

Romantic Etymology and Language Ecology

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation brings to light an etymological poetics in European and American Romanticism, through natural figures of temporal process that changed language's shape. I argue that the supposed "primitivism" of theories that root language in nature can often be better understood as efforts to model a simultaneous solidity and liquidity in language's forms, using metaphors borrowed from natural history. These theories react against arbitrary or conventional Lockean "signs" and the rational agents who invent them, while at the same time avoiding the stability of traditional "naturalisms," such as Cratylid or Adamic myths of naming. By demonstrating the ethical insufficiency of words alienated from their disorderly contexts, the practice of "Romantic etymology" reconstructs not derivations of individual words, but linguistic philosophy itself. Chapter One begins by crediting Herder and Humboldt with the effort to transfer language's "origin" from the distant past to an ongoing process of formation, so that language is ecologically formed through complex, collective processes of which individuals always remain partly in the dark. Chapter Two develops the idea of a language ecology by placing Blake's poetry in the context of eighteenth-century debates about the limits imposed on linguistic life by the silent, motionless figure of stone. Against such limits, I read Blake's poetic voices in "The Clod and the Pebble" as a language of geological process. Chapter Three examines Wordsworth's relation to the etymological logic produced by Coleridge's interest in radical philologist John Horne Tooke. In a reading of "Hart-Leap Well," I argue that Wordsworth resists simplistic origin stories by illustrating language's vulnerability to disintegration and reformation. Chapter Four follows this linguistic naturalism to America, finding that in their most apparently "Cratylid" or naïve moments, the Romantic essays of Emerson and Thoreau aim not to name the primitive roots anchoring individual words, but to recognize language's inevitable mobility. A retrospective Coda traces nineteenth-century philology's development from a positivist cultural formation with vague ties to natural history and organicist metaphysics, to a social science determined to cut ties with its naturalist past by reviving the terminology of linguistic "arbitrariness"; this disciplinary history illuminates a concluding etymological episode in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, whose critical naturalism detaches language from a particularly immobile idea of nature.

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Introduction

Uprooting “Nature”: Etymology and Ecology

For we are like tree trunks in the snow. In appearance they sit atop smoothly and a little force should be enough to push them aside. No, it can't be done, for they are firmly joined to the ground. But see, even that is only appearance.¹

— Kafka, “The Trees”

Frail is the bond, by which we hold
Our being, be we young or old,
Wise, foolish, weak or strong.
— Wordsworth, “The Oak and the Broom”

I. “Refuge in Etymology”

One story told in Kafka's parable “Die Bäume” walks the reader through a sequence of illusions about rootedness. A “we” (quickly changed to a “they”) looks temporarily perched; then seems more permanently fixed; then seems, in a second reversal, capable of being detached from the ground after all. The appearance of simply resting is complicated by the discovery of firm attachments, but these attachments can, it turns out, be remedied. There is the vague sense of a humble life that proves itself to be made of sterner stuff, only to be ominously ‘eradicating’ in the end after all. Kafka's analogy (“wir sind wie Baumstämme”), if read beside Wordsworth's “The Oak and the Broom: A Pastoral,” might conceivably be imagined as a late twist on the “trick” of pastoral (in Empson's broad sense of grafting the lofty onto the humble, or “putting the complex into the simple”). Wordsworth's lyric centers on a conversation between a patriarchal oak tree standing high on a crag and a quick-witted shrub growing out of the rocks below about the relative stability of their positions: with apt irony, the storm that then uproots the prominent oak spares the broom. The humble broom gets the lofty speech (“Frail is the bond, by which we hold / our being,” etc.); the oak meets a sudden end; and the lowlier and simpler is revealed as the surer root. And yet: something about that line — “frail is the bond” — stays with us; something in Wordsworth's tone tells us he believes that this small triumph, too, is “only appearance.” Such a phrase, asserting both bond and impermanence, implies that something like Kafka's second reversal, the last twist of “Die Bäume,” is already turning in Wordsworth's pastoral poetry: all feelings of rootedness are matched by the persistent awareness of their frailty.

This dissertation tells a similar story, this time in the form of literary history and through a series of examples from the literatures of Romanticism. The version of the ‘rootedness’ narrative I tell here gives surprising new dimension to the historical significance of natural metaphors in Romantic language philosophy. Since the disciplinary split of natural and social sciences toward the end of the nineteenth century definitively situated linguistics as a *social* science (despite its many flirtations with neighboring fields), the natural metaphors for language common in the Romantic era

¹ “Denn wir sind wie Baumstämme im Schnee. Scheinbar liegen sie glatt auf, und mit kleinem Anstoß sollte man sie wegschieben können. Nein, das kann man nicht, denn sie sind fest mit dem Boden verbunden. Aber sieh, sogar das ist nur scheinbar” (“Die Bäume,” Kafka 7; translation mine).

have more often than not been taken as various forms of naïve primitivism.² These natural metaphors — transferred, in a thinner form, into positivist philology — are epitomized in the notion of etymological *roots*. But though etymology is evidently a source of study and fascination for most of the Romantic writers in the chapters that follow, it soon becomes clear that the “naturalism” it evokes often works counter-intuitively: not through its capacity for establishing the ahistorical fixity of singular, grounding origins, but rather by making visible a kind of mobility, “a certain self-regulated motion or change.”³ This linguistic naturalism enables a conceptual picture of language that is on the one hand solidly objective or “real,” and yet on the other, continuously vulnerable to transformation. Roots, invisible at first, materialize under critical pressure; yet even where they appear firmest, they remain in the midst of invisible processes of formation and decomposition. Language is open, in these theories, to environmental weathering.⁴ Yet understanding exactly how these “language ecologies” work means stretching our thoughts about nature.

For the authors discussed in the chapters that follow, to call language “natural” is to reimagine it against its traditional ahistorical forms or ‘seminal cells’ (e.g. texts, words, signs),⁵ unfolding over time, and variously pictured according to different processes observed in nature: eroding, decomposing, dissolving, sedimenting, unfreezing, spontaneously splitting, reproducing, expanding or extending. When using such metaphorical forms, theorists of language origin and etymology redefine language according to its evident temporal mobility. Again and again, we will see how for these authors any fixed origin — whether for language as a whole, or for individual words — is deemed artificial and unsatisfactory, precisely because it imposes on language a retrospectively convenient limit at which time stops, where history ceases to interfere. The effort to view language changing over time indicates a belief that ahistorical forms, though efficacious as cultural products, tend to conceal their processes of formation and transformation. The term “Romantic etymology” designates a range of practices that pit themselves against any language theory desiring or requiring a resting point in timeless truth. Where etymology, generally speaking, reconstructs individual words, what I call Romantic etymology is more ambitious: it reconstructs linguistic philosophy.

This story is told through a sequence of what I refer to as Romantic episodes, despite the fact that figures close to the center of the Romantic canon (e.g., Herder,

² This historical episode in the disciplinary history of linguistics is given in greater detail in the Coda.

³ Emerson, “The Poet,” 330.

⁴ Such a claim may well sound less than revelatory today if we simply rephrase it to say that language is intimately bound to “context.” (What sociolinguists call language’s “defeasibility” is a late expression of an idea similar to what is expressed here by “weathering,” the idea that language’s indexical attachments constantly undergo circumstantial renegotiation in the course of discursive interaction [Silverstein 1992]). Yet the more “natural” this context is rendered, the less credible it may seem to modern ears, so that explaining why I use the term “language ecology” to frame this kind of naturalism will require some care. Because one of my claims is that Romantic theories attentive to language in various kinds of contexts often have the “sociosemiotic” complications of culture very much in mind, particularly when they set out to represent the ways in which phenomena conceived either as nature or as culture are in fact inextricably both, the adoption of “context” over “environment” or “ecology” is finally just the preference for one euphemism over another.

⁵ If it is true that, as Blanchot has suggested, “etymology fixes the attention on the *word* as the seminal cell of language” (96), then the peculiarly *Romantic* etymology this dissertation examines moves the attention almost anywhere *but* the word’s solid, individuated “cell.”

Goethe, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth) share the stage with figures that may be considered “Romantic” only loosely — if at all (e.g. Wilhelm von Humboldt, John Horne Tooke, Henry David Thoreau, Marcel Proust). It may also seem initially surprising to bring together a concatenation of well-known figures from such disparate periods and nationalities. What pulls them all into this story, however, is that each has played some role in the history of “naturalist” language theory or poetics (whether they meant to or not); and this history has too often been reductively misrepresented. In order to reveal the extent of this error, the story ends with a Coda showing how this misreading of linguistic naturalism was installed in nineteenth-century linguistics (and how, in the process of being misread, it was both embraced and rejected). Romanticism’s shift of emphasis from ahistorical forms to the processes of their formation was first of all at least partially absorbed into the positivist philology that reinvented itself according to scientific principles. However by 1866, writing of philology’s consolidation of the concept of “roots,” Michel Bréal, a transitional figure in nineteenth-century linguistics, criticized the discipline’s reliance on older forms of naturalism — notably by emphasizing new ones:

To find onomatopoeia or natural cries in these syllables, which have already been worn down by the friction of centuries, is to begin the *Cratylus* all over again. I have no intention of disputing the role of onomatopoeia in the formation of language. But words are like boulders torn from mountains and carried along by rivers at the beginning of their course: their rough edges having been already smooth halfway along, they finally end up as those little round pebbles continually washed and worn down by the surf... It would be truer to say that we hear the sounds of nature through the words to which our ear has become accustomed from childhood.⁶

If the *Cratylus* stands here for the regressive instinct of linguistic naturalism that dwells on discernible, recoverable origins (such as onomatopoeia or “natural cries”), a different kind of naturalism prevails with the metaphor of words as “boulders” gradually reduced to “pebbles,” through processes of erosion and transport. Versions of this metaphor, and others like it, are pervasive in Romantic language theory and poetics, as I will show: they refer language to nature as a way of imagining its temporal processes, rather than rooting it to a specified ground. Perhaps surprisingly, Bréal’s view of the role of custom and culture, through whose practices we learn to “naturalize” our speech, or approximate language and the world around us to one another (“we hear the sounds of nature through the words to which our ear has become accustomed”), is equally characteristic of this same Romantic trend. I will return to this nineteenth-century disciplinary transition in the Coda; first, the tale of its Romantic pre-history.

It is instructive to begin by considering how deeply the unexamined assumptions put in question by this strain of Romanticism ingrain themselves in customary representations of language. I will hardly have been the first to analyze the assumptions that guide stock associations between Romanticism, naturalism, and the origins or roots of language. If, as is often the case, one dominant sense of nature is apprehended as “essence,” and if an “origin” is assumed to be singular and ultimate, a number of influential critics have unsettled such assumptions by revealing a fairly precise, artificial logic aligning nature and origin. In an effort to undermine the apparently “static foundation” of the archaic, Theodor Adorno describes one way in which we tend to

⁶ Bréal 105-6.

elevate and secure our cultural ideas of truth, or “undialectical myths,” far from “the movement of the world,” by simply relocating them as origins: “as a result of the alienation of the ideas from the world of human experience, they are necessarily transferred to the starts [sic] in order to be able to maintain themselves in the face of the world’s dynamic. The ideas become static: frozen.”⁷ Such a strategy seems to fixate on a satisfyingly empirical proof of truth or right, by reconstructing the past in the present’s image, in the “just-so” vein: how the leopard got his spots, how the recovery of an obsolete meaning justifies a certain ‘authentic’ usage. As long as “nature” is taken to mean something like “essence,”⁸ it may be understood as something distant and stationary, whether a physical or ideal origin, offered as source or endpoint for a cultural formation. But if, as in the Romantic texts that interest me here, nature means something more complicated, and less unified, linguistic naturalism cannot ground language in quite this way.

The coordination of nature and origin as primary truth finds exemplary and compressed form in the concept of the etymological root. Orienting his earlier idea toward specifically linguistic myths, Adorno would later criticize the practice of “ennobl[ing] the antiquity of language” and thus “authoriz[ing] the social using of linguistic anachronism” by elevating a “crude conception of the archaic” (34).⁹ (Placing emphasis on the manipulation of elements within linguistic “markets,” Bourdieu has made a similar argument.) Adorno’s critique is posed as a late engagement with something he calls (in his work’s subtitle) “German ideology,” and just as with Marx’s critiques of Hegel and his followers, this focused critique of a special power vested in archaism has a complex and intimate relationship with the idealist leanings of Romanticism. In Jacques Derrida’s influential development of a related line of thought, and especially in his efforts at revealing the internal mechanisms of “etymologism,” he

⁷ Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History” (123), recently reprinted (in English translation) in a collection of Robert Hullot-Kentnor’s essays on Adorno. In his introduction to the volume, Hullot-Kentnor writes, “The full scope of Adorno’s work can begin to be described as a study of the origin that is asserted in the radical critique of origin” (8). In parallel with Adorno’s claim, Kenneth Burke (2003) writes similarly of the “temporizing of essence,” that “the *narrative* way of trying to say how things *truly are* is to say how they *originally were*” (164).

⁸ This semantic formation has been speculatively described by Raymond Williams in “Ideas of Nature,” as “the moment of a singular Nature,” when observations of the attributes of physical objects congeal, and nature acquires its sense of “inherent and essential quality” (69). A somewhat different articulation of the same idea more directly applicable to the etymological root is expressed by Derrida 1992: “Nature, the meaning of nature, is reconstituted after the fact on the basis of a simulacrum...that it is thought to cause” (170). The after-the-fact “reconstruction” of the linguistic root based on, yet inevitably influenced by, its late reflex, stands in curious relation to Derrida’s own tendency to unearth and call upon forgotten uses of words. This pervasive etymological wordplay has been interpreted as a deliberate gesture that puts in question the tendency to rely on atemporal or transhistorical linguistic form, or form that forgets it disguises process: “Etymology can be used...to confirm a dominant ideology...to reinforce the myth of objective and transcendent truth; but it can also be used to unsettle ideology, to uncover opportunities for change, to undermine absolutes and authority...to shake our assurance in fixed and immediately knowable meanings” (Attridge 122-3). Even if it oversimplifies the uses of etymology as legitimation or subversion — and of course, even undermining authority can acquire its own kind of authority — this perspective opens a helpful view into the diverse strategies attached to etymology as a cultural resource.

⁹ His primary target here is Heidegger, and though I do not engage directly with this late and important instance of etymological thought, Heidegger’s work would make for a fascinating sequel to investigate further the habits of thought analyzed here. For inverse perspectives on Heidegger’s use of etymology, see Eiland; and Bourdieu.

reminds us of a moment from *The German Ideology* in which Marx and Engels link their impatience with the “theoretical nonsense” of Stirner’s economics with the practice of linguistic justification that “seeks refuge in etymology.” An appeal to a word’s past, in this sort of argument, proceeds by “exploiting the etymological connection” for the purpose of arriving at an “eternal truth.”¹⁰ Somewhat curiously, the authors of *The German Ideology* suggest that the process which might reveal the sources of the philosophers’ abstract words is a fluid dismantling: “The philosophers would only have to dissolve [*aufzulösen*] their language into the ordinary language from which it is abstracted, to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world, and to realize that neither thoughts nor language in themselves form a realm of their own, that they are only *manifestations* of actual life” (118). The structure of this claim, that language is not a ‘realm of its own’ apart from the actual world or actual life, yet that it is a quasi-material thing somehow solid and real enough to require ‘dissolving,’ suggests the paradox of a simultaneous linguistic ‘solidity and solubility’ mobilizing the various modes of Romantic etymology to be outlined here.

