similes, flowers, digressions, or unnecessary descriptions. Every thing tends directly to the catastrophe. Never is the reader's attention relaxed…Terror, the author's principal engine, prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions. (6)

Thus in contrast to a Wordsworthian poetics that encourages the relaxation of the organs of attention, the gothic genre demands, at least in theory, a narrative without distraction and with constant attentiveness, though they did not all succeed in practice. In another anonymous letter lamenting the popularity of the gothic, written in 1797 to *Monthly Magazine* under the title "The Terrorist System of Novel-Writing," "A Jacobin Novelist" criticizes the genre for being too formulaic and predictable, and figures the relation between political terror and literary terror as one of direct imitation:

> Happy, sir, would it be, if we could contemplate barbarity without adopting it; if we could meditate upon cruelty without learning it; and if we could paint a man without a head, without supposing what would be the case if some of our friends were without their heads. But, alas! so prone are we to imitation, that we have exactly and faithfully copied the SYSTEM OF TERROR, if not in our streets, and in our fields, at least in our circulating libraries, and in our closets. (Norton 299)[2]

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[1] Though my primary interest is in the role of "alarm," the terms "alarm," "terror," "horror," and "fear" were sometimes used interchangably in the period, though this was not always the case. In her "Essay on the Supernatural," Ann Radcliffe makes a distinction between terror and horror: "Terror and horror are so far opposite that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (Clery 168).

[2] Another criticism of the genre repeats the complaint about the formulaic aspect of the genre: "If a curtain is withdrawn, there is a bleeding body behind it; if a chest is opened, it contains a skeleton; if a noise is heard, somebody is receiving a deadly blow; and if a candle goes out, its place is sure to be supplied by a flash of lightning." (Clery 183).

Here the mimetic relation between British alarmism and the very terror it warns against is overshadowed by the more successful and forceful imitation happening through literary texts. This novelist attributes the literary imitation to boredom on the part of English novelists, who had enough of describing human life and manners "and just at the time when we were threatened with a stagnation of fancy, arose Maximilian Robespierre, with his system of terror, and taught our novelists that *fear* is the only passion they ought to cultivate, that to frighten and instruct were one and the same thing, and that none of the productions of genius could be compared to the production of an ague" (Norton 300). Although satirical in tone, this passage nevertheless reveals the strained politics of emotion at the time; "To give an emotion a name," writes Adela Pinch, "is, as the participants in the Revolution debates knew, a highly political act" (135).

Since its popularization in the 1790s, critics have agreed that gothic terror and alarm bear a privileged though vacillating relation to political terror and alarm, and that it is not a coincidence that the genre dedicated to both describing and causing terror and alarm emerged together with political terror as a recognizable "system."[3] For, as Foucault remarked, gothic novels function as "politics fiction" because "these novels essentially focus on the abuse of power" (211). While some critics have seen the gothic as a "regression" used to divert revolutionary sentiment to an earlier revolution or an attempt to preserve a tradition and history divorced from the French Revolution, others have seen in the gothic a critique of authority and tyranny and an embrace of transgression thoroughly in line with revolutionary principles. Perhaps the only aspect of the politics of the gothic upon which there is consensus is simply the fact *that* a connection between the emergence of the gothic novel and the revolutionary politics of the period not only existed at the time but was also quite overt. Michael Gamer's account of the politics of the genre pivots precisely upon the "ideological flexibility" that makes further consensus impossible; he points to the contradictory way that the gothic "can accommodate radically different political viewpoints even as it is denounced as politically dangerous" or how it can "function as a vehicle for British nationalism even as it is rejected as an invading foreign literature" (45).[4]

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[3] In his recent book *Romanticism and the Gothic,* Michael Gamer hints at this link, writing that "gothic's reception becomes especially marked and voluble after 1795, and coincides in trajectory and intensity with widespread alarm in England during these years over unrest at home and possible invasion from across the Channel" (31). Many readers of the gothic have picked up on the political resonances of the genre, (albeit with conflicting conclusions), from the Marquis de Sade, who called the gothic, in his 1800 *Reflections on the novel,* "the inevitable product of the revolutionary shock with which the whole of Europe resounded," to Maurice Levy, who identifies the genre as "the historically dated response of the English psyche to what was happening on the far side of the channel…a regression to a safe revolution (safe, because it had already taken place and was a thing of the past) as well as the defense and illustration of the 1688 principles of controlled political power and religion via media" (226). Tracing the historical emergence of these parallels, Ronald Paulson writes that "by the time *The Mysteries of Udolpho* appeared (1794), the castle, prison, tyrant, and sensitive young girl could no longer be presented naively; they had all been familiarized and sophisticated by the events in France" (Botting 274). In a similar vein, Claudia Johnson claims that "once social stability was virtually equated with paternal authority, gothic material was potent stuff" (25).

[4] While some critics have seen the gothic as a form with which to critique the abuses of power and incite readers to resist oppression and transgress the social order, others have associated at least a strain of the gothic with the goals of evoking both nationalism and a "nostalgia for simpler and more hierarchical class and gender structures" (Gamer 45) and narrating the restoration of the "property claims of rightful heirs" (Watt 7). James Watt identifies a dominant category of the gothic romance that he calls "Loyalist Gothic," writing that "from around the time of the British defeat in America…the category of Gothic was widely redefined so as to denote a proud heritage of military victory" (7). In contrast to the "Loyalist Gothic," Gamer cites George Canning, Thomas Mathias, and Hannah More who "vocally condemn the 'morality' of gothic fiction

Although the author of "The Terrorist School of Novel-Writing" mocks the idea that "to frighten and instruct were one and the same thing," there is a sense that gothic alarm might impart instruction by providing a lesson in the suspicion of, and resistance to, power and oppression. Consider Southey's "To Horror" (1791), a poem that addresses "Dark Horror!," which it asks to "Arouse the opprest; teach them to know their power;/ Lead them to vengeance!" (Clery 138). Similarly, Godwin, to whom we will return in more detail, uses gothic conventions to present his theories of political power and justice. In *Caleb Williams,* Godwin attributes the wisdom, experience, and insight of his narrator to the state of constant alarm from which he has suffered: "the constant state of vigilance and suspicion in which my mind was retained, worked a very rapid change in my character. It seemed to have all the effect that might have been expected from years of observation and experience" (142). Gothic novels often center around an authority who limits access to knowledge, and reveal unexpected links between power, horror, and epistemology. While the gothic genre often thematizes a horror that comes from either not enough or too much knowledge, it also – according to some critics – provides and performs an educative horror; as Catherine Morland in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* remarks "to *torment* and to *instruct* might sometimes be used as synonimous [*sic*] words" (124).

In fact, Austen's novel *about* the danger of reading gothic novels reveals a striking understanding of the convergences of literary and political alarm. On their walk up to Beechen Cliff in Chapter 14 of *Northanger Abbey*, the conversation between Catherine, Eleanor, and Henry leads to politics: "by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics it was an easy step to silence" (120).[5] The spectre of France and the dangerous proximity between the two nations haunts the scene, reminiscent of Charlotte Smith's gaze toward the coast and toward France: "'I never look at it,' said Catherine, as they walked along the side of the river at Beechen Cliff, 'without thinking of the south of France'" (120). The silence is finally interrupted by Catherine, the novel's heroine, who exclaims: "'I have heard that something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London.'" The ambiguity of the phrase "something very shocking," as well as the verb to "come out," causes a prolonged misunderstanding, in which Eleanor believes Catherine is referring to an imminent political riot, while Catherine is actually speaking about the imminent publication of a gothic novel. The misunderstanding points, explicitly though humorously, to the echoes between literary and political terror:

> Miss Tilney, to whom this was chiefly addressed, was startled, and hastily replied, 'Indeed! – and of what nature?'
> 'That I do not know, nor who is the author. I have only heard that it is to be more horrible than any thing we have met with yet.'
> 'Good heaven! – Where could you hear of such a thing?'

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and drama as politically dangerous and link it explicitly with radical and revolutionary politics" (31). In his essay "Gothic and the French Revolution," Ronald Paulson blames the popularity of gothic novels in the 1790s on "widespread anxieties and fears in Europe aroused by the turmoil in France finding a kind of sublimation or catharsis in tales of darkness, confusion, blood, and horror" (273).

[5] For a reading of the novel as a critique of the politics of enclosure and its impact on the displacement of the rural poor, see Robert Hopkins, "General Tilney and Affairs of State: The Political Gothic of Northanger Abbey." Hopkins interestingly links the prospect view present in the literary geneology of the Beechen Cliff episode to the novel's politics, writing that the prospect structure at the time "connected 'patriotism with peace, plenty, and property'" (214).

> 'A particular friend of mine had an account of it in a letter from London yesterday. It is to be uncommonly dreadful. I shall expect murder and every thing of the kind.' 'You speak with astonishing composure! But I hope your friend's accounts have been exaggerated; - and if such a design is known beforehand, proper measures will undoubtedly be taken by government to prevent its coming to effect.' (120)

Even before the cause of the misunderstanding is clarified here, we can see that the dramatic irony of the conversation depends on the emergence of alarm as both a political and literary category during the period, as though the misunderstanding were based on the obscured echo between *rioting* and *writing*.[6] The points upon which the misunderstanding pivots – the mysterious "author" of "something very shocking," the measures "taken by government to prevent its coming to effect" – underscore the disconcerting connections between authoring a novel and authoring a riot, as well as those between the alarms of readers and what Godwin refers to as the "alarms of booksellers."