In an alternate development of Adorno’s critical gesture, addressing the mysticism with which Romantic naturalisms may be interfused, Maurice Blanchot has proposed that the “spontaneous tendency of romanticism is to link the recognition of the religious character of all language to ancient primordial times” (110). Especially among the figures he has in mind — the early protagonists of German Romanticism — the characterization may be considered just. But I will emphasize in what follows how apparent primitivism (even when theologically or pantheistically inclined) often precisely relocates its “origins” to the present, and redefines them as a continuous process of formation in poetry, discourse, or dialect. A certain persistent residue of primitivism, which Blanchot suggests is Romanticism’s “spontaneous tendency,” may help us understand and reassess a vocabulary of originality and authenticity that nearly always partially obscures what I would like to make visible: the tendency contrary to archaism, toward a concept of language’s ongoing fluidity.

In Blanchot’s account, the procedure of etymology seems most obviously to posit a privileged origin in the true (because first or primary) meaning of a word: and this somewhat mystical relation appears to bind language to nature. Blanchot proceeds to several claims about the oddly seductive power of etymology, which helps substantiate its cultural uses: “I remain persuaded that the zeal of etymology is linked to a certain naturalism — that it is a kind of quest for an original secret held by a first lost language, clues of which would subsist among the multiple tongues that now exist, permitting its reconstruction” (119).¹¹ But etymology, even the “zeal of etymology,” has other motivations and consequences, as does naturalism; and it is not surprising to find that Blanchot’s fragmentary observations are circumspect, observing the matter from multiple

¹⁰ Marx and Engels, 101; cited in Derrida 1982, 216. Sociologically inclined linguists have reminded us that the ideology implicit in dictionaries themselves supports such practices as the recourse to etymology as proof (e.g., Williams 1976; Silverstein 1979; Joseph and Taylor 1990). Such critical views of the dictionary in the form it has assumed are reminiscent of the Romantic unease with the concretion, compartmentalization, and taxonomization of the units and parts of speech derived from classical grammars.

¹¹ In the course of his thoughts on etymology, Blanchot cites Jean Paulhan’s 1953 *La Preuve par l’étymologie*, perhaps the most entertaining and focused debunking of etymological reason, or “etymologism.”

viewpoints, reopening apparent conclusions.¹² If naturalism often appears to be seduced by a simplifying bond between ‘word and world,’ sign and idea, or language and its environments, Blanchot follows the quotation above thoughtfully, in dialogue with himself: “But it is true that the idea of arbitrariness in linguistics is just as debatable [as naturalism], and that its value is above all ascetic: it heads us off from facile solutions” (119). Blanchot suggests that the particular cautionary function performed by the idea of linguistic arbitrariness has its own seductive power, while also reminding us how readily the term “arbitrariness” is associated with a kind of denial or skepticism in language philosophy.¹³ Thanks in part to the skeptical tradition, and even more persistently to the distinction made in the classical tradition between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*), for which Plato’s *Cratylus* often stands, naturalism and arbitrariness tend to be thought of as incompatible terms for theories of language. Yet as this project argues, just as contentious terms like “natural” and “arbitrary” have changed their historical shapes, uses, values and allegiances, the supposed dichotomy they form is often unstable, and hence distracts attention from other important concerns.¹⁴

Blanchot’s dialogic viewpoint, analyzing in effect certain cultural uses of etymology, offers a model for the flexibility of the story I would like to tell, by engaging not with the strict legitimacy of etymology or naturalism, but with recognizable feelings and illusions of rootedness in language. If theories of language can be thought of not as more or less aligned with dominant institutions of linguistic science, but as the culturally defined strategies orchestrating how (as Foucault once put it) “individuals and groups represent words to themselves,”¹⁵ we can reconsider “naturalization” as a conventional procedure, guided by different views of “nature.” Jakobson neatly sums up one habitual tic of naturalization in the anecdote of the Swiss-German woman’s protest against her neighbors who see fit to call cheese *fromage*: “*Käse* ist doch viel natürlicher!” But this gives voice to a common feeling associating “nature” with the familiar, proper, or fit, and many alternative naturalizations can be imagined.¹⁶ For the purposes of this study, we

¹² Adorno, too, balanced his critical attention and suspicion between apparent extremes: he links the elevation of archaism, or “jargon of authenticity,” with its apparent antagonist, positivist linguistics, in that both forget or deny language’s historicity. A devotion to the authentic, he concludes, is actually “pay[ing] tribute to a blank nominalistic theory of language, in which words are interchangeable as counters, untouched by history” (5). And this is not all they have in common, since they represent two ways of treating a long-lost “secret” past artificially: “The jargon simply ennoble the antiquity of language, which the positivists just as simply want to eradicate” (34).

¹³ Compare this association of asceticism with “arbitrariness” to Kenneth Burke’s essay on “The Virtues and Limits of Debunking” in *Philosophy of Literary Form* and to Stanley Cavell, “Nature and Convention,” in *The Claim of Reason*. The relation of the natural and the arbitrary in language, and the theories that claim language itself as either one or the other, is discussed throughout this dissertation, and dealt with in some depth in Chapter One and the Coda.

¹⁴ For illuminating and learned histories of the uses of these and related terms, see historian of linguistics Eugenio Coseriu; for a thorough critique of careless uses of the term “arbitrariness” from within the institution of linguistics, see Paul Friedrich, “The Symbol and its Relative Non-Arbitrariness.”

¹⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 353

¹⁶ Jakobson 1962, 348-9. In his *Signs in Society*, Parmentier gives a lucid and nuanced account of different ways in which the “naturalization of convention” (as well as the “semioticization” of convention) plays out concretely and narratively in ethnographic studies and sociobiological arguments, but also among the ‘native’ members of social groups themselves. His purpose is, in part, to show that it is not possible to “reduce or transcend the opposition of nature and convention” (192), and to demonstrate “the need to reopen the question of the relationship between nature and convention as a dynamic process” (178); but he

may begin with the insight that among linguistic philosophies just as much as among language users, “one theory’s naturalness is another’s epiphenomenon”;¹⁷ but we must then move to examine more closely what each kind of “naturalness” implies. With a viewpoint adjusted to nature’s differing appearance for various Romantics, this study exposes precise variations in the effects of naturalism according to different poetics.

The examples assembled here show, moreover, that Romanticism, in a variety of different, seemingly primitivist shapes, actually offers the terms for a critique of any “etymologism” clinging to a picture of language that alienates it from its “life” in cultural practice.¹⁸ Different as they are in many respects, figures like Herder, Wordsworth, and Thoreau offer naturalist views of a “real” language changing over time, imagined at once as solid, external, or common, and as undergoing constant improvisatory transformation. We have seen already above that for twentieth-century critics it is not only etymology’s mystical, but also its positivist procedures that call for reform. So that while on the one hand this critique has been understood by critics like Adorno as loosely associated with Marx’s demystification of what he diagnosed as the metaphysical excesses of a particularly German ideology, and the associated primitivist tendencies of Romanticism and its aftermath,¹⁹ on the other hand the critique also converges with the demystification of (bourgeois) positivism. This latter critique has, of course, something in common with Romanticism, which for the sake of brevity I will risk generalizing as the demystification of different kinds of alienation. Marx himself of course insists both on the continuous participation of individuals in the re-creation of social “bonds,” and on these bonds’ objective naturalness for those individuals, as part of a particular historical formation: “This bond is their product. It is a historic product. . . *It is the bond natural to individuals within specific and limited relations of production.*”²⁰ This difficult idea of a social reality that is simultaneously already there, apparently fully formed and “natural,” and yet undergoing constant adjustment through cultural practices (*and yet* not controlled by deliberate acts), resonates with the Romantic pictures of language that interest me. Marx interprets cultural forms as both objective and provisional, something Marshall Berman has noted via the *Communist Manifesto* as a tension or dialectic inherent in historical materialism “between Marx’s ‘solid’ and his ‘melting’ visions of modern life.”²¹ In Romantic etymology as well, language’s *hardness* (solidity, immutability) is often articulated as simultaneous with its *softness* (precariousness, mutability).

Moreover, as I will show, it is precisely their “naturalism” that allowed Romantic figures to suggest this paradox, by reshaping the contours of language (according to a particularly mobile sense of nature) into a pervasively collective phenomenon open to

also conveys strongly the way every culture necessarily represents or theorizes language within the very rituals language allows them to perform.

¹⁷ Silverstein 1971, 362

¹⁸ Influenced by Wittgenstein’s discussion of Augustine at the beginning of his *Philosophical Investigations*, I will often use the phrase “picture of language” to mark how individual theories rely on particular notions of language’s shape, limits, and form (whether these notions are explicit or implicit). My hope is that the visual metaphor will not be so distracting that it counteracts the usefulness of thinking about contrasting perspectives on language as presupposed in theoretical accounts (indeed, such “theories” are embedded in language use generally, as linguistic anthropologists in Silverstein’s wake have repeatedly reminded us).

¹⁹ Cf. Adorno, Derrida, Bourdieu, Parmentier.

²⁰ *Grundrisse* 162, emphasis added.

²¹ Berman 90.

constant change. What appeared objective and impersonal was also fluid and intimate; just like nature, language was not merely an alien construction ‘out there,’ built once in the dim past and now slowly disintegrating, nor was it merely a kind of legal contract between autonomous individuals each possessing private, progressively accumulated psychic acts. Drawing on Marx’s scattered comments on the “materials” of language, V. N. Voloshinov declares Romanticism’s originality by proposing that it accomplished something unprecedented in the history of language philosophy: “The romanticists [sic] were the first...to attempt a radical restructuring of linguistic thought” through resistance to “the categories of thought promoted by the alien word” (83). Only according to Voloshinov, this Romantic corrective, apparently guided by Idealism, is complicit with the error of overemphasizing the individual’s creative power.²² My project challenges this claim by arguing that the “radical restructuring of linguistic thought” performed by Romantic etymology intuits a version of language’s social basis, using the idea of “nature” to balance the appearance of language’s common objectivity with a dynamism or vulnerability not governed by the willful acts of individuals.

Although little more than a quick sketch in his overall work, Voloshinov’s fascinating notion of an “alien word” determining the orthodox genealogy of linguistics stands for a symptom of formalist habits of thought that separate instances or units of language from “actual life,” that is, from the processes and relations fleetingly embodied in interactive utterances. His discussion makes it clear that Voloshinov uses “alien” to refer to the grammar and lexicon of classical or “dead” languages, but also more broadly to language as philology externalizes it in empirical forms: “At the basis of the modes of linguistic thought that lead to the postulation of language as a system of normatively identical forms lies a *practical and theoretical focus of attention on the study of defunct, alien languages preserved in written monuments*” (71, original emphasis). In *The*

²² Building his theory around a critical synthesis of what he describes as two general historical “trends” in linguistic philosophy — “individualistic subjectivism” (associated with Romanticism) and “abstract objectivism” (whose protagonist is Saussure) — Voloshinov attributes to both the same primary error, i.e. assuming that the utterance is an individual act, whereas in reality “the utterance is a social phenomenon” (82). With this claim, Voloshinov reaffirms both the social objectivity of language exceeding the psychic acts of the individual, and maintains emphasis on the process hidden by the form of the “alien word.” Similarly, for Marx, the “romantic viewpoint” that counters the bourgeois ignorance of its historical formation by “yearn[ing] for a return to...the original fullness” of the “single individual” is as guilty as its positivist antagonist of dehistoricizing its ideal; for whether bourgeois or romantic, it is “insipid” to claim that the “merely objective bond” presupposed in a cultural formation can be traced or rooted to some “spontaneous, natural attribute inherent in individuals,” when in reality of course, it is a particular form of the social individual that is itself constantly reproducing its own ‘nature.’ Marx suggests that the shared reliance on an ahistorical “individuality,” whether archaic or modern, almost guarantees the coexistence of these two points of view: “The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end” (*Grundrisse* 162). Incidentally, one might well wish to defend Saussure (as I am in effect defending “the Romanticists”) against Voloshinov, given the complexity of his notion of the individual’s role in language. From Saussure’s *Cours*: “The distinguishing characteristic of the sign — but the one that is least apparent at first sight — is that in some way it always eludes the individual or social will” (17). The phrase “in some way” is tantalizingly vague: in what “way” is this elusiveness enacted, and why is this characteristic so difficult for the language-user to perceive? Adorno similarly declares that language’s “generality and objectivity” “already negates the...particular speaking individual subject: the first price exacted by language is the essence of the individual” (10). Yet when the “individual” has been shorn of such features as “will” and “essence,” the improvisation of language goes on as before: language’s social reality is also the guarantee of its constant vulnerability to transformation.

German Ideology, Marx and Engels describe the process of alienation as a hardening, a “crystallization [*Sichfestsetzen*] of social activity, [a] consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations” (53). But there is a difference between the externalization of “alien” cultural products that seem as static as inscriptions in stone, and those that seem dynamically to “grow”: these seem almost to be different modes of alienation. The “social activity” that grows “out of our control,” like a garden gone to seed, makes an apt description for “naturalized” language, understood as a quasi-physical entity changing under forces that cannot be arrested by reason’s grasp. A comparable process of language’s “crystallization” is explicit in Humboldt’s language theory (before being converted in nineteenth century positivist philology into a “natural realm” in which languages flourished or died organically, alienated from their speakers). But in Humboldt, though Marx would doubtless have found much to critique, there is a strong sense of language as both natural or objective, *and* as something “we ourselves produce” (Humboldt calls it a “fashioned organism”). Language is never “invented” individually, but comes about as a jointly fashioned product with a life of its own, of which no single participant can have mastery or possession. When the “objective” qualities of language are understood as collective, and the individual’s contribution as both passive and active, the word’s alienness is balanced by a curious intimacy or particularity, sometimes figured in Romanticism as susceptibility to dissolution, sometimes as poetic or revolutionary potential. Romantic etymology, which is to say, my interpretation of what Voloshinov called Romanticism’s “radical restructuring of linguistic thought,” is certainly marked by the effort to resist the “alien word”; yet it practices a naturalism willing to suppose that something “out of our control, thwarting our expectations” characterizes our linguistic lives, eroding, decomposing, dissolving, sedimenting, and so on.

II. Frail Bonds

In the spring of 2011 a study from the journal “Science” was published in redacted form in the *The New York Times*.²³ The article had first been titled “Phonemic Diversity Supports a Serial Founder Effect Model of Language Expansion from Africa.” This was then reduced in the vulgate of the *Science Times* section to “Languages Grew from a Seed in Africa.” The study used statistical analysis to correlate the decrease in the diversity of articulated sounds used meaningfully in a language with the distance between a given population of speakers and a fixed geographical point in southern Africa, where the director of the study deduced that language was “born” (in other words: the more sounds a language makes use of, the older it should be).