Although not typically read beside each other, Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* share an interest in the critical response to political alarmism made possible by the gothic genre's reliance on alarm. Both authors renounce certain sensational or formulaic aspects of the gothic to show the terror of "things as they are," to use the original title of *Caleb Williams*, and to close the gap that Austen delineates between the "anxieties of common life" and the "alarms of romance." And though both novels have been called "gothic," they resist the identification as strictly or simply gothic. Instead, they self-consciously borrow from gothic conventions in order to expose how alarm functions as a form of subjection. Since, as the 1790s revealed, continual alarm often functioned as a systematic means by which government gained power over the governed, both authors turn to the Gothic genre to ask how alarm serves as a pretext for the preservation and expansion of power. Both authors investigate alternatives to alarm as a form of subjection, raising the possibility of a voluntary, unforced alarm that would not participate in a system of control. While Godwin imagines an epistemologically-productive alarm by finding at its root a heightened attention that might transform alarm into a productive curiosity and critical judgment, Austen is more skeptical about any potential productivity to alarm; her novel presents both a false sense of security and a number of false alarms and destabilizes our understanding of both. Austen's irony, I'd like to suggest, implicitly queries the possibility of voluntary alarm altogether, picking up on the irony of a government-sponsored "volunteer movement" that directed, coerced, and controlled public alarm. Playfully blurring the distinction between gothic conventions and the rhetoric of political alarm, Austen make a subtle diagnosis of the way that a rhetoric of *voluntary* alarm can still participate in a system that uses alarm as subjection.

[6] The anonymous author of "terrorist novel-writing" also plays with this pun: "Need I say that I am adverting to the wonderful revolution that has taken place in the *art* of novel-writing, in which the only exercise for the fancy is now upon the most frightful subjects, and in which we reverse the petition in the litany, and riot upon 'battle, murder, and sudden death'" (Norton 300).

II. Caleb Williams's Susceptibility

> Government is nothing but regulated force; force is its appropriate claim upon your attention.
>
> - William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Political Justice*

Godwin's withdrawn introduction to his 1794 novel *Things as they Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* describes the novel as "a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism, by which man becomes the destroyer of man" (xxiii). Perhaps it was the explicit intention to record "unrecorded despotism," which, in the political atmosphere of suspicion and vigilance in the 1790s, caused booksellers the "alarms" that led to the preface's removal. According to Godwin:

> This preface was withdrawn in the original edition, in compliance with the alarms of booksellers. Caleb Williams made his first appearance in the world, in the same month in which the sanguinary plot broke out against the liberties of Englishmen, which was happily terminated, by the acquittal of its first intended victims, in the close of the year. Terror was the order of the day; and it was feared that even the humble novelist might be shown to be constructively a traitor. (xxiv)

The sanguinary plot to which Godwin refers is the sedition trials of Hardy, Thelwall, Tooke, and Holcroft, which began in 1794, and which both exemplified and exacerbated the sense of an enveloping suspicion, alarm, and watchfulness. Godwin had prefaced his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Political Justice* only a year earlier with a similar reference to the political atmosphere of alarm and panic; there he invoked the fearless force of truth to "prove victorious over every adversary" (vi). Mobilizing a language steeped in the militarized fear that his text aims to overcome, Godwin explains the challenge of publishing a book in a climate of alarm:

> It is now to be tried whether, in addition to these alarming encroachments upon our liberty, a book is to fall under the arm of the civil power, which, beside the advantage of having for one of its express objects the dissuading from tumult and violence, is by its very nature an appeal to men of study and reflection. It is to be tried whether an attempt shall be made to suppress the activity of mind, and put an end to the disquisitions of science…it is the fortune of the present work to appear before a public that is panic struck, and impressed with the most dreadful apprehensions respecting such doctrines as are here delivered. All the prejudices of the human mind are in arms against it. But it is the property of truth to be fearless, and to prove victorious over every adversary. It requires no great degree of fortitude, to look with indifference upon the false fire of the moment, and to foresee the calm period of reason which will succeed. (vi)

Godwin's use of military language to express the powers of thought and reason picks up on the strange doubling of "alarm" as a call to arms and a state of mind; the idea that the "prejudices of the human mind are *in arms*" closes the gap between those two senses of "alarm" by suggesting that panic and apprehension actually take on violent forms of defense, as if feeling alarm and taking arms were indistinguishable.

Godwin's repetition of the phrase "it is to be tried" anticipates the trial of Caleb Williams and suggests a relationship between the publication of *Political Justice* and the novel's treatment of suspicion and alarm. Published in the year following *Political Justice, Caleb Williams* has typically been read as a manifestation and fictionalization of the author's political principles; Godwin wrote that the story was the "'offspring of that temper of mind' in which the composition of *Political Justice* had left him" (Marshall 146). The role of alarm in the novel, as a "temper of mind" available for both political manipulation and paranoia, and as a crucial element in the contemporary political landscape as well as in the gothic genre, has gone relatively unnoticed. For what is striking in Godwin's novel and its preface is neither that this political atmosphere caused Godwin to remove the original preface to the novel, nor that he feared that he "might be shown to be constructively a traitor," but rather, that the novel is itself *about* what happens when "terror" becomes the "order of the day" – of the every day. Godwin's preface may seem to invoke terror and alarm only to explain his own anxieties of publication, but I would like to suggest that he is actually pointing to the novel's own investigation not only of how governments gain power through alarm but also of how the complex relationship of political subjects to power relies on a multi-directional, mutual alarm that includes a government's own alarm about, and fear of, the governed; "there is no disposition that clings so close to despotism," writes Godwin in the *Enquiry,* "as incessant terror and alarm" (2.46),

Godwin's decision to write a novel about political alarm one year following his major work of political theory reveals a significant generic shift. In his 1797 essay "On History and Romance," Godwin discusses the difference between writing history and writing novels, proposing that the novel is, paradoxically, a more accurate representation of historical experience. In contrast to "history," Godwin refers to "that species of literature, which bears the express stamp of invention, and calls itself romance or novel" (463), insisting that it is better to study one man, "his ordinary and minutest actions" than to "perus[e] the abridgement of Universal History in sixty volumes" (458). "He that knows only on what day the Bastille was taken," he argues, "and on what spot Louis XVI perished, knows nothing. He possesses the mere skeleton of history. The muscles, the articulations, every thing in which the life emphatically resides, is absent" (462). Godwin goes so far as to say that it is the writer of romance who is actually writing true history:

> The writer of romance then is to be considered as the writer of real history; while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the ardour, the enthusiasm, and the sublime licence of imagination, that belongs to that species of composition. True history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines. (466)

True history, according to Godwin, expresses character rather than dates; it focuses on wholly depicting one mind rather than trying to encompass them all. According to Jon Klancher: "'Of History and Romance' posits no break between political theory and imagination's practice" (161). And indeed, *Caleb Williams* merges these two realms as well, using fiction to express a history of alarmism, and using character to posit a political theory of emotion.

In his 1832 description of the process of writing *Caleb Williams,* Godwin recalls his attempt "to conceive a dramatic and impressive situation adequate to account for the impulse that the pursuer should feel, incessantly to alarm and harass his victim, with an inextinguishable resolution never to allow him the least interval of peace and security" (xxvi). Working backwards, Godwin

conceives the goals of incessant alarm and the impossibility of security prior to imagining either the situation or characters. The situation he finally conceives is a surprising one, since the cause the "pursuer" has "incessantly to alarm and harass his victim" is the pursuer's own guilt. If the novel allegorizes the relationship between ruler and oppressed, as it has so often been read, this aspect of the plot suggests that a government's attempt to alarm the people comes from its own fear and guilt. The novel chronicles the "adventures" of Caleb Williams (the "victim"), who narrates his own attempts to escape the watchful grasp of Falkland, his former master. Caleb's only action to blame for his "incessant alarm" is his discovery of the horrible secret that his master, Falkland, had committed murder and placed the blame on an innocent farmer. Caleb spends the majority of the novel pursued without peace or security by Falkland, who tracks Caleb at every step, until Caleb finally has the chance to testify against Falkland. This conclusion, however, revised from its original version which ended the novel with Caleb in prison, is also unusual because Caleb's testimony is successful and credible only because it involves his own self-indictment, self-abasement, and his professed reverence and admiration for his despotic enemy.[7]

The novel conceives liberty as a freedom *from* alarm and watchfulness. When Caleb escapes from Falkland's house, he explains: "I hardly felt the ground; I repeated to myself a thousand times, 'I am free. What concern have I with danger and alarm! I feel that I am free; I feel that I will continue so" (180). The passage echoes Godwin's definition of liberty in a letter to John Reeves on February 8, 1793 in the *Morning Chronicle*: "Liberty…consists in allowing every man, in the way of enquiry and argument, to speak what he thinks. It consists in delivering us from the empire of spies and informers, in not subjecting us to perpetual watchfulness and reserve" (*Uncollected Writings* 125). Godwin accuses Reeves of taking too far his "alarm for the safety of [the] country" – an alarm prompted by associations with the purpose of "diffusing opinions and concentring exertions among the middling and lower orders of the community," the distribution of pamphlets "tending to produce rancour and dissension," and the pasting of handbills on walls.[8] While Godwin allegedly agrees that "these things are unseemly and injurious," he criticizes Reeves for his "indefatigible exertions" and claims that Reeves refuses to stop when the alarm has been stifled, and in a surprising reversal of the link between alarm and arms, accuses Reeves of aiming to "wound those he had already disarmed" (*Uncollected Writings* 115). The letter goes on to diagnose the way that government uses "alarm" as a pretense for the extension of powers and increase of suspicion and surveillance; as Godwin writes in his *Enquiry,* "No picture can be more disgustful, no state of mankind more depressing, than that, in which a whole nation is held in obedience, by the mere operation of fear" (2.46).

The opening lines of the novel signal the centrality of alarm's vigilance to Caleb's oppression: "My life has for several years been a theatre of calamity. I have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny, and I could not escape" (3). The movement from the preface, which places the novel in a climate of terror, alarm, and vigilant suspicion, to these opening sentences, which put the protagonist and narrator under the watch of the "vigilance of tyranny," immediately blurs the distinction between Caleb Williams and *Caleb Williams,* and points to the way that both author and narrator suffer from heightened modes of attention. Vigilance is a pivotal aspect of Caleb's suffering and oppression: he explains that discovering Falkland's secret causes him to spend the "rest of [his] days devoted to misery and alarm" (7); "Every incident," he explains, "connected with my late abhored situation was calculated to impress me with the deepest alarm" (183). Caleb

[7] On the two endings, see Horrocks.

[8] According to Graham, "John Reeves's "Association for Preserving Liberty and Property Against Levellers and Republicans" acted as vigilantes to suppress meetings, expressions and even ballads that they deemed unpatriotic" (Graham 5).

presents alarm as equivalent to suffering: "I had suffered as much as human nature can suffer; I had lived in the midst of eternal alarm and unintermitted watchfulness" (329). And he explains his solitude in terms of alarm: "Neither had I the refuge, which few men have been so miserable as to want, of one single individual with whom to repose my alarms, and who might shelter me from the gaze of indiscriminate curiosity" (313). Alarm also functions in the novel in opposition to sympathy - "the magnetic virtue, the hidden essence of our life" - as though the best way to sympathize with someone were to leave her or him alone (357).[9] Shrinking from others' vigilance and unable to exchange sympathy with others, Caleb has to turn his vigilance to himself:

> In every human countenance I feared to find the countenance of an enemy. I shrunk from the vigilance of every human eye. I dared not open my heart to the best affections of our nature. I was shut up a deserted, solitary wretch in the midst of my species. I dared not look for the consolations of friendship; but instead of seeking to identify myself with the joys and sorrows of others, and exchanging the delicious gifts of confidence and sympathy, was compelled to centre my thoughts and my vigilance in myself. (297)

This solitude and self-vigilance leads to a heightened sensibility and maturity – "my vigilance in myself" anticipates Keats' demand that the "Genius of Poetry must…be matured…by sensation and watchfulness in itself." Yet the vigilance in himself is the devastating consequence of having no one to have sympathy either for or from. In this sense, the passage most strongly anticipates Frankenstein's monster, who, alone, without sympathy, eavesdrops on the cottagers only to reflect on his own solitude: "the words induced me to turn towards myself" (100).

Living in the midst of "unintermitted watchfulness" means always being watchful but also always being watched. This interdependence of watching and being watched evokes the paranoia that Thomas Pfau, reading *Caleb Williams* and the treason trials of 1794, has identified as "the paradigmatic mood of the 1790s in England" (77). Caleb's suffering and misery is, aside from his time in prison, when he was paradoxically free from "perpetual anxiety, terror, and alarm" and thus in better health (323), marked by an "eternal alarm and unintermitted watchfulness" that comes from both his own watchfulness that makes him more vulnerable to alarm and from the fear that he is being watched and is causing alarm in others: "It seemed as if I had some contagious disease from which every man shrunk with alarm, and left me to perish unassisted and alone" (343). But the sense that both oppressor and oppressed suffer from alarm and that there is thus a pervasive and mutual watchfulness is not simply a paranoid fantasy in the novel. For Godwin suggests that reciprocal alarm and vigilance is a fundamental aspect of government itself. In a crucial passage, Caleb explains the surprising mode of control and governance exerted by Falkland:

> I contemplated the proceedings of my patron with the deepest astonishment. Humanity and general kindness were fundamental parts of his character; but in relation to me they were sterile and inactive. His own interest required that he should purchase my kindness; but he preferred to govern me by terror, and watch me with increasing anxiety. (167)

[9] Consider, in contrast, Adam Smith's model of sympathy which entails a constant monitoring and attention. "We sit down by them, we look at them, and while they relate to us the circumstances of their misfortune, we listen to them with gravity and attention" (47).

Since its publication, readers and critics of *Caleb Williams* have investigated the overt political allegories at work in the novel. The word "govern" in the quotation suggests an allegory between governing and governed, between tyrant and citizen, or between monarchy and the masses. The force of the passage above comes through this allegory, but also through the ambiguity of the final line, for in the phrases "govern me by terror" and "watch me with increasing anxiety," both the terror and the increasing anxiety could belong to Caleb *and* to Falkland. Even though we might assume that the phrase "watch me with increasing anxiety" implies that Falkland's anxiety increases as he watches, the word "me" allows the possibility that it is Caleb's anxiety that increases as he is watched. Similarly, in the phrase "govern me by terror," it is not clear to whom belongs the terror – the governing or the governed. Both watching and being watched increase anxiety, and both governing and being governed, according to Godwin, require terror. Godwin's insight here is not simply that both parties experience terror and anxiety; the novel suggests that oppression works precisely through the ambiguity that emerges here linguistically. This ambiguity deflects enquiry or critical judgment in the same way that feelings like guilt, alarm, and reverence do. Guilt, alarm, and reverence in Godwin's model confuse and blur the distinction between governing and governed, and thus create a climate which renders critique of government impossible.

The reciprocal watchfulness and alarm in Godwin's novel participates in a complicated psychological relationship in the novel, in which Caleb adopts Falkland's guilt and is thus complicit in his own misery. At the novel's conclusion, Caleb can only successfully testify against Falkland by simultaneously revering Falkland's character and incriminating his own – what Gary Stenport calls "an increasingly frenzied defense of Falkland's virtues and an almost frantic exercise in self-abasement" (948). In his testimony, Caleb announces: "I proclaim to all the world that Mr. Falkland is a man worthy of affection and kindness, and that I am myself the basest and most odious of mankind!" (323). Yet this self-abasement is not as surprising as it may seem. After all, when Caleb describes "the injustice of a man, vigilant, capricious, and criminal," the association between vigilance and criminality would seem to imply that Caleb is indicting himself, since he is as vigilant as his oppressor. In a remarkable passage immediately following Falkland's revelation of his secret, Caleb anticipates the misery that will come as a consequence to his knowledge of the secret, a consequence which he blames himself for, all the while discovering "new cause of admiration for [his] master" (158):

> But, though the terrors which had impressed me were considerably alleviated, my situation was notwithstanding sufficiently miserable. The ease and light-heartedness of my youth were for ever gone. The voice of an irresistible necessity had commanded me to 'sleep no more.' I was tormented with a secret of which I must never disburthen myself, and this consciousness was, at my age, a source of perpetual melancholy. I had made myself a prisoner, in the most intolerable sense of that term, for years – perhaps for the rest of my life. Though my prudence and discretion should be invariable, I must remember that I should have an overseer, vigilant from conscious guilt, full of resentment at the unjustifiable means by which I had extorted from him a confession, and whose lightest caprice might at any time decide upon every thing that was dear to me. The vigilance even of a public and systematical despotism is poor, compared with a vigilance which is thus goaded by the most anxious passions of the soul. (159)

Caleb's invocation of the anonymous voice in *Macbeth* that cries "'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep'" brings together vigilance, alarm, reading, and quotation, placing Godwin in the tradition of writers I have been tracing throughout this dissertation, and perhaps closest to

Wordsworth who, in his hotel in Paris, also "seemed to hear a voice that cried/ To the whole city, 'Sleep no more!'"[10] Yet Wordsworth's experience of history comes from the relaxation of the organs of attention, whereas Godwin registers historical experience both *through* and *as* an inescapable vigilance. Though Godwin figures liberty as a removal from alarm and a turning away of the vigilant, he never positively represents such an experience as Wordsworth does. Godwin's text instead makes explicit the paradoxes of a political alarm that subjects: that the alarm and vigilance of a "public and systematical despotism" demands the alarm and vigilance of its political subjects, and that this reciprocal alarm relies on a sense of guilt present in both parties. Caleb realizes that Falkland is "vigilant from conscious guilt" at the same time that he places the blame for his fate on himself – "I had made myself a prisoner" – and experiences the guilt-induced vigilance of Macbeth's insomnia. The vigilance of a "public and systematical despotism" cannot stand in opposition to the "vigilance which is thus goaded by the most anxious passions of the soul"; the two vigilances stand in contiguous rather than oppositional relation to each other. Ingrid Horrocks argues that Godwin's later revisions to the novel, which she identifies as more "gothic," prove that he "reconsider[ed] the uses to which sustained mystery – ambiguous signs, contradictory explanations, uncompleted gestures – could be put as affective vehicles without compromising a desire to reveal the workings of oppression" (2). I would take this one step further to suggest that revealing the workings of oppression actually *requires* gothic conventions because it requires a portrayal of alarm and terror.[11]

In *Political Justice,* Godwin writes that "there will be oppressors, as long as there are individuals inclined, either from perverseness, or rooted and obstinate prejudice, to take party with the oppressor" 128). What might "take party with the oppressor" mean in the context of *Caleb Williams*? The novel is particularly adept at showing how the relationship, built on alarm, between the "tyrant" and the "slave," transfers the tyrant's guilt onto the slave, while paradoxically relying on a reverence and attachment between the two which sustains the relationship. By revering the oppressor, the oppressed identifies with and takes on the guilt of the oppressor; for according to Tilottama Rajan, "Falkland and Caleb are not simply antagonists but also doubles" ("Wollstonecraft and Godwin" 240).[12] Although Caleb refers to Falkland as his enemy, he maintains a strange and undeserved reverence for him, a reverence which speaks to Godwin's discussion of obedience in the section devoted to "Principles of Government" in *Political Justice,* where Godwin makes the striking claim that "every voluntary action is an act of obedience; in performing it, we comply with some view, and

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[10] This citation is also a favorite of De Quincey's. It appears twice in his *Confessions*. First, when he writes: "even when thy own peaceful slumbers had by long sympathy become infected with the spectacle of my dread contest with phantoms and shadowy enemies that oftentimes bade me 'sleep no more!' (36); and then, again, following "sudden alarms: hurryings to and fro: trepidations of innumerable fugitives." De Quincey "awoke in struggles, and cried aloud – 'I will sleep no more!'" (77).

[11] It is Godwin's exploration of terror and alarm in *Caleb Williams*, and its emphasis on the horror of secrecy, that aligns the novel so closely with the gothic genre and that has led critics to identify it as "political gothic." "Tea at Radcliffe's, talk of morals and fortitude," wrote Godwin. In her essay "More than a gravestone: Caleb Williams, Udolpho, and the politics of the gothic," Ingrid Horrocks writes: "that immense and violent repression of civil liberties had become the gothic of the everyday in this period is something that Godwin gestures towards in the original title to his bleak novel – 'things as they are.'" (2) According to Graham in *The Politics of Narrative,* Godwin's novel lacks "gothic scenario. There is no medieval setting, no castle with its perplexing and somber corridors and passages, and no ghosts" (110). Yet he argues that "Godwin appears to have understood that the Gothic narrative need not rely on supernatural events nor a pseudo-medieval scenario" (131).