Let us consider not this interesting hypothesis itself but rather its expression. Between the two forms of the title lies an obvious and fascinating rift, which we might characterize as cautious neutrality versus simplistic sensationalism, or Latinate scientism versus organicist primitivism. Rather than merely focusing on the specialist-layperson distinction, the difference between scientific and popular vocabularies, I am curious about the avoidance or embrace of organic metaphors (such as “grew from a seed”) in descriptions of language. Both published accounts choose different accents to tell a story about a persistently touchy subject in linguistic research: the problem of language’s

²³ See Atkinson; Wade.

origins. In fact, both idioms express the hypothesis of an original language in a geographic location (“Africa”) whose very vagueness allows it to assume a distance not only in space, but also in time (it seems clear that to pinpoint language’s origins in “Africa” both draws on and enables the West’s image of its own modernity beside pre-modern, “primitive” civilization). Moreover, the theoretical premise behind tracking phonemic diversity as “language expansion” presupposes comparative philology’s innovation of observing “sound change” as an objective, empirical feature of language, a theoretical viewpoint historically indebted to naturalist metaphors of “growth” and “decay.”²⁴ Thus while the *Science Times* panders to its readership by indulging in a simplistic rootedness, its organicism is an easy target, but in the end perhaps no less vulnerable to criticism than the “neutral” scientific jargon of the professional journal.

The point of this example, however, is neither to ridicule the populist, vaguely mystical evocation of language’s “seeds,” on the one hand, nor to unveil the fallacies of scientism on the other. Rather, I want to suggest that when we think about language formation, regardless of the idiom, we tend to prefer imagining origins at least provisionally as firmly fixed (and often to presuppose an inventor or founder — a tendency accidentally suggested by twisting the pleasantly ambiguous term “founder effect”). The problem raised by comparing the titles is related, again, to the naturalizing of a hypothetical origin: how do we, in fact, represent to ourselves how language comes into being? How does a culture picture language origin? This problem lurks at my own project’s beginnings. This can be conveyed most clearly by looking at several eighteenth-century versions of the formation of language: the first representative of a conceptually reductive vocabulary, the second a starting point for the kinds of Romantic etymology that form this story.

First, the Scottish polymath and early philologist Lord Monboddo, best remembered as the author of the six-volume *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (between 1773-92): “unless we believe names were imposed upon things arbitrarily and capriciously, which cannot have been the case if the language was the work of art, we must suppose that they were framed with some view to the nature of things.”²⁵ Not only do we perceive here the dominant eighteenth-century sense of “arbitrary” as defined by willful (but unsuited) acts of ‘imposition,’ but we find that, within a deeply ingrained conceptual model of language as a collection of “names” for objects in the world, even the imagined alternative of a language more adequately suited to “the nature of things” — that is, even a certain kind of naturalism — appears equally reliant on individual acts of will in which such designations were once “framed.”

If we then compare a passing comment on language’s formation in Herder, in a text of 1767, we find a very different picture:

All human productions in this way have a begetting and a birth; from the latter begins form, season of life, and chronology; but how much noteworthy alteration, indeed the whole process of formation itself, is forgotten in contemplating this! Likewise in the case of language: Who can take note of it before it exists, how it comes into being? It must exist,

²⁴ This reliance of positivist nineteenth-century philology upon the organic metaphors of its founders is described and examined at greater length in the Coda.

²⁵ Monboddo, Vol. II, 189-190.

and fully so, before it even becomes capable of being noted, and the investigator wants to know the first step!

Most things in the world are brought forth...through chance, and not through purposeful efforts...If we had a history of human inventions, how we would find products which arose in accordance with the cosmogony of Epicurus, through a confluence of atoms! Series of causes work together, against each other, and after each other; cog caught cog; one motive against the other; without plan or rule one thing harried another; hot and fast the throws changed; chance had almost exhausted its bad lots before better ones fell.²⁶

Though one might easily suppose the biological metaphor of conception would serve the grounding purpose of genealogical provenance or possessive filiation, in this passage it does something like the reverse: it is clear that to imagine “human productions” organically as gestated, as having a “begetting and a birth,” allows Herder rather to open up new complications, to question the ease with which the theorist may forget each conflicted and often contingent “process of formation” in the rush to settle a singular originary cause — say, a time, place, or agent of invention. Herder’s always palpable excitement at irreducible complexity, renouncing certainty and simplistic origins, seems to relish the creative profusion of a world in which artificial productions occur, as in nature, by strings of accidental congruence (“in accordance with the cosmogony of Epicurus”). Language, as always in Herder, is paramount among these productions.

It has been repeatedly noted that, for Romantic accounts of language that dwell on some kind of naturalness, “arbitrariness” (along with its German equivalent *Willkürlichkeit*) is a suspect term. But — what about arbitrariness is suspect? As the passage above already hints, one poisonous sense of “arbitrary” for figures from Herder to Wordsworth to Emerson (each of whose comments on language have often been understood as primitivist) was the presupposition that language could be built up word by “alien” word, and that each was the individual act of a controlling rational will, uninfluenced by physical or social environments. By contrast, in their theories, the individual agent was only “active” as a participant in greater patterns of movement often wholly inaccessible to that individual’s conscious actions. The linguistic theories that result, attempting to combat the alienating picture of an artificially constructed language by modeling its growth or development in natural terms, are generally not intended to perform the function of grounding and authenticating social conventions or cultural formations. Rather, the intended effect of figuratively naturalizing language is directly the reverse: to show how such formations inevitably change, based on processes manifesting the fluidity and flux observed in natural processes. While conscious of the specific physical and social realities of language, that is, its objective form and efficacy, Romantic etymology finds “naturalness” in language’s mutability, suggesting that its production, activity, and effects can be most easily apprehended figuratively through natural or material processes and forms that both resist and give way.

The Romantic claim for a natural wildness or inconstancy inseparable from human affairs may not seem first or most obviously a linguistic problem; and for this reason, its relevance to language theory has not been sufficiently explored. A

²⁶ Herder, “Fragments on Recent German Literature” (55).

contemporary turn in political, social, and literary theory to better articulate the overlap between human and natural spheres has gained institutional visibility and momentum in the past twenty years, giving rise in literary studies to various kinds of “ecocriticism,” and more generally to a more widely-held assumption that nature should be considered a contested term or critical category. In an influential polemic arguing that “nature” (the term and concept) ought to be actually abandoned in favor of *political ecology*, Bruno Latour analyzes our conflicted attachments to unexamined forms of “nature,” calling his object “that blend of Greek politics, French Cartesianism, and American parks.” Latour later declares his polemic succinctly as an attack on “three forms of nature”: “the ‘cold and hard’ nature of the primary qualities, the ‘warm and green’ nature of Naturpolitik, and finally the ‘red and bloody’ nature of political economics” (245). Each of these relies largely on nature’s persistent externality, on a “nature-over-there” with which a human world either fits or doesn’t; but, as Raymond Williams had earlier put it, “Men come to project onto nature their own unacknowledged activities and consequences.”²⁷ In fact, perhaps no one has shown this as plainly as Williams: among his engagements with the cultural effects of this insight, he illustrates the figures and ideas historically used to animate and motivate nature, in its rhetorical representations — as God’s deputy, as absolute monarch, as constitutional lawyer, as selective breeder, as image of the free market, as merciless battlefield, as nurturing or vindictive mother, and so on.

Curiously absent from Latour’s short list of contributors to the culturally most available images of nature in Western thought is the legacy of German and British Romanticism. The historical period and especially the literary figures associated with Romanticism are remembered for helping to introduce a thorough reinvention of nature (as Goethe wrote among his “Aphorisms,” “The nature with which *we* must work is no longer nature — it is an entity quite different from that dealt with by the Greeks”). In his study of nature in the eighteenth century, Basil Willey writes of the term’s changing senses (with special reference to Wordsworth’s poetry), “All depends upon whether ‘Nature’ is regarded as a fixed state or as a dynamic process” (206). A palpable, if hardly unambiguous, shift from the former to the latter is noted in Arthur Lovejoy’s concise report on the word’s range of applications in aesthetic writings over roughly the same period: among several important semantic innovations altering the senses of Neo-Classical natural ‘order’ was an emphasis on diversity and fluidity of form and a new (and positively valued) wildness.²⁸ Lovejoy cites “insatiable fecundity,” “continuous evolution,” and intimate particularity (as opposed to universal validity) as the senses “relatively novel in the eighteenth century” (77). It is within the context of such new meanings — “diversification,” “irregularity,” and a common “intimacy” varying by milieu (as against “unification,” “regularity,” and “the universal and immutable”) — that the emphasis of “nature” on a pleasant strangeness and continuous transformation intensifies within Romantic thought, yet without loss of “simplicity,” and retaining elements of simplicity’s primitivist appearance.

In cultivating a critical relation to the concept of “nature” in the language theory of the Romantic era, I have felt the great advantages of having at my fingertips the tradition of scholarly work that has long examined the internal complexity of the Romantics’ idea of “nature.” This tradition stretches back to the 1950s and early ‘60s

²⁷ Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (81).

²⁸ Lovejoy, “‘Nature’ as Aesthetic Norm,” in *Essays in the History of Ideas*.

with a series of important essays by William Wimsatt, Paul de Man, and Geoffrey Hartman, each working to recognize the philosophical complexity compacted into the productions of the “nature poet,” quintessentially embodied for (and by) them in Wordsworth.²⁹ As Paul Fry has outlined with admirable clarity, essays such as these, alongside works by intellectual historians like Lovejoy and Willey, prepared the way for more recent debates over the degree to which Romanticism’s tendency to dwell on forms of nature represses or communicates “history.”³⁰ These in turn have subsequently fed, whether directly or indirectly, the current wave of ecocritical readings interested either in positioning Romantic appeals to nature as proto-environmentalism, or in responding to this comparatively “warm green” interpretation with its promise of a haven from, or reproach to, the encroachment of industry and tourism, by questioning, criticizing, and complementing such a view.³¹

Paul Fry’s own handling of the question of nature poetry leads him to sketch Wordsworth’s “nature” as an ontological ‘leveling’, and to respond by advocating what to my great joy he calls a “stone-colored,” as opposed to a “green,” criticism. In focusing my own study on the naturalism specifically motivating Romantic language philosophy, the figure of stone has emerged as crucial, as the quotation from Bréal above and several comments below show; but though I am attached to Fry’s preference for a “grey” rather than a “green” naturalism, I have framed my critical investments as linguistic and cultural, rather than ontological. Fry’s attentiveness to the variable forms of nature recognizable in Wordsworth’s thought is nevertheless nothing short of revelatory, and while I have learned a great deal from Latour’s and Timothy Morton’s flexible concepts of “ecology,” this study seeks the ecological oddities already lurking in Romantic nature. Latour writes, “Nature is not in question in ecology: on the contrary ecology dissolves nature’s contours and redistributes its agents” (21). But what if these solvent ecologies are already implicit within one’s concept of nature? In the naturalism that interests me, the acceptance of the solidity of natural forms is balanced by an awareness of their temporal movement, so that static-seeming objects (like “alien words”) disintegrate and transform. Just as the immutable and the mutable seem to coexist in “Marx’s ‘solid’ and his ‘melting’ visions of modern life,” language’s stoniness coexists with its “natural” fluidity and dissolution.³²

²⁹ See especially William K. Wimsatt, “The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery,” in *The Verbal Icon*; Paul de Man, “The Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*; and Geoffrey Hartman, “A Poet’s Progress: Wordsworth and the Via Naturaliter Negativa,” in *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814*.

³⁰ See, for example, Williams; Barrell; Levinson; Liu; Roe; Cadava. So far as I know, Fry’s “Green to the Very Door? The Natural Wordsworth,” lately republished in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, is the best summary of critical interpretations of Romantic ideas of nature.

³¹ For the former, see Bate and McKusick; for the latter, Morton and François.

³² As I initially imagined it, the term “language ecology” was an extension of Herder’s notion of the “household economy” of faculties relating a creature to its environments (see Chapter One); but the term is also meant to indicate an affinity with the ideas of culturally-inclined linguistics (particularly those influenced by Peirce), as in the “symbolic ecosystem” once described by Paul Friedrich, which invokes “a model of language as an open system that is being used and created by interpreters in a community,” whose “environments” encompass physical, cultural, and psychic factors (14). This, to me, sounds very like Humboldt’s picture of language. My use of the term “language ecology” is unrelated to its most familiar current sense in linguistics, whereby language change is modeled on metaphors from evolutionary theory (and virology), in which the “life cycles” of languages proceed according to competition, selection, speciation, extinction, and so on (Mufwene). This interesting research is a late, apparently quite

Thus the notion of a “language ecology” elaborated at length in Chapter One foregrounds the complex linguistic environments and processes necessary to allow for the restructuring performed by Romantic etymology. Two simple expressions on the topic of nature in Alfred North Whitehead — philosopher of process — resonate particularly with my reading of this linguistic naturalism. The first declares simply that “There is no nature at an instant” (146): the adoption of this idea of nature disallows a fixed origin in the distant past, and warns against becoming too attached to any apparently changeless form. The other builds, in a sense, from the first. Whitehead writes, “In all discussions of nature we must remember the differences of scale, and in particular the differences of timespan. We are apt to take modes of observable functioning of the human body as setting an absolute scale” (141). In fact it is precisely the human scale, and its linguistic mode of thought, that is put in question by expanding pictures of language, so that objects like “words” are viewed from new perspectives, placed in attenuated, changing contexts in order to rediscover the processes of their formation. Again and again, Romantic poetics exhibit a determined refusal to limit themselves to a single timescale; it is the close observation of nature’s peculiarities that allows or requires them to shift between scales of various magnitudes. This is made most evident in the geological timescales activated by metaphors of language as stone, and my project draws attention to the ways Romantic thought uses geological time, among other speculative, inhuman chronologies, to express a dissatisfaction with the ahistorical permanence of the “alien word.” This viewpoint of deep time shows how stone, the very symbol for what seems most resistant to change, alters its shapes over “patient periods” (Emerson). The appeal to deep time allows the thought that language can be better understood if viewed within patient periods of its own, indiscernible to the eye constrained by the “absolute scale” of human action. It is this opening up of “absolute” timescale that led geologist Charles Lyell to write, in the mid-nineteenth century, “it is time that the geologist should in some degree overcome those first and natural impressions which induced poets of old to select the rock as the emblem of firmness.”³³ Romantic poet-linguists had meanwhile overcome this natural impression by using stone to represent not firmness as permanence, but firmness in the midst of change.

The language philosophies of Herder and Humboldt analyzed in Chapter One reshape the notion of language’s “origin” by introducing variable timescales in their theorizations of language’s development. In doing so they create different pictures of language as ecologically formed through complex, collective processes, of which language’s human “inventors” necessarily remain partly in the dark. By refusing arbitrary or willful origins, on the one hand, and reconceiving primitive, static natural origins, on the other, they open the possibility of viewing language’s origin as an ongoing process of formation, rather than a lost or recoverable event in the distant past. Resistance to the idea of an “alien word” means, for both, making the paradoxical recognition that depending on how it is viewed, language has the “natural” attributes both of solidity and of fluidity. Their work thus reveals various discursive processes invisible to narrow views of linguistic form that privilege the alien word.

sophisticated return to the linguistic naturalism absorbed into nineteenth-century positivist philology, literalizing the metaphor that gives individual languages lives of their own (see Coda). See Gillian Beer for the ground-breaking account of the mutual formation of evolutionary theory and comparative philology (“Darwin and the Growth of Language Theory”).

³³ Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, cited in Balaam 17.

Subsequent chapters find partial echoes of their ideas in related pictures of language imagined by Romantic figures whose poetic theories of language seem especially vulnerable to the charge of primitivism. In Chapter Two, I read several of Blake's illuminated poems in the context of eighteenth-century debates about what kind of limit the silent, motionless figure of "stone" placed on relations between humans and the natural word. By evoking the slow motion of deep time in the voices of his poetry, particularly in the short lyric "The Clod and the Pebble," Blake in effect allows a stretching and contracting of timescales in his almost inconceivably flexible picture of language. Blake's anomalous and self-critical modes of "naturalism" and "materialism" strengthen the argument that linguistic naturalism should be understood with more nuance, and demand meticulous attention to the specific poetic effects of natural metaphors (here, geological formation and erosion). The dialectic between "soft" and "hard" animated by "The Clod and the Pebble" finds a telling echo, in Chapter Three, in Wordsworth, through the building up and breaking down of landscape features — among which, as has been often noted, both stone and inscription number prominently. Through a background account of the etymological logic very much present to Wordsworth thanks to Coleridge's interest in John Horne Tooke, I show how Wordsworth resisted language origins that seemed to settle too simply in the material or ideal worlds, by illustrating language's vulnerability to disintegration and reformation, giving a rhythm in his poetry to solidity and solubility. Chapter Four then considers the American Romantic inheritance of Continental linguistic naturalism, and finds that in their most apparently "Cratylic" or naïve naturalizing of language, Emerson and Thoreau may be read not as revealing the firm root or primitive core anchoring the meanings of individual words, but rather as pleading for the recognition of language's inevitable mobility. Although their means are distinct, an eccentric recycling of figures in both gives their own relation to language a simultaneous familiarity and impersonality. In the picture they develop, we take part in language at levels both trivial and unthinkable vast; to participate in linguistic exchange is to feel both its closeness and distance, to feel internal and external to it, to see it as resisting and succumbing to alteration, and to understand oneself as an active and a passive force in its operations.

A concluding Coda gives, as promised, a retrospective view of nineteenth century philology's development from a positivist cultural formation with vague ties to natural history and organicist metaphysics, to a social science determined to cut ties with its naturalist past by reviving the terminology of linguistic "arbitrariness."³⁴ This sketch of disciplinary history is paired with a brief reading of an etymological episode in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* that has usually been understood as an engagement with naïve naturalism. In light of the foregoing Romantic experiments in linguistic thought, I argue that Proust's sociological landscape of semiotic accidents models a critical

³⁴ As Paul Friedrich wrote in 1975, "the theory of arbitrariness, at least in its typically naïve and dogmatic formulations, ought perhaps to belong, not among the live issues giving new or potential insight, but rather among a set of paragraphs about an episode in the history of linguistics over the last hundred years" (25). This should not, however, be understood merely as a polemic against Saussure. If we adopt Samuel Weber's view that Saussure's innovations open onto an implicit theory of the "ineluctable necessity of seeing simultaneously from different points of view" (937), it is clear that the "sociocentric formalism" (Friedrich) of some structuralist thought may have buried elements of a more ecological conception of language in Saussure.

linguistic naturalism with a recognizable affiliation to the Romantics, precisely because it represents language's *detachment* from a particularly immobile idea of nature.

If interpretations of Romantic language theory have tended to take its naturalism as primitivist, and more especially to take its etymological detours as illegitimate attempts to root, bind, or ground language, it is easy enough to miss the tone that tries to communicate the impermanence of roots, even as this tone may take pleasure in the temporary feeling of rootedness. Blanchot suggests that etymology reveals, despite itself, our uprooting, and the tenuousness of a picture of language grounded outside history: "The radicalization whereby etymology's linkages appear to promise us the security of a native habitat is the hiding place of the homelessness which the ultimate's demand...incites in us as uprooted creatures, deprived by language itself of language — of language understand as *ground* where the germinal root would plunge" (86). He points out also that, curiously enough, the feeling of rootedness itself, reinforced by the lure of etymology, is ironically what inspires the urge to pull: "And right away we feel rooted and so we pull at this root with an uprooting force" (97). This dissertation argues that some of the Romantics apparently most blind to this dialectic of rooting and uprooting were in fact conscious that for language to be "natural" is not, or not only, to impose on it a desire for the roots its forms seem to conceal, but to recognize "roots" as shorthand for the temporality of such forms, and to see this temporality as the frailty or vulnerability that constitutes the flip side of revolutionary potential. From its late vantage, Kafka's "Die Bäume" begins, not with the presumably prototypical Romantic desire to discover roots, but with the blithe, positivist expectation of being unencumbered by them, followed by the unhappy discovery of their presence and force — followed, at last, by the yet more unsettling discovery that roots themselves only reach so far and do so much.

Chapter I

Against *Willkürlichkeit*: Formative Ecologies in Herder and Humboldt

... for the signification of sounds is not natural, but only imposed and arbitrary.³⁵
— John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)

... a language contrived out of pure arbitrariness is absolutely opposed to the whole analogy of the collective faculties of the human mind.³⁶
— Johann Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung* (1772)

They make use of it without knowing how they have fashioned it.³⁷
— Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Verschiedenheit* (1836)

I. Introduction: Nature's Context

Recent attempts to understand historically the sense of linguistic “arbitrariness” (in German, *Willkür* or *Willkürlichkeit*) — a justly controversial term carrying a range of distinct, and indistinct, connotations — have outnumbered attempts to define the diverse, apparently opposed family of theories sometimes called “linguistic naturalism.”³⁸ This may well be because anything perceived as linguistic naturalism is regarded from different perspectives as superstitious or mystifying, unscientific or uncritical. This chapter looks more closely at several figures whose “naturalism” seeks to be both critical and scientific, even as they concede a great deal to mystery. Familiar to any history of language theory, German precursors of linguistic anthropology Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) each held philosophical notions of science and philology that led them to re-theorize the concept of arbitrariness current in eighteenth-century language theory, by mounting influential defenses of what they framed as language’s naturalness. To Herder and Humboldt, the designation “willkürlich” was misleading, indeed symptomatic of a pervasive falsification of the entire enterprise

³⁵ Book III, 38.

³⁶ “...es ist überhaupt der ganzen Analogie aller menschlichen Seelenkräfte entgegen, eine aus reiner Willkür ausgedachte Sprache,” *Abhandlung* 54. Translations not otherwise marked are my own. Shortly before, Herder writes, “In der Reihe der Wesen hat jedes Ding seine Stimme und eine Sprache nach seiner Stimme,” 51, a position that apparently owes its “voices” in part to Jakob Böhme, whose “naturalism” is briefly examined alongside William Blake in Chapter Two. If Herder’s language of the “chain of being” sounds natural in an older, static sense, we should remember that it is precisely in Herder’s time — in fact, in part through Herder’s own natural historical writings — that this vision of the cosmos acquires a proto-evolutionary mutability. See Lovejoy, “The Temporalization of the Great Chain of Being,” in *The Great Chain of Being*.

³⁷ “Sie bedienen sich ihrer, ohne zu wissen, wie sie dieselbe gebildet haben” (*Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*, hereafter cited simply as *Verschiedenheit*, in *Schriften zur Sprache* 303; *On Language* 24. The German and English will hereafter be differentiated by referring to the latter as “E” for English).

³⁸ In its origins this project engages with the legacy, in linguistic anthropology, of Peirce’s semiotic trichotomy, which crucially complicates the arbitrary/natural distinction. It would be impossible to do justice to the large body of literature that observes and studies this distinction, or that wishes to clarify it; but one might begin with Silverstein 1976 and Friedrich 1979. A number of historical investigations trace the terms through older usages (e.g., Coseriu, Gensini, Formigari, Joseph); a series of celebrated objections or refinements to the form of semiotic arbitrariness generally thought of as Saussure’s (early among them Jespersen, Voloshinov, Benveniste, Jakobson); as well as several engagements dealing in depth with the issue in literary environments (Genette, Keach).

of any holistic, scientific, or “philosophical” study of language. In their differing idioms, each countered the errors of *Willkürlichkeit* by introducing terminologies that placed language within a “natural” context, in order to attempt a coherent account of language processes.

The sequence of epigraphs above follows a shift in theories of how linguistic creatures inherit language. Writing toward the end of the seventeenth century, Locke had implied that language is inherited as we become accustomed to language’s “voluntary imposition,” a phrase which suggests that individual words were decided upon by some previous, and seemingly originary, human agency. (We must remember that this notion of voluntarism or “arbitrariness” itself seeks to correct the theological model of a universal governing natural order in language.) In Herder, by contrast, language inheritance occurs at the level of species, under the pressure of greater forces naturally (and therefore, for him, also historically) shaping the creature’s way of life. Finally, Humboldt’s densely packed claim — “They make use of [language] without knowing how they have fashioned it” — suggests how what Locke means by “arbitrary” signification is swallowed up within Herder’s natural historical thinking. Superficially compatible with Locke in its notion of historical “fashioning,” Humboldt deliberately makes this artifice mysterious to us. The agency behind this fashioning is dispersed; the “product” has a life of its own, in turn shaping the producer.³⁹ Rather than adopting a reductive recourse to, for example, Cratylist correspondence, or signification in some manner founded in or “copied from nature” (as Locke understood natural signification), this naturalism shows how relations generally called *arbitrary* become conventionalized through temporal forces and historical narratives. Imagining these processes themselves, which resist the “deprocessualization”⁴⁰ of individual units necessary to language’s formal representation, helps lay bare what is “natural” in both Herder’s and Humboldt’s linguistic theories. Both emphasize the simultaneously passive and active role of linguistic creatures, whose worlds are in key respects uncontrollably shaped by languages that these same creatures simultaneously help to create. Both recognize this as an inevitable feature of the formation of language; however, they do not regret that language works from within and without. Rather, this reciprocal (ecological) influence reconfigures the question of “origins” as a process of continuous formation.

³⁹ There is in this brief formula (published in 1836) more than a hint of that logic for which Žižek gives Marx credit: the fetishistic logic guiding the “dimension of the symptom” in social life. When in 1867 Marx writes, of the process whereby “men” bestow value upon products of labor, that “They do this without being aware of it” (167), he is describing a way of life established in response to a form of thought to which its participants, despite the fact that they are the ones “doing” it, have no immediate access. (It is at this precise point in *Capital* that Marx himself compares the manufactured “objectivity” of this process to that of language: “for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language” [167]). The *Selbstätigkeit* or “autonomy” of Humboldt’s conception of language is like this “socially valid” objectivity (Marx), or its “social effectivity” as ideology (Žižek): “Thus we have finally reached the dimension of the symptom, because one of its possible definitions would also be ‘a formation whose very consistency implies a certain non-knowledge on the part of the subject’” (Žižek, 21). I would argue that there is a foretaste of this “certain non-knowledge” in language’s partial inaccessibility, via Herder and Humboldt’s formulations.

⁴⁰ Silverstein and Urban, 1. I use this unwieldy term sparingly, but like its partner term “entextualization,” it is useful for signaling a transition from a theory that privileges segmented units, to one that privileges process.

Lia Formigari’s recent historical survey of linguistic philosophies helpfully lays out several different kinds of linguistic naturalism, beginning with the reduction of Cratylishm to a “belief in a natural correspondence between words and things,” which could also stand for the theological doctrines of linguistic revelation exemplified in myths of Adamic language origin.⁴¹ A related naturalism, she writes, views language as produced by human history, but maintains that the divine gift of skill in language creation, as in the imposition of names, nevertheless leads to a natural fit between word and world.⁴² Finally, a more thoroughgoing attention to this historical dimension leads to a rather different strain of naturalism, exemplified in the Epicurean tradition by Lucretius, for whom the perennial choice between linguistic relations based in *physis* (nature) or *thesei* (convention) seems a false one: “But the various sounds of the tongue, nature drove [men] to utter, and convenience moulded the names for things... what is so very wonderful in this business, if the human race, having active voices and tongues, could distinguish things by varying sounds to suit various feelings?” (459-61). This aptness of sounds to feelings belongs to an idea of naturalism not necessarily predicated on any fixed or antecedent correspondence (and having no clear relation to reference). Unlike Herder’s and Humboldt’s naturalist models, no precise distinction is made here between the linguistic capacities of humans and other animals; yet quite in tune with both Herder and Humboldt, the *naturalness* of the account is the result of imagining how a lived environment colludes with socio-historical “convenience” (*utilitas*) and the physics of articulation to produce a communally varying form of communicative practice. Furthermore, a crucial element of the Epicurean position was a refutation of the conscious, private, whimsical dimension of that arbitrary “imposition” of words upon things: “Therefore to suppose that someone then distributed names amongst things, and that from him men learnt their first words, is folly” (459).⁴³ Herder and Humboldt belong roughly in this historically inclined naturalist tradition: Herder’s concern with combatting the natural fitness bestowed by divine revelation is matched by his veritable anguish at the undue credit “arbitrariness” grants to rational or intentional “invention” of language, as we shall see.

The consequences of their position — what Voloshinov would characterize as a “reaction against the alien word” — are far-reaching. We are no longer creatures that

⁴¹ Formigari, 39.

⁴² A more contemporary sense of “naturalism” refers to the idea of a “language instinct,” and the crucial influence of “phylogenetic and biological factors” (*ibid*, 40). Superficially at odds with Locke, some naturalisms of this sort might be compared to certain empiricisms, because of an inability to account for language origin except through a stable, coherent, anterior agency, though in this case that agency is displaced onto an impersonal “instinct.” As we will see below, Herder is impatient with the evasiveness of such a logical move. Cf. Harris, *The Language-Makers*, and also the brief citation from Monboddo in the Introduction.

⁴³ Compare Lucretius’s didactic poetic rendering with a well-known letter from Epicurus to Herodotus: “Hence even the names of things were not originally due to convention but in the several tribes under the impulse of special feelings and special presentations of sense primitive men uttered special cries. The air thus emitted was molded by their individual feelings or sense-presentations, and differently according to the difference of the religions which the tribes inhabited... And as for things not visible, so far as those who were conscious of them tried to introduce any such notion, they put in circulation certain names for them, either sounds which they were *instinctively compelled to utter* or which they *selected by reason or analogy* according to the most general cause there can be for expressing oneself in such a way” (cited in Formigari 41, emphasis added). Here we see clearly the balance between compulsion and reason, active and passive expression.

merely make or use language, but are always *remaking* something given us, and as a consequence also in part receptively *made by* language; or as Humboldt puts this, our “mental activity” is “nicht rein erzeugend, sondern umgestaltend” (325, E50). Yet to counter the “alien word” does not mean to domesticate or stabilize language: Romantic theories of language are often investigations of variations on incommunicability, and the continuities between what can and can’t be articulated. In precisely this mode, Herder dwells on the “dunkle Gefühle” that shape overlooked dimensions of language, both in its historical “origin” crudely conceived, and in the constant processes of its ongoing formation. Humboldt is if anything more urgent still about the “[unzugängliche] Quelle” of language and mind, and what always remains “unerklärlich,” “unergründlich,” “nicht [zu] erkennen” as a result of its constant refashioning: “die eigentliche Sprache [liegt] in dem Akte ihres wirklichen Hervorbringens.”⁴⁴ The temporal milieu into which such a theoretical premise “plunges” us acknowledges both the passivity inherent in this activity of “utterance,” and the consequent loss of any ultimate, grounding origin: Humboldt emphasizes his own insistence “daß wir uns...mit unsrem Sprachstudium durchaus in eine geschichtliche Mitte versetzt befinden, und daß weder eine Nation noch eine Sprache unter den uns bekannten ursprünglich genannt werden kann” (325, E49-50). Long before the later nineteenth-century philological turn away from a focus on origins, culminating for many historians in Saussure, Herder and Humboldt labored to deflect attention away from supposedly recoverable, ultimate origins, and toward the ongoing formation of language.