[12] According Thomas Pfau, "Part of the formal and ideological lucidity of Godwin's novel lies in the fact that the Jacobin agitator and the aristocratic murderer stand in perfectly symmetrical and hence equivocal relation to one another" (144).

are guided by some incitement of motive" (107). Godwin admits the necessity of obedience to figures of power; his objection comes only to the reverence that so often accompanies it, explaining that "nothing can be more contrary to reason and justice" than reverence to our superiors in station only. "Obey; this may be right; but beware of reverence" (109), he writes. "It is a violation of political justice, to confound the authority which depends upon force, with the authority which arises from reverence and esteem" (110). In the novel, Caleb displays an extreme reverence for Falkland despite the latter's originary crime and crimes against Caleb. Godwin is interested in the affective and psychological aspects of governance; he does not advocate violent revolution or even disobedience despite his distrust of government itself, but instead insists that political subjects refuse the reverence that he claims blinds them to reasoned enquiry and reflection.

Though Godwin's novel goes far to critique the mutual alarm of and between the governing and the governed, the text suggestively provides a way out of that relationship through the knowledge and sensitivity engendered by alarm itself. I referred earlier to the maturity and self-knowledge Caleb gained when he "was compelled to centre [his] thoughts and [his] vigilance in [himself]" (297). Elsewhere in the novel, Godwin repeats this emphasis on the surprising benefits of alarm and the unexpected perception gained from the heightened attention caused by alarm. At one point, Caleb explains: "the constant state of vigilance and suspicion in which my mind was retained, worked a very rapid change in my character. It seemed to have all the effect that might have been expected from years of observation and experience" (142). Later in the novel, Godwin again describes the surprisingly productive effect of a mind in constant alarm:

> It seemed as if my faculties were, at least for the time, exhausted by the late preternatural intensity of their exertions, and that they stood indispensably in need of a period of comparative suspension. This was however but a temporary feeling. My mind had always been active, and I was probably indebted to the sufferings I had endured and the exquisite and increased susceptibility they produced, for new energies. I soon felt the desire of some additional and vigorous pursuit. (341)

The fact that Caleb's alarms produce an "exquisite susceptibility" of mind suggests the possibility of an epistemologically productive alarm – one which we can infer comes from the combination of alarm and "comparative suspension." The sense of a movement from suspension to susceptibility recalls the "elasticity" of mind in Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* that Desmond experiences whenever he is "not suffering under any immediate alarm" (311). Both Smith and Godwin suggest that while "immediate alarm" prevents enquiry and reflection, a mind recovered from such intensity, a mind that experienced an alarm that has since been suspended, gains a susceptibility and receptivity that would not otherwise be available.[13]

Though the productiveness of Caleb's alarm may sound at times ironic, and we should keep in mind that the celebratory conclusion is still tinged with an unaccountable reverence for Falkland and a lasting sense of guilt, consider Caleb's productively susceptible alarm beside Godwin's description of 'the genuine scholar' in "Of History and Romance": "His curiosity is never satiated. He is ever upon the watch for further and still further particulars. Trembling for his own fallibility and frailty, he employs every precaution to guard himself against them" (458).[14] Echoing

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[13] Godwin's use of the word "susceptibility" here is striking, particularly in light of his claim in *Thoughts on Man* that by the term "life" we "understand mere susceptibility" (159). I discuss this further in the coda.

[14] For a reading of Caleb as a suspicious reader whose "'truth' is necessarily suspect, subject to a reading that will make it too disclose its hidden secrets," see Tilottama Rajan "Wollstonecraft and Godwin: Reading the Secrets of the Political Novel." Rajan notes that "It is a curious coincidence that the reader in this novel,

Wordsworth's description of the imagination in *The Prelude,* "ever on the watch/ willing to work and be wrought upon," Godwin finds in curiosity a positive form of perpetual watchfulness that is linked to neither oppression nor suspicion. In his *Thoughts on Man,* in fact, he links alertness of mind to rebellion, explaining: "Wilfulness, impatience and rebellion are infallible symptoms of a mind on the alert" (162). By making Caleb the narrator of his own story, Godwin not only shows how one might resist injustice through enquiry and observation, but also how the very alarm which imprisons the political subject – when relieved by a period of "comparative suspension" and combined with what he elsewhere calls the "idea of voluntariness" (*Enquiry* 1.27) – might provide the "susceptibility" that becomes insight and allows him to criticize that very imprisonment and make room for critical reflection. Alarm, therefore, is an unusual form of subjection because, while it might obstruct political justice, Godwin suggests that it also enables the critique which makes political justice possible. For this to happen, alarm must become a voluntary attentiveness, suspended at will, since "the true perfection of man was to attain, as nearly as possible, to the perfectly voluntary state" (*Enquiry* 2.524). If voluntary, then alarm might produce the kind of "curiosity" Godwin finds in the "genuine scholar."

III. "An Alarm Not Wholly Unfounded"

Though unpublished until 1819, Austen wrote *Northanger Abbey* in the 1790s and revised it for the last time in 1803, the peak years of England's invasion alarms (Lynch 224). Austen's 1816 advertisement to the novel suggestively apologizes for "those parts of the work which thirteen years have made comparatively obsolete," implying that the shift in England's political climate might render some of the novel irrelevant. Indeed, the misunderstanding about rioting and writing that I quoted from the novel earlier hinges on the absent but looming word "alarm" that pervades both the political and literary context at the time, as well as the rest of Austen's novel, but that would have felt less pressing in 1816 than it was thirteen years earlier. To have had Eleanor misinterpret the word "alarm" would have been making the reflections on alarm that repeat throughout the novel heavy-handed; if there is a critique of the rhetoric of alarm in Austen's novel – and I'd like to argue that there is – it is so muted that even her narrator is oblivious to it.

The narrator, who mocks Catherine throughout the novel, and Henry Tilney, the novel's token instructor and voice of reason, become figures of supposed authority and judgment. It is Henry who clarifies the misunderstanding between the two women about whether it is a riot or a novel that will soon come out in London:

> 'Miss Morland, do not mind what he says; - but have the goodness to satisfy me as to this dreadful riot.'
> 'Riot! – what riot?'
> 'My dear Eleanor, the riot is only in your own brain. The confusion there is scandalous. Miss Morland has been talking of nothing more dreadful than a new publication which is shortly to come out, in three duodecimo volumes, two hundred and seventy-six pages in each, with a frontispiece to the first, of two tombstones and a lantern – do you understand? – And you, Miss Morland – my stupid sister has mistaken all your clearest expressions. You talked of expected horrors in London –

Caleb himself, is figured as a spy…For the spy is a kind of diviner, a reader of other people's secrets, but he also has his own secrets, his motivations for reading as he does" (245).

> and instead of instantly conceiving, as any rational creature would have done, that such words could relate only to a circulating library, she immediately pictured to herself a mob of three thousand men assembling in St George's fields, the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood, a detachment of the 12th Light Dragoons, (the hopes of the nation), called up from Northampton to quell the insurgents, and the gallant Capt. Frederick Tilney, in the moment of charging at the head of his troop, knocked off his horse by a brickbat from an upper window. Forgive her stupidity. The fears of the sister have added to the weakness of the woman; but she is by no means a simpleton in general.' (127)

Though much of the novel is devoted to narrating Catherine's wild imagination and vulnerability to alarm caused by reading too many gothic novels, this passage reveals certain imaginations set on political alarm, and thus recognizes, albeit satirically, the ways that politics and the gothic were beginning to intersect at the end of the eighteenth century. Yet it is precisely the relevance and likeliness of this political threat that should give us pause regarding Henry and the narrator's authority as enlightened voices of reason. Henry's condescension regarding Eleanor's alarmist imagination is subverted by the echoes, which Robert Hopkins observes, between his description of "a mob of three thousand men assembling in St George's fields, the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood" and the historical account of the Gordon Riots provided by the Annual Register for 1780 (Hopkins 217).[15] "The real world of the Gordon Riots," writes Hopkins, "is far more Gothic than the episodes of any Gothic romance" (217).[16] Similarly, Claudia Johnson insists that the novel reveals "that the misunderstanding between Catherine and Eleanor is plausible and even insightful: political unrest and gothic fiction are well served by a common vocabulary of 'horror' because they are both unruly responses to repression" (39). Thus, Henry provides, in response to a "false alarm," a kind of false enlightenment or a false security. For although Eleanor certainly does misunderstand Catherine's intended meaning, she

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[15] As many critics have noted, Austen's cousin Eliza also witnessed a riot in 1792, writing a letter explaining the "sudden alarm" she experienced:

> I suppose you have heard of the commotions we have of late had in this metropolis, & Tuesday last going thro' Mount Street in my carriage I most unexpectedly found myself in the midst of an immense mob who were contending with a large party of Guards on horseback, because these latter endeavored to disperse them & prevent their demolishing some houses which they were determined, & had begun, to pull down. The noise of the populace, the drawn swords & pointed bayonets of the guards, the fragments of brick & mortar thrown on every side, one of which had nearly killed my coachman, the firing at one end of the street which was already begun, altogether in short alarmed me so much that I really have not been well since. The confusion continued all that day & night & the following day, & for these eight & forty hours, I have seen nothing but large parties of soldiers parading up and down this street…My apprehensions have been that they would set fire to the houses that they were bent on demolishing. (*Northanger Abbey,* Appendix B, 243).

Warren Roberts points to a few inconsistencies between Austen's description of this riot and the Gordon Riots, including the number of people involved and the idea that a bank was attacked (27).