Herder memorably claimed that all “original languages” are animated by remnants of the sounds of nature, but that these sounds do not constitute the *roots* themselves; natural sounds are rather “the sap which gives life to the roots of language.” While not denying that this is a kind of primitivism, I would like to point out here that it is not the primitivism we might expect. Even as it asserts language’s material affiliation with nature, the metaphor’s eloquently voiced caution steers the eager etymologist away from the easy satisfaction of onomatopoeia (or even of Rousseau’s “cry of passion”) as explanation of language origin, warning against under-imagining the relationship of significant sounds to their causes, and disallowing the attachment of words to any permanently true or natural meaning. Herder is far too ‘attached’ to liquidity for this. At all points, he maintains his commitment to the idea that the natural world — though always necessarily language’s support, however artificial that language may look — remains to some degree mysterious to human reason. But this mystery or “darkness” of nature’s matter is attractive for him, rather than a problem requiring a solution.

The recognition of language’s constitutive material quality, alongside its systematic articulation, constitutes one part of the “radical restructuring of linguistic thought” pursued by Romantic-era linguists like Herder and Humboldt (Voloshinov). At the fringes of this project, I have sketchily proposed a resemblance between romantic poetics and some contemporary linguistic anthropology, disclosed through linguistic models that partially dissolve or dismantle the familiar units of language into the matrix of their social and natural environments, or into the details of their utterance. This

⁴⁴ Humboldt 324, E46-7. See section “Form der Sprachen,” in *Verschiedenheit*. Such sequences are the very type of what Voloshinov conceives of as the “individualistic subjectivism” of Romantic linguistics: “Romanticism, to a considerable degree, was a reaction against the alien word and the categories of thought promoted by the alien word...The romanticists were the first philologists of native language, the first to attempt a radical restructuring of linguistic thought” (83).

dissolution may be understood as a desire to break down and see through the artificial building blocks of words and grammatical categories. Yet it is also, at a different level of abstraction, meant to counteract simplistic notions of information communication, and the utilitarian language ideology that assumes language is created, imposed, and used by intending subjects in order to represent an objective, pre-existing world. The ecological language theories pursued against this model ask that we recognize a passive role in our own language formation, at the same time that we assume responsibility for a constitutively active role in forming language at various levels of abstraction.⁴⁵ The conceptual units so often taken for granted — words and grammatical categories, but also minds and bodies, subjects and objects — are viewed as inseparable from each other, as well as from their “natural” contexts and histories, and from their temporal unfolding. Discovering what is meant by “nature” in these theories is part of my aim. Complicating language study’s reliance on abstract segmented units, the linguistic “pragmatism” of this view widens the purview of linguistics, or in Herder and Humboldt’s idiom, “philosophizes” it. While attentive to the force of the ideational and abstract in language, it also allows us to dwell on the material sign processes and bodies that remind us language is taking place over stretches of time.⁴⁶

Returning us to the Epicurean naturalism that forbids oversimplification of the invention of language as an intentional act of naming, and refines the reduction of origination to a diffuse, but purely active, poetic practice, Humboldt writes,

Die Sprache entspringt zwar aus einer Tiefe der Menschheit, welche überall verbietet, sie als ein eigentliches Werk und als eine Schöpfung der Völker zu betrachten. Sie besitzt eine sich uns sichtbar offenbarende, wenn auch in ihrem Wesen unerklärliche, Selbsttätigkeit, und ist, von dieser Seite betrachtet, kein Erzeugnis der Tätigkeit, sondern eine unwillkürliche Emanation des Geistes. (303)

⁴⁵ The term “ecology,” meant to invoke the simultaneity of active and passive modes of linguistic participation, is loosely adapted here from Herder’s use of the term *Haushaltung* — economy, ‘keeping house’ — for the web of relations governing the bio-cultural sphere of individual creatures, species, and even nature at large. This expansive and flexible conceptual form finds a late echo in Kenneth Burke’s concept of “metabiology” (*Permanence and Change*), with its broad view of linguistic convention closely bound up in psychological, bodily, and social “attitudes,” though in Burke we might find equal warrant for one source in Marx’s concept of the “metabolism” between nature and human society. *Ecology* seems to me close to what Herder may have had in mind with the curious *Haushaltung*, and it is not unimaginable that from Herder’s use of “Haushaltung” or “Ökonomie,” we might draw an indirect line to nineteenth-century naturalist Ernst Haeckel’s coinage “Ökologie,” the first recorded use of the term.

⁴⁶ As a placeholder for a much larger conversation, I note in passing that the linguistic model I am trying to track shows signs of an effort not to prioritize, or privilege, either writing or speech, but rather to take these as aspects of the same object, and to think of the artificially clear distinction between them as something that has always been in part metaphorical. Cavell and Burke, in different ways, explicitly (if also only in passing) view this apparently dual shape as a sort of pseudo-problem (see Cavell 2005, 186). For a more technical effort to collapse the writing/speech distinction, see the above-mentioned move from text to “entextualization” of Silverstein & Urban, *Natural Histories of Discourse*. Each might be profitably compared with Derrida’s earlier concept of “écriture.” For a recent and illuminating exploration of a similar problematic, see Celeste Langan’s “Pathologies of Communication in Coleridge and Schreber,” in which she proposes that the “Romantic revolution in poetic language” might be understood “not in terms of a nostalgia for the ‘oral’ culture of the ballad but rather as an exploration of ballad meter as the sign of ‘narration without a narrator,’ as the sign of writing-as-citation rather than of speech” (148).

If this “unwillkürliche Emanation des Geistes” strikes some as too idealist for comfort, the inexplicable “Selbstätigkeit” or autonomy of language manifestly balances the role of individual utterance against the ceaseless social work of language as the complex production of *all* speakers. In a sense presaging later uses of etymology in romantic literature, we find in Herder and Humboldt suggestively ecological conceptual models, imagined within an entangled, natural “web” of influences and interdependencies. Though their models are in many ways distinct, this account focuses on the close relation between their writings, from Herder’s *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) to several of Humboldt’s earlier, shorter works on language, and particularly the text referred to as the *Baskenfragment* (1801-2) (as well as the later, better known *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts* [1836]). The central motive of these texts demonstrates that language is attached to the different constraints and time frames within which it emerges. Not desiring to solve every question they raise, each remains attentive to the paradoxes of representing the processes foreshortened in language’s forms. How does one describe the indebtedness, responsiveness, or attachment of language to its cultural environment, without first imagining it as alienated or separable *from* that environment? How can such alienation be recognized — or provisionally overcome?

II. Herder’s *Abhandlung*: Disobedient Form

In diesem Gesichtspunkt, wie groß wird die Sprache!
— Herder, *Abhandlung* (115)

The institutional background of the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* helps explain its own rhetorical orientation: the treatise is a pointed attempt to refute contemporary proposals for language origin as either essentially an animal adaptation or a divine gift to humankind. Hence the piece’s insistence on a kind of middle path between the two, and its attempt to give language a *human* origin, or a manner of development specific to the human.⁴⁷ This attempt to mark out a new path also helps to explain the piece’s skirmishes with thinkers Herder takes to exemplify both arguments, primarily on the one hand defenders of language’s divine origin, and on the other hand the French Enlightenment materialists (representing the French adoption and adaptation of British empiricism), whose arguments, in subordinating the authority of religion and elevating scientific method, seemed to point toward a manner of linguistic development equally as mechanically law-bound as other aspects of nature (yet preserving nevertheless the assumption of intrinsic human superiority). It is notable that several of Herder’s most

⁴⁷ This gives some dimension to the claim that Herder is a precursor to linguistic *anthropology*. In Herder scholarship, it is customary to point out that the Kantian phrase about a ‘Copernican’ turn in philosophy appears decades earlier in an early text of Herder’s (*Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volkes allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*), written and delivered as a talk while he was still Kant’s student. For Herder, this means an anthropological philosophy (philosophy *kat’anthropon*), generated from observations on — and from — the lived experience of the human creature: “All philosophy that strives to be the people’s [Volks] must take people as its center, and if one pursues a change in kind for the viewpoint of knowing the world [Weltweisheit], there will be no limit to the new productive developments revealed, if our whole philosophy becomes anthropology.” Not unlike Kant’s “turn,” this is a strange Copernicanism in that while it limits the powers of human philosophy, it seems unrepentantly anthropocentric. See especially Zammito (e.g., 221-253, 315-326) and Prosser.

indispensable targets — e.g. Rousseau and Condillac — are understandably simplified, sometimes crudely, in order to be the more efficiently refuted. Their indispensability to Herder's argument, however, means that their own theories are not simply wrong, from Herder's point of view, but at times equally a source and inspiration.⁴⁸ Understood as rebuttals necessary in order to set off his own terms, these critical encounters reveal the key points to which Herder resolutely returns, the theoretical territory which defines his interest in language as constitutive of the human sphere of cognition and action.⁴⁹

Interestingly, in order to show that he is not answering the question as it is posed, in order to show that he is unable, in fact, to supply an origin of the order requested, Herder characterizes his own approach to the Prize question as in effect a dutiful or necessary "disobedience" (*Ungehorsam*) to the Academy.⁵⁰ His treatise's final paragraph declares both that he has offered no hypothesis at all in place of those that exist already, thus "transgressing" the terms of the Academy's call ("das Gebot der Akademie übertreten"), and that he has strived by stepping beyond the dictates of the official prize question to also go beyond the individual proposals or hypotheses of his precursors. In this manner he supplies the only fitting answer, which has been drawn, he explains, from the wider scope of "the whole household management [*Haushaltung*] of the human species" (124), a phrase which suggests the anthropocentric "ecology" that underlies his theory of language.

As I explore the way Herder opens language up to give shape to this enigmatic housekeeping, I will focus especially on his unflagging preoccupation with the themes of

⁴⁸ See, for example, Pénisson (2003) on Herder's use of Rousseau.

⁴⁹ Several interesting attempts to demote this work's originality, or representativeness, are worth mentioning here. In a notable dissent from widespread agreement on the work's innovations, Hans Arsléff (1982) disputes that Herder differs productively from Condillac's earlier work. Michael Forster's recent two-volume study of German language philosophy, on the other hand, while generally attributing to Herder a primacy perhaps overgenerous, disavows the *Abhandlung* as a misstep in his linguistic thought. Forster argues that, because it apparently reverts to the "conventional Enlightenment picture" (58) of how language functions, in which "thought and meaning [are] prior to and autonomous of language" (92), the *Abhandlung* is a regression from Herder's earlier and later models of language. In claiming that the work thus "fails," due to a "sophistical" redefinition of language as a kind of thought (*Besonnenheit*, reflection), Forster suggests that it marked a deviation from a more promising theoretical path. Since Forster would like to emphasize not just the enormous influence of Herder's work, but additionally its ongoing relevance to contemporary linguistic philosophy — as when he calls Herder's thoughts "plausible," or even "correct" — he forces himself to defend or reject Herder's statements as though they ought to be considered alongside contemporary arguments in language philosophy. While I follow Forster in wanting to show the salutary effects of rereading Herder, and even in wanting to press the interesting parallels between his work and contemporary linguistics, it seems reasonable to read him, not as correct or incorrect, but along the grain of those philosophical premises which Forster calls his "historicist hermeneutics."

⁵⁰ A related point which I leave to the side for reasons of economy is the way in which Herder's writing style itself constitutes a kind of recalcitrance to scholarly discourse: its dedication to common experiential relevance and comprehensibility, its refusal of dry or recondite philosophical terminologies, its avoidance of systematic formulations, its popular and poetic diction, its exclamatory enthusiasm. This point has been made well by John Zammito, who shows how Herder wrote in a cultural and intellectual setting in the German eighteenth century in which *Populärphilosophie* competed with academic philosophy (this is partly the context within which, according to Zammito, he fell out with Kant after the mid-1770s). Others have shown how a belief in the inextricableness of substance and expression, traceable to Herder, warranted the informality and self-interruption, the enthusiasm and poetic flights that characterize much of the writing of subsequent generations of Romantic thinkers, who would write of the necessary relation between poetry and philosophy. This debt, however, is not always accepted or acknowledged: see Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute*.

arbitrariness in language and paradox in argumentation, and the manner in which these preoccupations organize his complex treatment of the problem of origins. Herder's maligned terms 'arbitrary' (*Willkür*, *Willkürlichkeit*) and 'paradox' come up so reliably for criticism in the course of the *Abhandlung* that it can be difficult to recognize 1) that Herder's own philosophy of language *encompasses* arbitrariness, while insisting on its broader contextualization, in a sense its "historicization," and 2) that his methods of discussing language exploit paradoxical formulas as brazenly as those he criticizes. In the end it is what Herder *does* with paradox that is significant: he acknowledges, in fact insists upon, the paradox of his narrative of language formation, because the Academy's question on the discovery of language, as posed, demands a transparent account of something about which Herder implies we must necessarily remain in the dark. The origin of language cannot, as such, be articulated. Thus the paradoxes he detects and denounces in the origin myths relayed by his precursors are only a problem when they go unrecognized; as soon as the inherently paradoxical nature of the problem at stake is *recognized*, Herder suggests, we learn a crucial lesson by finding out what we can't know (bearing in mind that, for Herder, not "knowing" doesn't mean we are not involved; we may still unconsciously "feel," engage non-rationally, or *cooperate* with whatever lies outside our awareness; in fact, we inevitably do).

Furthermore, in persistently contesting the claims for language's "arbitrariness," Herder simultaneously allows that the specifically *human* adaptation of language has an arbitrary character, but refuses this as language's definition, in part because he reconfigures the static, free-standing signs presupposed by Locke's arbitrariness, in their dynamic particularity. Herder expands conventional views of language to encompass the "community" of all human speakers — "How vast language becomes!" — in order to show that what is recognized in the tendency toward "arbitrariness" of signification is part of a natural history of change, and part of the formation and variation of human convention (note here the difficulty of avoiding terms that would anachronistically invoke adaptive evolution).

a) *Willkür* as Opposed to What?

Unser Erkenntnis ist also...nicht so eigenmächtig, willkürlich und los, als man glaubet...
— Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* (1778)

Part of a much larger resistance to the philosophical overvaluation of individual autonomy, and transparent "reason," Herder's sense of the danger of characterizing language itself as arbitrary emerges already within the *Abhandlung*'s opening sections, which reinvest all of nature with the capacity for a certain kind of language, specific to each life-form. Yet this concern with arbitrariness needs considerable contextualization to be fully understood, not least because of the complex history of the term "arbitrary" in (and quite specifically as a result of) language philosophy between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Whether or not Herder's own use of this term corresponds precisely to that of those theorists he takes issue with (that of Condillac in particular, with Locke behind him) is a question of some importance as well, since his project sets out deliberately to stretch, twist or otherwise disfigure key terms in the debate he enters, not the least of which is "language" itself.