[16] In his reading of the novel in the context of enclosure, Hopkins points to the riots in the 1790s in response to grain shortage and the high cost of wheat. "If Jane Austen had this 'Food Riot' in mind, it would comment further on General Tilney's self-centered pride in his pineapples and his concern for the 'abundance' of his dinners" (217).

picks up on an all too real possibility, which Henry's condescensions fail to conceal. Despite his attempt to control and contain the women's alarm, the persistent cause for alarm suggests that he is an unreliable authority figure and that their alarm cannot and should not be quelled. And yet are we then to believe that Austen does believe there is cause for alarm? Is she aligning herself with alarmists, and asking her readers to fear both literary and political violence?

Recent Austen criticism has resisted the popular debate about her party lines and chosen not to see a firm political position espoused in the novels. Instead, critics locate subtler observations of the way politics and war have been registered in the everyday lives of women. Tim Fulford has argued that Austen's achievement in *Pride and Prejudice* is "to transform the romantic story – the woman sighing for a soldier – into a discourse in which politics and history can be seen to begin at home" (164). Fulford claims that Austen "is not a party writer – her fiction is concerned with tracing the social causes and effects of political decisions rather than with repeating the formulations of those causes and effects made in parliament" (168). In a similar gesture, Mary Favret's account of *Persuasion* and the everyday finds in Austen "a negative history of wartime – built less of rousing fortification than of rejection, unspoken pains, and unaccountable failings and fallings" (*War at a Distance* 145). By claiming that "the novels of Jane Austen focus on the discourse rather than the representation of politics," Claudia Johnson also urges critics not to search for a political position or polemic as a representation of what we might imagine Austen's politics to look like (27).[17] By refusing to map politics onto characters in this way, these critics offer an attention not only to the circulation of political discourse in Austen's works but also to alternate ways of imagining how politics looks – or reads. My argument is indebted to these readings of Austen's politics, for I believe that *Northanger Abbey* reveals an ironic attunement to the discourses of alarmism by demanding that the reader observe what happens in the novel *despite* its figures of authority, *despite* the sides it takes explicitly. For the figures of authority in the novel, though they are not alarmists, try to manipulate the alarm of others, an attempt at control or power that Austen mutely though concernedly highlights. For Henry's attempt to quell the women's quite valid alarm about writing and rioting is neither a call to arms nor a dismissal of alarm; instead, the scene demonstrates the way his authority in the novel is founded on an attempt to define, control, and manage the alarm of others.

Austen reveals elsewhere a pronounced sensitivity to the militarization of attention and the effects of wartime alarms on everyday life. Her 1818 *Persuasion* (published alongside *Northanger Abbey*) discusses what she calls "true naval alertness" (84) and ends with the famous final line, in which Anne "gloried in being a sailor's wife, but [she] must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (258).[18] But it is the combined attention to the experience of reading the gothic and political alarm in the 1790s, and where the two intersect, that makes *Northanger Abbey* Austen's most sustained investigation of alarm. In an essay on teaching and reading Austen in wartime, Favret asks about the political resonances of alarm in the novel. Favret notes the historical link I have been tracing, writing that "in the years when Austen worked on this novel (1798 and 1803), England was, in fact, subject to two serious (and other minor) invasion scares," and explaining that "gothic novels and circulating libraries were not the only sources for these alarming scenarios; and Catherine and Eleanor were not alone in their fears" (Favret "Reading"). Favret takes note of this alarmist context,

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[17] This is precisely the kind of reading Marilyn Butler does when she interprets Isabella Thorpe as "the revolutionary character, the man or woman who by acting on a system of selfishness, threatens friends of more orthodox principles; and ultimately, through cold-blooded cynicism in relation to the key social institution of marriage, threatens human happiness at a very fundamantal level" (180).

[18] The "tax" of quick alarm suggests a sense of *paying* alarm, like paying attention, embedded in the military economy and the economy of marriage.

which she claims "gives special force to the (large) number of times Austen plays on the word 'alarm,' and the variety of emotional registers that accompanies these 'alarms.' The novel joins alarm to curiosity, eagerness, and even hope—as well as dread." Christopher Miller, who presents Austen's "narrative technique as a phenomenology of surprise" (256) has also noticed Austen's tendency to "poke fun at abuses of the language of astonishment" (241). Austen's narrator in *Northanger Abbey* is certainly playful, poking fun at the language of alarm. This, in itself, could be seen as a reflection of the immense proliferation of "alarms" at the time, of the ease with which the word was thrown around, and the number of resulting false alarms. Favret concludes her article on pedagogy and war with the following questions:

> Catherine's sense of alarm does invade the most mundane aspects of her life, and the narrator gently mocks her for it: but if she's living in wartime, under the fear of invasion, is Catherine in fact registering something more culturally pervasive, if unacknowledged? Might fear and alarm—as much as anxious waiting—legitimately shape one's experience of wartime? Or should the constant recourse to alarm (in our time, such alarm is given levels and colors) serve only as the object of mockery? (Favret, "Reading")

I've already suggested that the discourse of alarm in the novel is not only an object of mockery, but that in fact the mockery is unreliable. Instead, I'd like to suggest that Austen's inquiry into the rhetoric of alarm allows her to pose a series of difficult questions about alarm, such as whether alarm is natural, whether it has to be learned, and how it relates to reading. The novel certainly raises Favret's questions, but it inquires primarily about the relationship between alarm and power, about who decides on a valid cause for alarm and how that decision imparts power. This demands an investigation of whether alarm is or can be voluntary, or of the consequences of an involuntary, coerced alarm.

Most interpretations of *Northanger Abbey* treat the novel as a parody and a rejection of the gothic novel. While mocking familiar and formulaic gothic tropes, Austen's novel also explicitly thematizes the experience and effect of reading gothic novels; in fact, it is pivotal that the novel only begins to seem "gothic" after its heroine has learned – from reading Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* – how to experience gothic alarm. There is thus a kind of Bildungsroman narrative about learning *how* to feel alarm, and later learning which kind of alarm is proper. Critical consensus about the novel as parody has for a long time agreed that the parody exposes at least one detrimental effect of reading gothic novels: a vulnerability to heightened and irrational alarm. The story that this novel *seems* to tell about alarm begins with Catherine Morland imitating the heightened and hysteric susceptibility to alarm that she reads in the first pages of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the novel which features Emily, the sensitive heroine, who "felt alarmed, yet knew not wherefore" (9). Catherine learns, through the sobering, wise practicality of Henry Tilney to limit her anxieties to realistic, ordinary worries and quell what the novel at one point calls "romantic alarm" (225). Her arrival at Northanger Abbey coincides with a heightening of alarm caused not only by the gothic location but also by General Tilney, who Catherine suspects killed his now deceased wife. She gathers clues throughout the abbey, finding everywhere "intelligence" that might ordinarily go unnoticed. The word "intelligence," repeated throughout the novel, hovers between a simple description of knowledge and a term for information gathered by spies, and thus indicates the uneasy distinction between inquiry and paranoia, or between sensitivity and suspicion, in the novel and in the gothic

genre more generally.[19] Austen writes: "To close her eyes in sleep that night, she felt must be entirely out of the question. With a curiosity so justly awakened, and feelings in every way so agitated, repose must be absolutely impossible. The storm too abroad so dreadful! – She had not been used to feel alarm from wind, but now every blast seemed fraught with awful intelligence" (172). Consider, in contrast to every blast of wind that "seemed fraught with awful intelligence," the following description of Catherine the night after she discovers that the General has unexpectedly and without explanation ordered her dismissal from the abbey, and also, significantly, after Henry has scolded her for her irrational alarm and heightened suspicion:

> Heavily passed the night. Sleep, or repose that deserved the name of sleep, was out of the question. That room, in which her disturbed imagination had tormented her on her first arrival, was again the scene of agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers. Yet how different now the source of her inquietude from what it had been then – how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability; and with a mind so occupied in the contemplation of actual and natural evil, the solitude of her situation, the darkness of her chamber, the antiquity of the building were felt and considered without the smallest emotion; and though the wind was high, and often produced strange and sudden noises throughout the house, she heard it all as she lay awake, hour after hour, without curiosity or terror. (219-220)

We might be tempted to read the arc of the novel as bookended by these two differing responses to wind. The obvious contrast between these two sleepless nights clearly indicates a movement in the novel from an irrational, imaginary, "romantic" alarm, overly-sensitive to external stimulus to an anxiety, no less powerful, with "foundation in fact" on which wind and other atmospheric forces have no effect. In fact, her more "mature" or "enlightened" anxieties prevent her from noticing anything but her own thoughts, whereas her earlier alarm heightened her sensitivity to the world around her.[20] The narrator explains that "the anxieties of common life began soon to succeed to the

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[19] The fifth definition provided by the *OED* of "intelligence" is "Interchange of knowledge, information, or sentiment; mutual conveyance of information; communication, intercourse. esp. applied to the communication of spies, secret or private agents, etc." ("Intelligence," def. 5).

[20] It is interesting to note the effect of this shift on Catherine's powers of observation. In the first kind of alarm, she experiences a heightened sensitivity to the external world. Every blast of wind contains intelligence. The more "mature" anxieties of common life are not more pleasant, but they consume her in a way that prevents her from "noticing any thing before her." Consider the following passage, on her way home, unexpectedly, from Northanger: "In this unceasing recurrence of doubts and inquiries, on any one article of which her mind was incapable of more than momentary repose, the hours passed away, and her journey advanced much faster than she looked for. The pressing anxieties of thought, which prevented her from noticing any thing before her, when once beyond the neighbourhood of Woodston, saved her at the same time from watching her progress; and though no object on the road could engage a moment's attention, she found no stage of it tedious" (223). If the novel ostensibly priveleges this second, realistic anxiety, it also privileges an anxiety or alarm that focuses attention inward rather than on the external world. "Lost from all worldly concerns," the novel privileges absorption, as is clear earlier in the novel, when Catherine loses herself in her reading. On absorption in Austen, see Pinch, who writes that in *Persuasion,* "Autonomy of mind often appears as an extreme form of absorption which renders one simply incapable of attending to the outside world" (163).

alarms of romance" (198), as though the distinction between anxiety and alarm were obvious, and as though the novel hadn't already complicated the opposition between "common life" and "romance." Yet, as Tony Tanner has shown, "Common life has proved to be capable of producing surprising uncommonness; anxiety may be a form of controlled alarm, while alarm can be the result of a suddenly exacerbated anxiety" (73). Subsequently, the shift from one kind of response to wind to another is neither unambiguous nor irreversible.

The "alarms of romance" could just as easily be called "gothic alarms," for they are grounded in Catherine's enthusiasm for reading gothic "romances." *Northanger Abbey* is a novel about alarm but also about reading; more specifically it is about the way the former is determined by the latter. Catherine and Isabella Thorpe begin their friendship in Bath by reading Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* which leaves them with a raised imagination and a susceptibility to alarm: "Catherine was then left to the luxury of a raised, restless, and frightened imagination over the pages of Udolpho, lost from all worldly concerns of dressing and dinner" (74). Though the narrative presents her later abandonment of gothic alarm as a relief and as progress, it is important to note that a "raised, restless, and frightened imagination" served as a "luxury" for Catherine. She will later blame her "craving to be frightened" and wild imagination on her own reading of this and other gothic novels. Indeed, alarm seems to have its origin in reading rather than in any natural or inherent feeling, so when Henry Tilney attempts to frighten Catherine on their way to Northanger, she can only register her fear by likening it to an experience of reading. Henry tells Catherine: "you listen to the sound of her receding footsteps as long as the last echo can reach you – and when, with fainting spirits, you attempt to fasten your door, you discover, with increased alarm, that is has no lock.'" And Catherine responds by exclaiming, "'Oh! Mr Tilney, how frightful! – This is just like a book!" (162). The narrator is later explicit about blaming Catherine's state of constant alarm in the abbey on her reading of gothic novels: "the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged" (197). By locating alarm's origin in reading, Austen denaturalizes alarm. According to Adela Pinch, "the politics of feeling in the gothic decade of the 1790s often turned on precisely such claims to distinguish excessive from 'natural' feelings" (111).

Though Henry Tilney teasingly provokes Catherine in the passage cited above, he primarily plays the role of instructing and enlightening Catherine and exposing her gothic alarm as unfounded, unpatriotic, and irrational. The novel's presumed turning point – centered precisely between Catherine's two opposing responses to the wind – rests on a shift in states of alarm, a moment of awakening for Catherine, an awakening from, or out of, romantic or gothic alarm. When Henry finds Catherine looking for "intelligence" in his mother's room, she reveals her suspicion about his mother's death, to which he responds by both scolding and enlightening her as follows:

> Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you – Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? (195-6)

Henry plays this role of the masculine, rational authority throughout the novel, invoking "the weakness of the woman" to explain Catherine and his sister's alarm (127).[21] The chapter ends with Henry's admonishment and Catherine's "tears of shame," and the next chapter begins with the following declaration: "The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done" (196). Marilyn Butler reads this turning point as "the typical moment of *éclaircissement* towards which all the Austen actions tend, the moment when a key character abandons her error and humbly submits to objective reality" (176). According to this line of reasoning, Henry's invocation of law, education, and national pride so thoroughly shames Catherine that she abandons her romantic imagination and gothic alarm in favor of the everyday romance of courtship and, finally, marriage. Marriage, according to this logic, would replace gothic alarm in the novel.

And yet, might Catherine's "tears of shame" echo the "misplaced shame" she felt earlier in the novel (124)? Are we to trust Henry in absolving his own father and shaming his accuser? As I suggested earlier, some critics have noted that the novel seems to resist the accuracy of Henry's enlightenment. Even Catherine qualifies her praise for Henry's address by admitting that "she need not fear to acknowledge some actual specks in the character of their father, who, though cleared from the grossly injurious suspicions which she must ever blush to have entertained, she did believe, upon serious consideration, to be not perfectly amiable" (198). In fact, the entire narrative of feeling ashamed about and thus learning to abandon her romantic alarm is put into question when we consider that General Tilney remains, despite his absolution, the tyrant of the novel, only not a murderous one. Claudia Johnson comes to this same conclusion when she writes that "Austen may dismiss 'alarms' concerning stock gothic machinery – storms, cabinets, curtains, manuscripts – with blithe amusement, but alarms concerning the central gothic *figure*, the tyrannical father, she concluded, are commensurate to the threat they actually pose" (35).[22] Although the novel appears to dismiss gothic alarm as unfounded and irrational, it nevertheless suggests that some alarm might be valid and thus reveals that narrative power, like political power, is gained by managing and manipulating the reader's alarm.

Critics who aim to find in the novel a justification for Catherine's alarm struggle to overcome influential readings based on Austen as a "conservative Christian moralist of the 1790s" (Marilyn Butler 164) who is associated with an "anti-jacobin recoil from the cult of sensibility" (Lynch 212). To think of *Northanger Abbey* as "perhaps the most political of Jane Austen's novels," in Hopkins' words, may seem surprising in light of a critical tradition exemplified by Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas,* an influential study that asserts that all of Jane Austen's works "belong generically…to a movement that defines itself by its opposition to revolution" (123). The

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[21] The politicization of the gothic was closely linked to gender and Mathias' assault on the genre involved a critique of "Our *unsexed* female writers now instruct, or confuse, us and themselves in the labyrinth of politics, or turn us wild with Gallic frenzy" (Clery 190).

[22] In a similar vein, Ronald Paulson's essay, "Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution," argues that "the fantasy of General Tilney as wife-murderer generated by the Gothic-infatuated Catherine turn[s] out to signify, but not something close to the sign, not a Gothic but rather a worse, because more banal, more historical evil – one perhaps like the French Revolution itself: General Tilney's abrupt dismissal of Catherine because he thinks she will interfere with his dynastic plans for Henry" (270). And from a more explicitly feminist perspective, Maria Jerinic dismisses the idea that the novel is "mere parody of the gothic novel" (137) and insists instead that "the object of Austen's parody and the real threat to women…is not the gothic novel but it is men, particularly men who wish to dictate to women what they should and should not read" (138).

crux of identifying the politics of *Northanger Abbey* lies in the character of General Tilney, who is himself a political figure, staying up at night to ponder political "pamphlets" and the "affairs of the nation."[23] Robert Hopkins responds to an essay by B.C. Southam that "complained of the failure of scholars to study the historical context of the novel, to ask what Jane Austen means 'by the wealth of detail and activity with which she surrounds' General Tilney, 'as a pamphleteer,' 'in his pose as a mysterious man-of-affairs, sitting up at night, as he claims, to brood upon the state of the nation'" (213). Hopkins responds by asserting that Tilney is "clearly one of those 'voluntary spies'!" and that "no Jane Austen critic has ever recognized that General Tilney's duties at night were as an inquisitor surveying possibly seditious pamphlets either for the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property or, after 1793, for the Home Office" (221). Claudia Johnson also picks up on the General's political affairs, writing that Austen "emphasizes the political subtext of gothic conventions: her villain, General Tilney, is not only a repressive father, but also a self-professed defender of national security" (35).

When Catherine's "visions of romance" are over and she is "completely awakened" (196), the narrator provides an account of how Catherine understands her heightened alarm about the General:

> Her thoughts being still chiefly fixed on what she had with such causeless terror felt and done, nothing could shortly be clearer, than that it had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the Abbey, had been craving to be frightened. She remembered with what feelings she had prepared for a knowledge of Northanger. She saw that the infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath, and it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged. Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe's works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for. (196-7)

As I've already indicated, the rest of the novel puts the reliability of this passage, in which Catherine and the narrator's voices merge, in question. Is her delusion really "voluntary" here, entirely "self-created"? Austen's phrase "an alarm not wholly unfounded" (168) taken out of context takes on unexpected significance when we resist the narrator's authority and doubt Catherine's certainty here; as Claudia Johnson writes, "When General Tilney sacrifices decency to avarice and banishes the now reluctant gothic heroine into the night, he proves that 'human nature, at least in the midland countries of England' *can* in fact be looked for in 'Mrs. Radcliffe's works' and those of her imitators" (40). This element of the plot is not the only indication of uncertainty and doubt here. The narrator's tone throughout the novel, sometimes mocking, sometimes ironic, is erratic, uneven, and difficult to read.[24] Given the force of the political implications of the gothic, do we trust the narrator who aims

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[23] Butler cites critics such as Andrew Wright and Lionel Trilling who, as early as the 1950s, find that Catherine's view of the General is "not altogether illusory" (178). Butler insists, however, that "an act of rudeness is not villainy" (178) and concludes that "ideologically, it is a very clear statement of the anti-jacobin position; though, compared with other anti-jacobin novels, it is distinctive for the virtuosity with which it handles familiar clichés of the type" (180).

[24] William Galperin identifies in the novel "an abiding failure of narrative authority," which he associates with the narrator's "unevenness of tone, ranging from parody to sentimentality" (139). Galperin distrusts Austen's

to foreclose the idea that Catherine's alarms may not be "wholly unfounded"? And do we trust Henry, who in both the rioting/writing passage and in the central transformation of Catherine's alarm, emerges as an untrustworthy authority, trying to control and manage Catherine's alarm despite her and our own suspicions?[25] The Beechen Cliff passage provides an indication that, despite Henry's perceived clarification, enlightenment, and instruction of "the weakness of the woman," the alarm nevertheless resists that simple clarification. Though the linguistic misunderstanding is easily resolved in this scene, the proximity between rioting and writing remains both unresolved and unpredictable.

Although the novel purports, through Henry and the narrator's judgments, to distinguish clearly between two different kinds of fear – alarms of romance and anxieties of common life – and to privilege the latter, this distinction and privilege is consistently undermined. Galperin points to the narrator's "failure to control either the materials from which the narrative of *Northanger Abbey* is fashioned or the irony by which control is continually exerted in the novel" (141). Indeed, the free indirect discourse in the passage cited above about Catherine's voluntary delusion points more to a narrator struggling to control the character's alarm than to any authentic realization in the novel. And despite the narrator's condescension to "the luxury of a raised, restless, and frightened imagination," the novel ends with an evocation of her own raised imagination, admitting that "the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own" (233). The novel's narrator and Henry attempt but fail to manipulate alarm, and this attempt reflects the novel's insight that power is gained and maintained through the manipulation of others' alarm. If we decide that we do not trust either the narrator or Henry to decide what deserves Catherine's alarm, then they emerge as dangerous figures for an attempt to control alarm in order to gain what Eleanor calls "real power" (185).