As we see from the opening moves of the essay, Herder's primary task is one he perceives as the necessity of conceptual reintegration, or the claim for a certain kind of continuity or inseparability of elements that is overlooked by the "analysis" practiced by the theorists he opposes. This reminder of inevitable interconnection is taken to counteract what Herder describes as a "cold" philosophical technique of abstracting, dismembering, picking apart, hyper-rationalizing: to build on one of his own favorite figures, of the world's relations as a fabric or web, this practice amounts to following and pulling on single threads without taking the whole cloth into account.⁵¹ "Willkür" (and its lexical family) is one of the terms that comes closest to summing up this problematic tendency, and its closeness to the notion of intention or volition is repeatedly indicated (e.g., "Willkür und langsamen Bedacht," "Willkür und Absicht" 5-6).

To complicate language's relation to the idea of arbitrariness, by substituting "naturalness," is thus not for Herder a move toward some simplistic collapsing of linguistic units with referents or their cognitive equivalent (Lockean "ideas"), as we might assume; indeed, it is remarkable how little Herder's linguistic philosophy is focused on referentiality. It is rather to disrupt the assumption that language's capacity to create and maintain meaning can be fully accounted for by a will or intention governed by reason, whether individual or collective. (Herder often pauses to resignify "reason," to give it the same outlines as the mode of knowledge limited to humans, or their species-being: hence, it spans regions that we might normally think of as irrational.) The Herder who strains in particular against something called "arbitrariness" can seem puzzling, from a contemporary perspective, since in certain respects the very qualities Herder adduces to qualify the arbitrariness he refuses — "naturalness" as wildness, liquidity, darkness, continuity with a world of creatures (and elements and forces) beyond our modes of knowledge or our temporal horizons, irrelevance to instrumental intention (much less control), bodily and rational participation with what lies beyond understanding — these very qualities can *also* be thought of as "arbitrary," when the term is used to emphasize language's historicity, or to show that language can seem to function as an autonomous, even a living, thing.⁵² Yet the movement of historical differences clearly enough contributes to the "naturalness" he values. It is as though Herder wants to adjust our

⁵¹ Herder writes of the abstracting armchair philosopher: "Setzet einen Philosophen, in der Gesellschaft geboren und erzogen, der nichts als seinen Kopf zu denken und seine Hand zum Schreiben geübet... Da wir also durchaus keinen schüchternen, abstrakten Stubenphilosophen zum Erfinder der Sprache brauchen, da der rohe Naturmensch, der noch seine Seele so ganz, wie seinen Körper, aus *einem* Stück fühlet, uns mehr als alle sprachschaffende Akademien und doch nichts minder als ein Gelehrter ist — was wollen wir diesen denn zum Muster nehmen?" (88-90). The rejection of all "sprachschaffende Akademien" is striking, in the context of an Academy-authorized text; and that of the skeptical philosopher, dismembered by his own chosen practice or habits or life (in that he uses nothing but a head and hand), inevitably recalls Descartes, who asks — in the eerie isolation of his writing-chamber — how he can doubt that his hands are "his," or doubt that the parts of his body form a whole with a stable or constant identity. The question is, what does Herder propose as an alternative? See Butler, "How Can I Doubt That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?"

⁵² Thus "arbitrariness" that attaches to and circumscribes a static sign, a mental act or the saying of a word, gives way to a different arbitrariness over the long expanse of natural history. The question "Arbitrariness as opposed to what?" is meant to suggest that, for Herder, merely repudiating a catch-all arbitrariness is not the point. Rather, Herder is developing that train of thought within which Coleridge would later inquire, with some caution, around 1800: "Is *Thinking* possible without arbitrary signs? & — how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer?" See Chapter III for citation and discussion.

awareness so that we feel how individual “signs” or other elements of language are inflected and attached, thread-like, by the local contingencies of their emergence.

Yet, we have still to be more specific: how can we define the arbitrariness Herder refuses? Already above, I have indicated how such arbitrariness implies, for Herder, not simply the Enlightenment’s traditional definition of semiotic arbitrariness as established by Locke (and in related senses, inherited from much earlier traditions). For Herder, the problem with calling language arbitrary applies not only to individual signs, but to the uncritical assimilation of the theoretical premises that extend from thinking *only* of signs as discrete units: if signs themselves are arbitrary, how did they come into being? Can the origin of a particular sign be pictured without reference to the conditions of its appearance — its “total linguistic fact,” as anthropologists would now say? What makes this entire network of arbitrary semiosis *possible* in the first place? Herder’s strenuous argumentative push against *Willkür* suggests he believes that an uncritical presupposition of arbitrary signs allows philosophers to ignore the entire world-picture that *accompanies* “sign-making,” a complex process by no means self-explanatory. The imposition of asocial abstraction in place of experiential or empirical, sensory or felt evidence; the artificial division or taxonomic fracturing of faculties and feelings that should never be considered as other than mutually constituting; and the abruptness or suddenness of theoretical conjuring tricks, “hypotheses,” involved in most accounts of origin — all of these are symptomatic of the worldview or philosophy within which an objective arbitrariness gains undue prominence.⁵³

The view proposed instead depends, in its most interesting scenes, on treating language not exactly as signs or words; much as he sidesteps language’s referential function, Herder seems to strive as much as possible to dodge the trap of concretizing linguistic units into frictionless parts of speech.⁵⁴ True, the best-remembered section of the essay turns on a class of linguistic units rather like signs, what Herder calls “marks” (*Merkmale*) or “words of the soul” (*Worte der Seele*). *Merkmale* share some attributes of those prototypically arbitrary linguistic units, the “signs” of Locke or Condillac: they are rationally arrived at, distinctively and specifically human, coincident with human “freedom” from animal needs. But for Herder, this rationality is also in other important senses *natural*, bending the realm of the “rational” toward elements of the human profile usually considered as emotional or instinctive, characteristic features emphatically not bound by our usual concepts of intention. In a discussion of linguistic roots, to which I’ll return below, Herder argues that the meaning of these comparatively original words is inaccessible to us through textual evidence because meaning is attached not just to a historical epoch, but also to the specific “ways of thinking and seeing” native to a population or community of speakers: “Ihre Verwandtschaften sind ferner so national, so

⁵³ Although he does not dwell on this point, the same objections would be valid for those naturalizing theories of language that looked for *stability* to root language in nature, and a firm fit between original names and objects. This referential naturalism is not, by that name, an explicit target in Herder’s *Treatise*, but it would be vulnerable to the same critiques.

⁵⁴ This tendency toward liquidation of imposed structure is evident in his description of an “original” language, before a sense of grammar takes hold: “Verbum und Adverbium, Verbum und Nomen und alles floß zusammen...die Teile der Rede flossen auseinander: nun ward allmählich *Grammatik*” (76). Yet, just as the “language of nature” is always residual in human language (see below), one sees how this primitivist understanding of language’s liquidity in its early chronological phases tends in Herder to take hold of contemporary language as well.

sehr nach der eignen Denk- und Sehart des Volks, des Erfinders, in dem Lande in der Zeit, in den Umständen...” (64).⁵⁵ This specificity of use is compounded in the nuances added through tonal expression and emotional or psychic associations (“im Affekt, im Gefühl, in der Verlegenheit des Ausdrucks” [65]). Though apparently descriptive of a temporally distant phase in linguistic development, there is more than a hint that the “flüchtige Nebenideen” making ancient languages so labile and impossible to recapture are active still in our own.

How can we then characterize Herder’s reintegrated arbitrariness? In the *Abhandlung*, language is given several definitions, or considered simultaneously from several points of view: it has always and necessarily a natural component that is latent in, indeed repressed (“verdrängt”) by, its human form. This natural language is in fact the inevitable accompaniment of human language, however thoroughly it may be denied by appeals to render language absolutely efficient, transparent, stable, and logical. Thus Herder differentiates language into several modes or levels, emphasizing the definition that is less intuitively grasped, which is to say “language” as a language of nature or feeling (*Sprache der Empfindung*). This represents a kind of language shared with animals, and indeed the natural world generally. The other definition is closer to what the majority of his contemporaries mean when they discuss language, and closer to what is generally intended today: that language which is specific to our species, our conventional “künstliche” or “menschliche Sprache.” There is a clear sense in which, for Herder, the latter exerts a power over the former — to the extent that they can be imagined as separable (a separability which must be for Herder a purely rhetorical exercise, since the substance of his essay denies us such a move); however, that *both* are always present in human language is equally clear.⁵⁶

Herder thus accepts at one remove the picture of human language that sees its functioning as arbitrary, or dependent on a mark-making process of recognition or *Besonnenheit* only possible within the human sphere. The qualities of symbolic mediation specific to human cognition are distinctive in that they make “language” something characteristically new. Yet despite his recognition that there *is* a kind of arbitrary coloring to human language, in order to resist the biases of his intellectual interlocutors, and because of the state of the academic dispute on language origin toward the end of his century, Herder’s intellectual convictions make it imperative to emphasize that human language could only have developed within the context of a species-specific human sphere. He offers a “natural” temporal context, a broad or deep temporal view, within which to understand the emergence of language as coincident with the emergence of a creature whose horizons of knowledge and of sensation are distinctly human.

⁵⁵ Like others of his era, but distinctively contributing to the discourse, Herder often speaks of the “nation” or *Volk*, terms difficult for a modern reader to disengage from their subsequent uses in German nationalist contexts. Yet as one recent critic writes, “Care must be taken...not to confuse the reception of Herder’s views with what he actually said. Above all, blaming Herder for the extreme xenophobic nationalism that was sponsored by embittered German intellectuals after the shock of defeat in the First World War is anachronistic, an instance of what Hans Adler has termed ‘retro-semanticizing’” (Bohm, 277).

⁵⁶ Jürgen Trabant (1990) phrases Herder’s argument about the persistent presence of natural language, or the interaction between these two concepts of language, as a differentiation of types of *hearing*, according to his reading of Herder as “oto-centric” (but *not* phonocentric). On Trabant’s reading of Herder, the human hears simultaneously as animal and as human. He writes, “Der Mensch hört den Anderen als Tier. *In seinem Hören auf den Anderen bleibt er Tier.* Mensch wird er nur durch das Hören der ‘besonnenen Seele’ auf die Welt” (181, my emphasis).

At times, this might be interpreted as an over-correction, but Herder must have seen the effects of this insistence as salutary. Writing of the co-presence of arbitrary *and* natural language in the human creature, he melodramatizes the liquidity of the passions, as a deep reservoir under a civilized veneer: “Unsre künstliche Sprache mag die Sprache der Natur so verdränget, unsre bürgerliche Lebensart und gesellschaftliche Artigkeit mag die Flut und das Meer der Leidenschaft so gedämmt, ausgetrocknet und abgeleitet haben *als man will...*” (6-7, emphasis added). This “als man will” concedes something to artifice, while insisting on a persistent natural source or support (“sap”) of the language of feeling (or nature, or passion — these are not rigorously differentiated). Despite the ever-increasing sophistication or complication of our mediations of nature, despite the way our “bürgerliche Lebensart” and our “gesellschaftliche Artigkeit” have dammed up, dried out, drained or evaporated the flood or ocean of passion, there nevertheless pulses a remainder of its language in every linguistic act and judgment, and its presence is fundamental. In fact, at the same time as the *arbitrary* in language “represses” the *natural*, the natural at times seems to exert a power over the arbitrary as well: “O! die Gesetze der Natur sind mächtiger als alle Konventionen” (99). Although he relies on this primitivist imagery of the latent animal passions, Herder’s linguistics also depends unequivocally on the unknowable event that irreversibly inducted the human species into a different language reality. In this account of language as reciprocally shaped by human and natural influences, it is only possible to understand these two “languages,” or two ways of understanding language, as simultaneous and inextricable.

This returns us to the injunction not to treat the residue of nature in our language as a repository of isolable roots, but rather as something liquid and indistinctly felt: “[Die Reste] sind nicht die eigentlich Wurzeln, aber die Säfte die die Wurzeln der Sprache beleben” (9). Such a formulation claims to indicate not just what is shared, common, or dispersed among human creatures, but metaphorically where humans as a species overlap with the natural world; it makes as if to look back at a time in the past when the creatures who would become human were not yet human, yet Herder is clearly aware of the paradoxical anachronism necessary to play this drama out. To paraphrase one of the claims of the *Abhandlung*, in order to understand the “origin” of language, we already have to know language. There is no returning even speculatively to a prelinguistic human cognition, as writers like Rousseau or Condillac (in Herder’s presentation) would like to, because for Herder language and human cognition are entirely of the same order.⁵⁷ Together they constitute a particular way of knowing, a mode of being in the world, corresponding to a particularly human sphere of life (“Sphäre” or “Wirkungskreise”).

b) Ecological “Invention” and *Analogie*

⁵⁷ This is not to suggest that Condillac and Rousseau are not also at odds, and each is aware of this problem in his own way. In Rousseau for example, the transition is relatively nuanced: “if Men needed speech in order to learn how to think, they needed even more to know how to think in order to find the art of speech” (146). Language and thought are made interdependent, yet the “even more” gives a slight edge to thought. In the separate question of whether society precedes language, Rousseau pits himself against Condillac: “[Condillac] assumes what I question, namely some sort of society already established among the inventors of language” (145) — but then attributes language development to *necessity*, which is incompatible with Herder’s (and later Humboldt’s) notion of the *freedom* structuring the operations of human language.

Man siehet, ich entwickle aus keinen willkürlichen oder gesellschaftlichen Kräften, sondern aus der allgemeinen tierischen Ökonomie...

— Herder, *Abhandlung* (25)

A primary concern for Herder is the assertion of continuity and gradualism against “suddenness” or abruptness, akin to a philosophical attitude preferring to find language’s arbitrariness in its *institution*. This abruptness may emerge narratively, in the midst of mythic accounts, or logically, in the philosophical method itself. Acutely aware of the difficulties surrounding the problem of a well-defined origin, for which theorists only too often conjure up imaginary scenarios (what he refers to as “philosophical novels” or elsewhere — in his 1769 travel journal — *Romanbilder*, referring to Rousseau), Herder strives with the *Abhandlung* to substitute something else in place of simplistic origins. I am not so much interested in insisting that Herder succeeds in *not* offering similar hypothetical scenarios with his treatise, as I am in tracking his philosophical motivations, noting their rhetorical forms, and pointing out how they inflect the study of language toward a different philosophical endeavor. Some of his “disobedience” is, of course, self-fashioning.