IV. "The Idea of Voluntariness"

> Voluntary action is, where the event is foreseen previous to its occurrence, and the hope or fear of that event forms the excitement, or, as it is most frequently terms, the motive, inducing us, if hope be the passion, to endeavour to forward, and, if fear, to endeavour to prevent it. It is this motion, in this manner generated, to which we annex the idea of voluntariness.
>
> - William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*

Alarm's role as a means of subjection makes urgent the role of the voluntary in the experience of alarm. For what is unusual about Catherine's sensitivity to alarm in the passage detailing her apparent enlightenment is the claim of a "voluntary" or "self-created" delusion. What would it mean to have a voluntary delusion? Would this be akin to complicity or to uncoerced alarm? Does the

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narrator, arguing that the narrator describes, in Austen's words, "what never happened." For Galperin, this narrative "obtuseness" is particularly true with respect to same-sex relations among women in the novel (144), and he sees the narrator's inclination toward probability in line with the courtship plot that is nevertheless undercut. Galperin's work to expose the narrative obtuseness is helpful for our purposes in that the validity of Catherine's alarm, as well as the question of whether it was a voluntary alarm, is at stake in the narrative voice.

[25] Galperin, too, sees Henry's apparent enlightening as a kind of untrustworthy rewriting or narration: "Henry Tilney effectiveness rewrites the gothic by instructing Catherine in the difference between 'the country and age in which we live' and the gothic anterior" (144).

experience of being frightened rely on spontaneity and surprise? If not, how might one *will* alarm? Phrases like "a voluntary, self-created delusion," "an imagination resolved on alarm," and a mind which "had been craving to be frightened" all suggest that Austen's interest is not simply in how alarm works, but in investigating the possibility or pretension of voluntary alarm. And the idea that one might *desire fear* or *will alarm* echoes the possibility we saw in Godwin that the heightened attentiveness at the root of alarm might be converted into voluntary critical judgment or curiosity.

Yet, as I've already pointed out, Austen's novel frames the passage about voluntary alarm as a central moment of enlightenment while implicitly suggesting that Catherine's alarm is not actually voluntary at all but persistently coerced and managed by others. The word "voluntary" repeats throughout a number of central passages in *Northanger Abbey*. In her essay "From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels, and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey,"* Susan Zlotnick discusses Austen's "particular interest in women's agency, or female volition, as the repetition of "voluntary" in the novel's final chapters indicates."[26] For Zlotnick, Austen's interest in voluntary action reflects an investigation of female agency and the way reading can enable voluntary action; "What sets Catherine apart is her novel reading," explains Zlotnick: "Novels in *Northanger Abbey* emerge as enabling fictions that offer women a vision of agency akin to that embedded in the ideology of the marketplace but with a greater likelihood to enable voluntary female action" (280). And yet Austen's references to the "voluntary" throughout the novel are tinged with irony, as though illustrating Godwin's own claim that "every voluntary action has in it a mixture of the involuntary" (*Enquiry* 1.205). Catherine's realization that her alarm has been voluntary does not enable agency or female action so much as it exposes the way the narrative tries to convince us of the false possibility of voluntary alarm.

Zlotnick's title reminds us of another appearance of the word "voluntary" relevant here: the voluntary spy. For when Henry scolds Catherine for spying in his father's house, he invokes England's spies as a reminder of the security of the nation: "Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open?" (195-6). Paradoxically urging Catherine to stop spying because there are already "voluntary spies" in England to guarantee their security, this passage reveals another unusual intersection of political and literary alarm. Henry's argument seems to be that gothic alarm is neither necessary nor realistic precisely because they have political alarm. The reference, of course, had urgent resonances at the time when Austen was writing, and the idea of a voluntary alarm speaks to the rhetoric surrounding the "volunteer movement" in the 1790s, the groups of citizens who became spies, but who also kept watch for a French invasion, ready to fight at any moment.

The volunteers were first raised in England in 1794, even though Prime Minister Pitt was warned that "arming the people was 'rather a dangerous experiment'" (Gee 1). Nevertheless, civilians were armed, literalizing the etymology of "alarm," in order to maintain internal order and to

[26] Zlotnick provides a helpful list: "*Northanger Abbey* shows a: England is full of "voluntary spies" (145); Catherine is the victim of "a voluntary self-created delusion" (146); Isabella has "voluntarily" (151) entered into her relationship with James Morland; General Tilney's departure from the Abbey makes "every employment voluntary" (162) for those left behind; Catherine's sudden, unexpected return to Fullerton leaves her feeling restless, "as if nothing but motion was voluntary" (177); and in the novel's penultimate chapter, Catherine discovers herself to have been the "involuntary, unconscious object" (181) of General Tilney and John Thorpe's greedy speculations."

defend against invasion.[27] The force reached its peak in 1804 (the year following Austen's final revisions to *Northanger Abbey,* which was the same year of the renewal of war with France and thus of French invasion plans), by which time nearly 400,000 men participated – 18 per cent of men of military age (Gee 2).[28] The volunteer movement intersected with the discourse of alarmism not only because these citizen soldiers aimed to defend against both internal and external alarms but also by themselves producing alarm in the rest of the population; according to Austin Gee, "the object of the volunteer movement in the 1790s was presented as in part to control the spirit of disaffection by 'the terror of its aspect'" (33). Yet Austen's emphasis on Catherine's "voluntary alarm" exposes some problems in the discourse of the volunteer movement; though soldier-citizens were *volunteering* their alarm, their alarm was also being controlled by others, since they effectively had little choice as to where or how to direct their attention. Meanwhile, the distinction between voluntary and compulsory military service was quickly eroding.[29] Pamphlets and broadsides, of course, *demanded volunteerism* – a contradiction in terms. Consider, for example, the imperative, published in the *Anti-Gallican:* "We have the means of effectual defence within ourselves; let every man who has a heart to defend his property, his family, his country, and every thing dear to him, step forward at this important crisis, with a volunteer offer of his services to repel an invading enemy" (22). In this sense, the volunteer movement confirms Godwin's claim that "every voluntary action has in it a mixture of the involuntary" (*Enquiry* 205). And the volunteer movement certainly had its own dissenting members: "several gentlemen," writes Gee, "members of armed associations in the neighbourhood of Bilston, near Wolverhampton, declared in May 1800 that they had joined in order to protect their king and constitution, not '*to give security to the inhuman Oppressor, whilst the Poor are starving in the midst of Plenty*'" (238). It is Godwin rather than Austen who so effectively articulates the paradoxes of the voluntary, yet only in his theoretical work. The following insight does not make its way explicitly to *Caleb Williams*. Godwin writes:

> We have frequently had occasion to point out the distinction between our voluntary and involuntary motions. We have seen that they are continually running into each other; our involuntary motions gradually becoming subject to the power of volition, and our voluntary motions degenerating into involuntary. (*Enquiry* 2.594)

This fluidity between the voluntary and the involuntary may help explain how the involuntary, coerced alarm that subjugates Caleb might "gradually become subject to the power of volition," and become an epistemologically productive susceptibility. This promise of voluntary alarm, though, available in *Caleb Williams* as a voluntarily heightened attention in the form of curiosity, appears in *Northanger Abbey* as a joke that points only to Ingrid Horrocks's definition of "gothic horror":

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[27] According to Gee, "Three main motives can be identified: a response to the threat of invasion, the desire to avoid the local disruption caused by raising the militia, or the response to the apparent revolutionary threat posed by the political activity of the popular reform societies. The first two motives are difficult to disentangle" (50).

[28] The volunteer movement provides yet another example of British imitation of the French, despite their professed hatred. Gee writes: "The conscript armies of the French republic introduced the concept of the 'citizen soldier'. The example of the volunteers demonstrates both that the ideal of the citizen soldier was inherent in the voluntary military tradition also, and that successive British governments, under the threat of invasion, were not afraid of resorting to appeals for mass civilian participation on the French model, depite their stated abhorrence of French political principles" (265).

[29] See Jon Nerwan's "'An Insurrection of Loyalty': The London Volunteer Regiments' Response to the Invasion Threat" in Philp's *Resisting Napoleon.*

"knowledge of someone else's complete power to control (or author) the narrative of one's life, even to the point of extinguishing it" (5). For when Catherine diagnoses her own "voluntary alarm," her "self-created delusion," the novel's reader is given access to a world in which the narrator has the complete power to control the conditions and justifications for alarm. Voluntary alarm, for Austen, is nothing but an illusion. In this sense, we might see Austen's skepticism as aimed towards Romanticism itself, insofar as the Romantic texts studied here all privilege and seek out the increased susceptibility gained from alarm, proposing alternative epistemologies and sensibilities that deviate from alarm, but that also maintain an unexpected proximity to it.