The Academy had posed the first part of their Prize question: “Haben die Menschen, ihren Naturfähigkeiten überlassen, sich selbst Sprache erfinden können?” The phrasing demonstrates transparently that a respondent will be in essence arguing with the hypothesis of a divine origin of language, famously defended shortly before by Johann Peter Süssmilch in an Academy treatise (1756, published in 1766). As opposed as Herder is to this position, he also wants to avoid a reductive empiricist explanation for linguistic origin, which places him at odds in particular with the work of Condillac (but also Academy member Maupertuis). In order to position both Condillac’s and Süssmilch’s arguments as flawed in the same respect — because of the arbitrary suddenness with which they conjure language out of nothing, or out of not enough — Herder focuses on blurring and blending the typical terminology, substituting processes and gradations for objects and essences. In order to do this, he takes issue with each of the critical terms set out by the question: *Mensch, Natur, Fähigkeit, Sprache, Erfinden*. “Sprache” receives several importantly distinct definitions, as we have seen. “Mensch” and “Natur” are drawn much closer, until their edges blur, and they overlap — the human unable to leave behind nature, having then much in common with the rest of the natural world. The human linguistic “Fähigkeit” is cast under a cloud of suspicion, as an unspecified and unquestioned “qualitas occulta.”⁵⁸ Finally, if “Erfinden” the word still appears in the essay, any hint of the notion of individual, intentional *invention* is rejected outright. In fact, what Herder mischievously characterizes as his own insubordination amounts to the rejection of precisely this kind of mythic invention.

Because of its direct bearing on assumptions about origin, the term “Erfinden” is a special target. Subtle rhetorical detours map out alternatives to sudden, out-and-out

⁵⁸ The modern reader may find it difficult not to compare Herder’s criticism with objections to Chomsky’s genetic but unlocate-able and apparently ahistorical “language faculty.” Interestingly, Chomsky integrates Herder (and even more thoroughly, Humboldt) into his controversial historiographical study *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966), 13-15. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address Chomsky’s short work, but his translation of the terms of 18th century linguistics into the confrontation between behaviorism and universal grammar in the mid-twentieth century is useful as a cautionary tale for my own study, attempting to draft as it does selectively from intellectual pasts to contemporary debates.

language discovery or naming. The word loses its connotation of a controlling consciousness, for example in passives, as when the cognitive procedure of language implies that, within the species, language “*is invented*” (“ist erfunden,” 34); or in nominals and infinitives, as when this procedure is dramatized as taking place within a dynamic complex of natural laws, e.g. “The *invention* of language is as natural to him, as being human is” (“*Erfindung der Sprache* ist ihm also so natürlich, als er ein Mensch ist!” 32), or “everything *in the inventing*” (“immer im Fortschritte, im Gange, nichts Erfundnes, wie der Bau einer Zelle, sondern *alles im Erfinden*, im Fortwürken, strebend,” 115). To imagine that language can be invented is, almost unconsciously, to imagine it as a fully instrumentalized possession, planned, moldable, designed and fit for achieving specific and intended ends. Herder shifts the term, such that the mental activity that would come to be called language more or less occurred to us, marking a vital transition into a new species reality, transforming us into a new “us,” providing the very texture of what came to be called human nature.⁵⁹

“Schon als Tier hat der Mensch Sprache”: Herder’s famous first sentence is a simple yet strangely unparseable phrase, a distillation of the problem of origins whose disconcerting tensions are bluntly contained by the expression, yet remain subtly irresolvable within the frame drawn by its terms. What lies between the human and animal spheres? What temporal horizons are generated by this phrase — is it a mythic narrative of phylogenesis, describing the chronological transition from pre- or non-human to human? Or does it rather describe an ontogenetic state, saying: “Even when considered only in its creaturely, bodily, non-rational functions and desires, the human creature is still always, or already, linguistic”? In either case, we might say that the simplicity of its form charms us into suspending assumptions about the problems as posed, sweeping past the boundaries it blurs. As its opening phrase, the sentence contains Herder’s argument’s own self-conscious origin: Already as animal, the human has language. But what sort of language? Not human language (or are we meant to think: not *yet* human language?). Then why not just say: animals also *have language*? But Herder is not speaking of animals, only of humans, or he speaks only of what appears to lie outside human ken as a way of expanding our awareness of the way the human sphere, for all its self-imposed distinctiveness, is enmeshed in an environment. To express this another way, the thought experiments throughout Herder’s *Abhandlung* are intended to show that perhaps we *could* have developed in untold alternate shapes, but in order to become what we *have* become, the only path was the one we took.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Instructive in this regard is his metaphor of language as an embryo, simply knowing when it is time to be born (82). Humboldt will adapt this metaphor into language as the spark sleeping in a rock, which once “awoken” will not be put out again. This adaptation aligns language with technology, as opposed to Herder’s version, in which it remains a factor woven into the fibers of physiological and cognitive species genesis.

⁶⁰ Illustrating this principle throughout the *Abhandlung* is a curious series of imaginary monsters, against whose image we are meant to become more visible to ourselves (paradoxically, or ecologically, by merging us *with* our background). Thus the opening sentence works by the same logic with which he later finds it rhetorically necessary to imagine two speculative animals, two fascinating monstrosities, one whose primary sense is tactile, and one that is “all eye” (“ein Geschöpf, ganz Auge” [58]), in order to demonstrate the proposal that human language is developmentally defined by the intermediary or “middle” sense of hearing. Or again, later in the essay when he points to the likelihood of the common origins of human language (mono- versus polygenesis), his logic derives from the argument that if tribes or nations had arrived independently at the “invention” of language, they would be as different as inhabitants of different

This path is compacted in Herder's own appealing origin myth of the first appearance of *Merkmale* — some might say, the “hypothesis” he claims not to have given. As it is one of the best remembered sequences of the essay, it requires only a brief retelling. The myth hinges on the encounter where a single proto-human consciousness is confronted with an object's or entity's sound, and pauses reflectively over it in order to grasp it: in this case, a sheep's bleating. The suspended attention tied to this encounter becomes the genesis of *Besonnenheit* or reflection, and within this stage the emergence into human language and humanity simultaneously take place (accompanied by all the weakening and empowerment of the transition). The object in nature is thereafter recognized by its characteristic sound — or as this consciousness climactically cries, “Ha! You are the one who bleats!” (“Ha! Du bist das Blökende!”). This recognition creates a *Merkmal*, a distinctive mark or “Wort der Seele,” which is both prompted by and produces reflection.

In deviating from comparable scenes — particularly from Rousseau's in the *Second Discourse*, and Condillac's in his *Essai* — Herder's semiotic *Urszene* is notable in its effort to hone in on a psychic alteration that is instantly generalized as the communal condition within the life-sphere of a species. (Then why, we could ask, does he confront this incipient human with a sheep, suggesting a shepherd in the pastoral vale? Must this be, for Herder, a confrontation between a non-human and a human creature? Are we meant to view the sheep as representative of “nature” more broadly?) Herder's phenomenology of hearing is a psychic event at least half passive, an act of listening and noticing, and occurs apparently without an intervening concept, certainly without deliberate choice or intention; and yet, with ambient materials, it creates something anew.⁶¹ In seeking to account cognitively for an origin on a timescale not registered by positive intention, Herder distracts us from his scene's contradictions: while leading us *away* from the simplifying hypothetical origins of previous theories, he now offers detractors an originary scene that seems quite as simple. But perhaps this is necessary in order to plot the *Willkürlichkeit* of language production in a new light.

In between arguing against two language theories both not *human* enough — one against origins too material (represented in Condillac), the other against origins too divine (represented in Süssmilch) — Herder describes how this anthropology of language is to take place, how a form of life necessary to the emergence of language might have looked. He begins with an extended description of the “animal sphere” or circle, which he describes as expanded or contracted according to the intensity of its sensuous fixations: the weaker and more varied its sensuous attachment to its environment, the more diverse its attentiveness to surrounding objects. The human sphere of activity (*Wirkungskreise*) is so much more diverse than any other creature, the human soul's powers so distracted,

planets placed side by side, “als vielleicht die Einwohner des Saturns und der Erde” Perhaps this science fiction-like rhetorical move is in line with Wittgenstein's thought experiment in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him.” (Elsewhere, Herder makes reference to “unnatural” creatures born of false theories: the theory of language origin as imitation of birdsong yields “ein Ungeheuer, eine menschliche Nachtigall” [52])

⁶¹ Trabant (2009) has emphasized that in addition to diverting the Western epistemological bias toward “seeing and grasping,” Herder focuses on the ear, and on the linguistic consciousness's correspondingly non-aggressive attitude. Furthermore, in addition to creating a *Merkmal*, Trabant astutely points out that this linguistic encounter equally creates a “you,” the *Du* of “Du bist das Blöckende!” In its sociality — indeed, here its interspecies sociality — linguistic creation bears the stamp of its ecological emergence.

spread so wide, that the human relation to the world is necessarily of a very different kind. Human language cannot be a *Tiersprache*. Animals with narrower, more biologically specified horizons maintain a “dark, felt understanding” (“ein dunkles sinnliches Einverständnis”); they therefore have less need for language (but not therefore *none*). “Mit dem Menschen” however “ändert sich die Szene ganz,” in the divided attention and distracted desires of the human sphere, the human drives, the work and form of attention; “dark” inarticulate species-feeling is “not *his* language” (but not therefore eradicated from human experience). Hence no animal language suits the needs of the human, the “most orphaned child of nature”; “es müssen statt der Instinkte andre verborgne Kräfte in ihm schlafen!” For Herder, the difference between species, hence between languages, is not in quantity, not in levels of more or less, but in *kind* (25). “Language is as essential to the human species as — being human is.” (One could ask: why, then, does the rest of nature merge into *one* “kind” of language, the “language of nature”?) So Herder claims to have shown that he reasons not from “arbitrary or social capacities, but rather from the overall animal economy,” since the arbitrary or rational character of social relations must, for Herder, *not precede language* in order to be the specific domain of humans. Such facts of human experience must, he concludes, have developed in tandem. Arbitrariness had to come about in a natural setting.

Language, in this account, is just as *bodily* as it is rational: “Vernunft” for Herder is “no divided, singly-operating faculty, but rather a tendency of *all* faculties characteristic of the species” (29). He is particularly explicit about the impossibility of pursuing a language *capacity*, as though such a complicated abstraction were given or achieved quickly, hence he dismisses the frequent recourse in the literature he opposes to empty, pure or unidentified “qualities,” and that critical spook, the word ‘faculty’, capacity or ability (“Gespenst von Worte ‘Fähigkeit’” [39]) which appears to give no acknowledgment that it must have developed somehow. Herder also uses the term *Vernunftmässigkeit*, appropriateness to reason, in connection with our own ‘bodily organization’ (“körperliche Organisation”); asking “wo ist da bloße Fähigkeit?” (31), he alludes instead to a feature of the human mind which alters shape and *forms*, but does not itself reside *in* forms, is not a pure container but rather a tendency to shape (30).

Throughout this redefinition of terms, in the course of which Herder gradually assembles the materials needed to redefine language origin, he insists he is committing no uncritical argumentative leap (“Sprung”): “Ich gebe dem Menschen nicht gleich plötzlich neue Kräfte, keine sprachschaffende Fähigkeit wie eine willkürliche *qualitas occulta*” (24). Here, his effort is to avoid skipping steps, to avoid analysis that is too strict in separating the ‘threads’ of nature’s web (according to the precept taken over by Leibniz, “*natura non facit saltus*”). The new capability the human exercises is provided for, in Herder’s scenario, by its physical surroundings, its exceptional characteristics, above all by its history and materials. His words for this include “tierischen Ökonomie” (25), “körperliche Organisation” (26), “die ganzen Analogie seiner Natur” (54), and “der ganzen Haushaltung des menschlichen Geschlechts” (124): this terminology makes it especially clear that Herder is unwilling to segregate human faculties, what he refers to as sensory, reflective and voluntary features of human nature, since the “Kraft des Denkens” is inextricable from the “Organisation der Körpers,” locked together under the name of (what Herder calls) reason: “Man nenne diese ganze Disposition seiner Kräfte, wie man wolle, *Verstand, Vernunft, Besinnung* usw... Es ist die *ganze Einrichtung aller menschlichen Kräfte; die ganze Haushaltung seiner sinnlichen und erkennenden, seiner*

erkennenden und wollenden Natur” (26). The sustained attempt to avoid a leap in accounting for our linguistic nature, to foster an attitude keyed in to the manifold context surrounding language’s emergence, is both located firmly in a kind of necessary universal origin of humankind, and yet as firmly denied a limiting boundary line from which to measure an absolute or definite distance: “wo will man sagen: hier fing die menschliche Seele zu würken an, aber eher nicht?” (79). As in the treatise’s opening gambit, we find in this phrasing the persistent repudiation of a simplistic notion of “origin.”

c) Inexpressible Origins

Was sich bloß durchs dunkle Gefühl empfinden läßt, ist keines Worts für uns fähig, weil es keines deutlichen Merkmals fähig ist. Die Basis der Menschheit ist also, wenn wir von willkürlicher Sprache reden, unaussprechlich.⁶²
—Herder, *Abhandlung* (85)

Herder’s use of paradox accommodates the difficulties of recognizing several simultaneous contradictory viewpoints. I have been interested in suggesting that one reason Herder is able to assimilate multiple viewpoints into what appear at the same time to be scrupulous, or systematic, arguments is that he insists on observing language as simultaneously active in more than one “temporality” (for example, the natural and the human),⁶³ or rather, he insists upon our considering language within multiple temporal frames, in order to understand its operations, uses, and deviations with a richer notion of what it constrains or compels and what it makes possible. The formulas or expressions generated from this conceptual layering effect maintain a self-contradictory tension, the most striking example being Herder’s opening sentence, a dutifully disobedient answer to the Academy’s question as posed. This kind of paradox is one way of summing up Herder’s solution to the problem of origins.

As the quotation above indicates, origin in the sense of a “Basis der Menschheit” understood through arbitrary language has, for Herder, an “inexpressible” ground. To understand his position, we can return briefly to the two-pronged rejection of non-human origins, through the convenient caricatures of Condillac and Süssmilch. As noted already, Herder deftly objects to the theories of both on the same grounds: that they rely on a fully-formed rational subject, to whose life-form language is then simply appended. His objections to Condillac’s myth of language origin also focus on the primitivist argument that passionate cries are an early form of language, a relatively common position in the history of language origin speculation (later referred to as the “pooh-pooh” theory, a term

⁶² “We cannot possibly have a word for what is felt only through dark sense, since it is impossible to find for it a meaningful distinctive mark. The basis [base or ground] of humanity is therefore, if we are speaking of *arbitrary* language, inexpressible.”

⁶³ Rousseau, in the *Second Discourse*, turns the link between the non-linguistic and the linguistic creature into a *temporal* abyss — to “cross the immense distance” (146) between no language and language. He stretched the timeline of formation: “If one considers how many ideas we owe to the use of speech; How much Grammar exercises and facilitates the operations of the Mind; if one thinks about the inconceivable efforts and the infinite time the first invention of Languages must have cost... then one can judge how many thousands of Centuries would have been required for the successive development in the human Mind of the Operations of which it was capable” (144). Referring to theorists unaccustomed to considering this unthinkable scope, he later writes, “I beg them to reflect on how much time” successive developments must have taken (149).

with a Victorian ring coined by Max Müller in the nineteenth century). Condillac's theory is more complex, and involves gesture as well (or the "language of action"), but *pace* Aarsleff, this complexity doesn't exhaust or neutralize Herder's objections, which have to do with the impoverished conception of an origin of any kind following from Condillac's empiricist premises. Herder affects to find Condillac's theory absurd, and contradicted by direct evidence: animals do not use reason, do not use their sounds "with intention," hence the animal languages, languages of feeling, could never *become* "menschliche, willkürliche Sprache" (17). He rejects as ridiculous the mythic hypothesis at the center of Condillac's account, in which two children in a desert — those poor shipwrecked abstractions, abandoned as if from some tale of romance — develop a language out of urgent, intuitive cries.