On the Future of Terror

> Each extra
> day was a literal gift of habeas corpus.
> We ignored inoculation instructions
> and read *Intimations of Immortality*
> to the invalids instead. We couldn't curse
> the goddamned chiefs of staff
> except inwardly, but we could make kites
> in case we ever saw the sky again.
> We could listen for a knock at the door.
>
> - Matthea Harvey, "The Future of Terror/8"

As I complete the final pages of this project, it is mid-April 2011, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security is in the process of revising the country's terror alert system. The color-coded terror alert system that we have come to take for granted since 9/11 – which ranges from high (orange) and severe (red) to low (green) and guarded (blue), though these two lowest levels have never been used – will be replaced, according to recent news reports, by a two-tiered system designating simply "elevated" or "imminent" by the end of this month.[1] Reading about the political climate in the 1790s in England – about the emergence of alarmism, the suspension of habeas corpus, the Alien Act, and the militarization of attention – it is impossible not to hear echoes of our own encounters with alarm, of debates about the suspension of habeas corpus and use of emergency powers, of renewed suspicion of immigrants, and the everyday demands on the attention made in the United States during the first decade of the twenty first century. Following Benjamin's historical materialist, who "grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (*Illuminations* 263), it is important to acknowledge that these two periods – the period *about* which I write and the period *in* which I write: the first known by historians as "the great terror," the second known as the "war on terror" – mutually inform each other. Studying one alters how we think about the other. Of course, the political climate today also differs from that in England at the close of the eighteenth century in major and radical ways; the acts of keeping watch and sending out warning have transformed over the past two hundred years, along with the development of media, shifts in how we communicate, the transformations of warfare, and the radical redefinitions of enmity that have accompanied contemporary debates about "terrorism." And yet the concerns that emerge from both a critique of alarmism and the demands for a heightened attention during England's war with France have reappeared in the U.S. in new, transformed, disjointed forms at the start of the twenty first century. "At all Threat Conditions, we must remain vigilant, prepared, and ready to deter terrorist attacks," asserts the Homeland Security Presidential Directive-3, which instated the color-coded terror alert system in March of 2002. Compare that imperative with an excerpt from *The Anti-Gallican* from 1803: "We must, therefore, be vigilant, dauntless, and valiant; no exertion must be

[1] See "Color-coded threat system to be replaced in April." *CNN.com.* Cable News Network, 26 January 2011. On the role of humor in critiquing the color coded terror system, see John Brigham, "Anti-anti-terror: Color Coding and the Joke of 'Homeland Security.'"

spared to insure our safety; all the time we can devote from our daily occupations, *and the WHOLE of our time if our Government think it necessary,* must be occupied in the use of arms" (337-8).

In an interview about her 2007 collection of poems titled *Modern Life,* the poet Matthea Harvey explains what prompted her to write the two longest series of poems in her book, "The Future of Terror" and "The Terror of Future":

> Even though intellectually I knew that the word "terrorism" was a label designed to inspire fear, nevertheless I still felt heart-stoppingly afraid whenever I heard phrases like "the future of terror" on the radio (which I've listened to every morning since 9/11). One day I decided to write a poem that would turn this vague phrase into something more specific. ("Interview" *Tarpaulin Sky*)

Harvey's attempt to make the vague language of alarmism more specific using poetry may come as a surprise given poetry's reputation as abstruse or opaque in comparison to other forms of discourse. Yet Harvey talks about writing these poems as "discovering" something about the phrase "the future of terror" that the radio broadcasts obscured. Harvey explains her process of poetic discovery: she looked at all of the dictionary definitions that fall in between "future" and "terror" and let only those words guide the poem. Note, in the epigraph cited above, how "habeas corpus" is followed alphabetically by "Intimations of Immortality." Although she explains in the interview that she didn't set out to write political poems, she admits to having "unconsciously gravitated" towards some words that fall between "F" and "T" more than others. Of course, while the phrase "habeas corpus" is probably in the dictionary, the title of Wordsworth's ode "Intimations of Immortality" clearly isn't (though the first word in the title might follow soon after the second), and the pairing of the two phrases in the poem forms a constellation between Harvey's era and Wordsworth's. Perhaps this constellation is forged by the echoes between the two phrases, which both speak about bodies and imprisonment: "habeas corpus," from the Latin "you are to have the body," refers to the writ which requires the body of an imprisoned person to be brought before a court, whereas Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality" metaphorizes the body itself as "the prison-house."

The poems "The Future of Terror" and "The Terror of the Future" take place in a future, apocalyptic, militarized society. Experience in this world is reduced to the events and feelings surrounding the mediation of danger. Harvey's interest in listening, in the multiplication of devices for receiving and producing alarm, recalls Wordsworth's posture with his ear to the ground, as well as Charlotte Smith's detailed descriptions in *Beachy Head* of the beacons, and the telegraph, and the yellow wagtail, which, "gives, by its cry, notice of approaching danger." In "The Future of Terror/4," Harvey writes:

> The Listening Post was right under a linden tree
> so all we ever heard was leaves falling but
> it wasn't manly to write about that in your report.
> When the migratory birds arrived, there was mold
> on their beaks and a musty smell coming from
> their under-feathers. We mounted the public address
> system behind the proscenium where they used to have
> puppet shows, then walked round-shouldered
> through the rubble. A sandpiper squawked
> out a storm warning and got sucked up
> into the clouds. We were sweaty and ready
> to surrender. What was there left to say?

We turned on the teleprompter. (14-15)

These lines revolve around successes and failures of communication, moving from the listening post to the teleprompter, by way of the sound of leaves, migratory birds, the public address system, and a sandpiper with a storm warning; the militarization here is subtle, invoked briefly in the line "sweaty and ready/ to surrender." But the emphasis throughout on mediating danger suggests a diffused militarization, evoking Mary Favret's reminder that "the epistemology of modern wartime is an epistemology of mediation" (*War at a Distance* 12). Just as the speaker in *Beachy Head* forms the posture of keeping watch for an invasion only to hear the sound of the sea snipe that "just tells that something living is abroad," so here militarized listening is deflected because "all we ever heard was leaves falling." Harvey's movement through the alphabet is clear: from "l, " listening to the leaves of a linden tree, to "m," migratory birds, mold, musty, skipping to the "p" of the public address system's proscenium with puppet shows, and then skipping again to "s" and "t," the sandpiper, the squawk, the storm warning, sweaty and ready to surrender, and then turning on the teleprompter. It is, of course, the turn to the technology of the teleprompter that most strongly distinguishes these lines from those evoking wartime perception in the Romantic Period. And yet Harvey's interest in the public address system and the teleprompter nevertheless recalls Coleridge's investigation of the "empty sounds" of both alarmism and poetry. "What was there left to say?" We could read Coleridge's ventriloquism of the patriotic rhetoric that he also criticizes in "Fears in Solitude" as precisely a despondent, ironic turn to the teleprompter, a displaced use of someone else's empty speech, since there is nothing left for him to say.

In "The Future of Terror/1," Harvey moves again from "h" to "i," this time choosing words other than "habeas corpus" and "Intimations of Immortality":

> We were tired of hard news –
> it helped to turn down our hearing aids.
> We could already all do impeccable imitations
> of the idiot, his insistent incisors working on
> a steak as he said *there's an intimacy to invasion.*
> That much was true. (11)

Harvey deviates from her alphabetic guide in the final line to affirm the accuracy of the idiot's claim: there *is* an intimacy to invasion. Looking at the lines which precede that one, we can hear a sense of the invasiveness of sound; the juxtaposition of the lines "it helped to turn down our hearing aids" and "there's an intimacy to invasion" suggests the invasive force of sound as well as the vulnerability of bodies both in and around war. Hearing aids allow sound in, invasive and intimate in the body, but can also be adjusted to become a form of protection or security, to block sound out.

The movement in Harvey's lines from turning down hearing aids, which shuts off the body from invasive sounds, to affirming the intimacy of invasion makes clear a tension that is at work in all of the wartime texts I have been discussing. For writers during the Romantic Period discovered that the attention demanded by alarmism as a form of protection and security was precisely what produced security's inverse: intimacy, vulnerability, susceptibility. Harvey reminds us of the way that Romantic poets seek out the intimacy and vulnerability of invasion, how they court susceptibility and receptivity, even if they also hope for national security. Godwin's account of the "exquisite and increased susceptibility" produced by a state of constant alarm reveals a form of protection that always also renders its subject vulnerable. So, too, Wordsworth's description of the bright star which "penetrated" his capacity of apprehension once the organs of attention relaxed points to a provocative dialectic between keeping watch and invasiveness.

Implicit in the dialectic between keeping watch and invasiveness is the sense that vulnerability, or susceptibility, is a condition of life; even if one isn't courting vulnerability, one can't eradicate it either. We might thus pair Godwin's claim from *Thoughts on Man* that life itself is "mere susceptibility" (159) with Coleridge's definition of life as defense: "That which does not *withstand,* hath *itself* no standing place. To *fill* a station is to exclude or repel others, - and this not less the definition of moral, than of material, *solidity*. We *live* by continued acts of defense, that involve a sort of offensive warfare" (*Collected Works* 4.1.97). Though these definitions of life might appear to contradict each other in emphasis, both acknowledge that susceptibility is part of living. To live by continued acts of defense suggests that there is always something to defend against, and that some of those acts will fail. Rather than eliminate vulnerability altogether, the question becomes one of attitude, of ethics: how to live in light of this susceptibility, this invasiveness? How to respond to the inevitable failure of that daily offensive warfare? Judith Butler has recently discussed the particular vulnerability with which we all live, "a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt." Butler writes about the grief and vulnerability following 9/11 and prompting the U.S. "War on Terror": denial of such vulnerability, she writes, "through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war." Butler suggests that, instead of denying this vulnerability, we might "abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself" (*Precarious Life* 29).

In another poem in her collection, titled "Implications for Modern Life," Matthea Harvey tells us, "Decide what to look at and how" (3). And yet lines like "the Listening Post was right under a linden tree/so all we ever heard was leaves falling" and "we were tired of hard news –/ it helped to turn down our hearing aids" suggest that it is not quite that easy to decide where to turn our attention, or how to attend to something, at least when it comes to listening. Preoccupied with the way forms of looking and listening reveal differing attitudes toward security and susceptibility, Harvey's poems signal an afterlife for the literary tradition I have been tracing in this dissertation, a tradition we have come to think of as "Romanticism," but which, as Mary Favret has suggested, we might alternately conceive in terms of an aesthetic response to wartime watchfulness and the politics of alarm. This literary tradition does not simply reject the militarization of attention or the alarmism of the period; instead, it borrows the heightened attention of alarm to propose an alternative form of attention, a poetics of watchfulness that moves between security and susceptibility, vigilance and vulnerability, and that refuses to know in advance what it watches for. This attention borrows the forms and postures of war, but empties them of their content; in this way, Romanticism and its poetic afterlife asks how we pay attention to war and suggests that war alters how and to what we pay attention.

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