Herder's originality is made strikingly clear, I think, in this critique: for Herder, it might be that much else in Condillac's materialist theory of semiotic genesis is useful or correct, and even that rational discourse and conceptual meaning build from and are influenced by sense-data, but the whole theoretical basis of Condillac's theory of the development of signs and the history of cognitive function is compromised by the weakness of the hypothesis of origins, which ignores the starkly artificial incongruity of environmental factors in its narrative of origin. (Herder's own staged pastoral encounter, between the human and the sheep, presents a pointed contrast to this scene, by making the environment itself speak.) They are supposed, by Condillac, to have a role in choosing which ideas are linked to which sounds or gestures, and this supposition is "self-contradictory," "unnatural": in Condillac's desert vision, human sociality ("Kommerz") and reflective reason emerge suddenly, as if fully formed, out of instinctual behavior. Herder is comically scandalized — but also, I think, genuinely distressed — by the preposterousness of the claims: "Davon begreife ich nichts," he writes repeatedly after quoting from Condillac. Closing this line of thought, he reveals that the thread Condillac's argument dangles by is hanging, in fact, from nothing: "Kurz, es entstanden Worte, weil Worte dawaren, ehe sie dawaren — mich dünkt, es lohnt nicht den Faden unsres Erklärers weiter zu verfolgen, da er doch — an nichts geknüpft ist" (18). Knowing how important Herder's threads are, this is about as damning a dismissal as he can be expected to give.

The poverty of Condillac's explanation of origin lies in its assumption that it can throw light where light can't go (not just light, but the hot desert sun of his artificial scenario, as though the French *siècle des Lumières* were here intensified with reason's magnifying lens). This explanation depends on an already-present language (the mediating concepts that compose reason and social relations), in order for words (arbitrary linguistic signs) to have appeared. This amounts to an *unacknowledged* paradox, which Herder acknowledges and reorients. Instead of shining a light on origin, he casts it half in light and half in darkness — in part the effect of his move away from language and representation through visual means, toward the sense of hearing; and though philosophies of "imagination" to come would seem to revert to emphasis on the visual, this *darkness* would still become a well of inspiration to subsequent generations of romantics.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ For discussion of Herder's "oto-centricity," see Trabant (1990), 182-4. It is tempting to read Herder's final pointed epithet "unsres Erklärers" here as symptomatic of a denunciation of the Enlightenment more broadly; and it is true that Herder preserves, and believes strongly in, the necessity of a fundamental

So much for a materialism that sets human language exactly on a level with animal language, with languages of feeling or nature (strands not here further differentiated). Herder's next object for critique is the well established view of divinely derived language, current in the Academy in Süssmilch's version. Süssmilch presents for Herder a far more vulnerable target, and he makes the most of his naïveté, claiming that the arguments of his opponent are their own most crippling defects, and will rather prove Herder's own case (35). He calls the form of Süssmilch's argument an "ewigen Kreisel"; "Ohne Sprache hat der Mensch keine Vernunft und ohne Vernunft keine Sprache... Er soll also Sprache haben, ehe er sie hat und haben kann?" Once again, the point of contention is the idea that a creature we would recognize as human could have existed before its language had developed, then subsequently been the recipient of this divine gift. ("Ein Wesen ohne den mindesten Gebrauch der Vernunft — und doch Mensch!" [38]) Among other things, Herder objects to the analogy between language as divine gift, and parental pedagogy, reminding us that infants are not passive recipients, but contribute creatively or "invent" language concurrently as they learn: "Eltern lehren die Kinder nie Sprache, ohne daß diese nicht immer selbst mit erfänden" (37).⁶⁵ According to Herder, Süssmilch's account of an origin hides behind the word "Vernunftfähigkeit," that same "ghostly" term that is a renunciation of the complexities of language's mystery, constituting more a failure of curiosity than an explanation.⁶⁶

The paradox of the inexpressibility of arbitrary linguistic origins is further elaborated in a perhaps broader, apparently timeless paradox, that of the simultaneous diversity and unanimity of human language, the most familiar exposition of which is found in the Babel story. In his account of the excess and diversity of languages, indeed the internal diversity of language or its self-difference, Herder nevertheless insists on a common basis for understanding among the human species, implied through linguistic monogenesis. Diversity is guaranteed by the force of differentiation native to language

darkness. But it is also true that much of Condillac's tradition is formative for Herder, and indeed the concession to Condillac's "gute Anmerkungen" is a token of the appreciation for insights obviously related to Herder's own complex, more peculiar and poetical empiricism. However, Condillac's insights do not speak to the Prize question at hand, so that while Herder is on the one hand indebted to Condillac's tradition of thought, he can still claim that with regard to the question of linguistic origins, his contributions are ineffectual, indeed inapplicable ("zu unserm Zwecke nichts tun" 18).

⁶⁵ Elsewhere, the mutual exchange in language learning changes shape, but equally emphasizes that language's activity resides not in but *between* speakers: "Wer lernt nicht, indem er lehret?" (101). This is also a central question for Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, from the Augustinian opening onward, and for Stanley Cavell's interpretations of it. But cf. Formigari, on the opportunism of Wittgenstein's Augustine; the sentence which follows his quotation significantly complicates its role in the *Investigations*: "Thus I learned to express my needs to the people among whom I lived, and they made their wishes known to me; and I *waded deeper into the stormy world of human life*" (42, emphasis added). This leads Formigari to claim that Augustine's passage, rather than exemplar of a referential theory, "can better be read as a manifesto of a pragmatic theory of language learning" (42). With quite a different emphasis, this question of childhood language learning is precisely how both Coleridge and Wordsworth, in early poems, articulate the linguistic debt of infants to their "natural" surroundings (which Coleridge's naming his son Derwent, after the river, seems meant to index).

⁶⁶ It may seem hypocritical of Herder to object so strenuously to paradox in the arguments of others, when his tolerance of it in his own narrative is so blatant, when his own paradoxes are sustained with such elegance. But as I've noted above, the *acknowledgment* of the paradox seems to be in important aspect of his own attitude toward the origin of language in this essay.

formation (hence language change); declaring this as a “natural law” leads Herder to his own reading of the Tower of Babel.⁶⁷

Characteristically (and rather remarkably, if we remember that Herder was a preacher), Herder specifically refuses to give this Biblical account any primacy of validity — though, as he is also anxious to point out, without therefore robbing theology of its power and scope — saying he considers it only as a “poetic fragment from the archaeology of the history of a people,” citing it “only as a poem.” The diversity of languages, he writes, is due to disunity among a group with a common goal, and is no evidence for differences in kind among the distinct peoples, or language communities, composing the human species. Herder’s point is above all that language diversity does not provide evidence that language is other than a *natural and human* development, and that we do not need etymological histories or language family trees to account for the fact of diversity in language or to show how nations have split apart, traveled far afield, become alienated from one another. Language is necessarily, of its nature and in its origins, diverse, but by the same token in its basis is not therefore any less of a characteristic held common.

Perhaps more remarkable still, Herder suggests this myth of language’s *heterogeneity*, its inherent difference, coincides with its origins. The passage leaves a vivid impression of his tolerance, his taste, for paradox. Herder reads the building of the tower itself, this common project, as both a collective striving and a disunification, what unites a population and at the same time what guarantees its fragmentation. For Herder, the myth of Babel shows how the notion of a common origin need not exclude diversity, indeed that the two are mutually determining. (It can hardly be inconsequential that the Babel myth is specifically an instance in which God narratively intervenes, and is used to explain a feature of linguistic reality etymologically, though Herder leaves both of these ‘details’ out.)

In distinction from traditions that long for a universal, transparent or perfected language, whether Adamic and originary, gradually improved for an ever more rational society, or designed for future utopia, Herder not only prizes this disunity and confusion of language, but his theoretical stance asks us to take language itself as necessarily a process of differentiation, as inescapably concurrent with the tendency toward individuality inherent in the human attitude. (This can be seen in minute scale in Herder’s *Merkmal*, the differentiating mark or distinguishing delineation of an object from its background). The project of the Tower of Babel, described as a forestalling of differentiation (“lest we be scattered”), is a non-starter, since language’s consolidation is internally a scattering and confounding. This is a myth, then, that holds difference in common.

In his account of the tradition of German *Populärphilosophie*, John Zammito reminds us of the importance of the metaphor of “bringing philosophy down to earth” in eighteenth-century philosophy which sought (like Francis Bacon, in an earlier era) to differentiate itself from school or metaphysical discourse (the “down to earth” phrase is perhaps drawn from Locke, and reverberates through Herder’s work). Herder reminds us

⁶⁷ Trabant (2009) points out that the entire second section of Herder’s treatise — unaccountably left out of the canonical 1966 English translation, by Alexander Gode — is organized in four parts, each implicitly addressing one of four Biblical passages on language: the *lingua Adamica*, conversation between Adam and Eve, the Babel story, and Pentecost (130).

that every Babel-like project must, under its own sway, be *literally* brought down to earth. For Herder, the relation between earth and its diverse linguistic inhabitants is in some radical sense continuous, even as it is continuously transforming: "...so wird auch seine Sprache Sprache der Erde...die Sprache wird ein Proteus auf der runden Oberfläche der Erde" (107). Yet rather than implying that language must be the fixed product with its origins rooted in a bounded territory possessed by a native population, this phrasing implies that linguistic diversity is determined by the 'deep' natural history of its development, its differences expressed not through definable species or racial distinction (since language guarantees precisely what a group or species shares), but rather distributed at every level or register of articulation. The nature of this inarticulate continuity between environment and inhabitant is the project of the linguistic ecology I attribute to Herder, as well as to those who follow him and inherit, assume, or grapple with his work.

III. Humboldt's Herder: Language as "Fashioned Organism"

...the original *invention of language*...[is] a situation that we do not know about, but only presuppose as a necessary hypothesis.

— Humboldt, *Verschiedenheit* (76)

It is no empty play upon words if we speak of language as arising in autonomy solely from itself and divinely free, but of languages as bound and dependent on the nations to which they belong.

— Humboldt, *Verschiedenheit* (24)

It is hardly controversial to claim Wilhelm von Humboldt as one of Herder's interpreters. Yet in moving from Herder to Humboldt, I want to give further specificity to the frequent claim that Humboldt is Herder's successor. Humboldt's suggestive legacy for language theory is so exactly paradoxical it has been claimed as a precursor to two extremes of twentieth century language philosophy: on the one hand, to the popular caricature of linguistic relativity embodied in the "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis," and on the other, to Chomsky's hypothesis of infinite creative capacity predicated on an innate language faculty (the "language acquisition device" that generates forms from a universal grammar).⁶⁸ In the first epigraph above, this paradox is expressed as the free autonomy of "language," and the dependent specificity of "languages." The difficulty of articulating this tension narratively is demonstrated by Humboldt's care in framing language origin as an unknowable necessity. While we should doubtless hear Kant at such moments, these paradoxes are in part a testament to Humboldt's largely unacknowledged debt to Kant's student, Herder (unacknowledged, that is, by Humboldt himself), and specifically to exactly those features of Herder's language philosophy that have been outlined above, leading toward the rediscovery of linguistic process within linguistic form.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See, e.g., Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*; Leavitt, *Linguistic Relativities*.

⁶⁹ The editor of Humboldt's *Gesammelte Schriften* remarks on this odd absence of acknowledgment of any special debt to Herder. At the time Humboldt was writing, Herder was *persona non grata* in the intellectual community, largely for his public stand against the 'critical' Kant, embarrassing even to those who, like Goethe, were sympathetic. When Humboldt speaks of Herder (and there are only two entries in the bibliography to his collected writings), it is to commend his rhetorical grandeur; yet there is a critical tone to this honor, and he compares Herder's conversational style unfavorably with Schiller's.

Through Herder's *Abhandlung*, we followed a path emphasizing a deliberate attempt at a transition from what seemed a damagingly and painfully simplistic discourse of origin, to a complex ecology of the linguistic dimension of human species-being. This path connected the dots from Herder's disciplinary "disobedience," to his resistance against what he calls *Willkürlichkeit* in the assumed myths of language formation, to a closer examination of linguistic origin within a temporally and physically broader context, to the acknowledgment of the structure of paradox that lies at the heart of the question of language formation. Humboldt absorbs this entire conceptual transition, condensing it into (unattributed) allusions to Herder's treatment of language origin (as in: "the first word already announces and implies the whole of language"). Conjuring the paradox Herder builds, Humboldt however displaces Herder's broad natural historical sweep into a presumed, but inaccessible, beyond. Where in Herder the linguistic "basis of humanity" cannot be articulated through human — arbitrary — language ("ist, wenn wir von willkürliche Sprache reden, unaussprechlich"), still its 'other side' can be sensed in the non-rational world around and within us; whereas in Humboldt, the study of language is firmly restricted by language's coincidence with reason, reflection, human cognitive and communicative activity. The limits are the same, but Herder would like us to remember albeit dimly that there is a world outside those limits, while Humboldt's project restricts attention to the territory they delineate.

Bearing this difference in mind, I want to show briefly in what follows how Humboldt adopts 1) Herder's reliance on paradox to explain language origin, though what Herder imagines as darkly felt, becomes in Humboldt more strictly unknowable; 2) Herder's attempt to reform the blunt instrument of *Willkürlichkeit*; 3) Herder's concept of *analogy*, although its force is redirected from physiological composition to the processes inherent in language's autonomous ("selbstständig") change; and 4) Herder's notion of language's *continuous formation*, although Herder's natural, corporeal ecology is now absorbed by social exchange, until in Humboldt's insistence on language as an "organic" entity, "nature" becomes more self-consciously figurative. I will not present these continuities so schematically, but each of these borrowings is evident as we move toward several examples of Humboldt's reliance on natural imagery to figuratively represent language's simultaneous "hardness" or objectivity and "softness" or mutability.

In a striking example of the paradox of origins from an 1820 Academy address, Humboldt offers first an intimation of innateness: "Language could not have been invented if its type [Typus] were not already in place in the human mind. In order for the human truly to understand even one single word... language as a whole and in context had already to lie within";⁷⁰ yet scarcely three sentences later, we find what seems to be a pronouncement of the flexibility and diversity, in fact the organic dynamism of this "type": first, as regards the "inseparability of human consciousness, human language, and the nature of the reasoning act," and then in the ensuing claim that

one must not however imagine language as some preformed given [fertig Gegebenes]... It arises necessarily from the human itself, and also of course only bit by bit, but in such a way that its organism [Organismus] by no means lies as a lifeless mass [tote Masse] in the dark reaches of the soul, but rather determines the functions of thought as would a law, hence the first word already announces and implies the whole of language. (44-5)

⁷⁰ The lecture's title was "Über das Vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung."

This may seem an irreconcilable contradiction, and it is thanks to such paradoxical expressions that we read about the uncharacterizable plenty or “embarrassment” of Humboldt’s thought and reception.⁷¹ What I want to suggest, and what should be clear enough to close readers of Herder who have recognized the extent of his influence on Humboldt, is that this embarrassment is a consequence of a very principled and precise formulation of paradox that underlies Humboldt’s adapted version of Herder’s conception of language, closely related to the problem of origins. If ‘relativity’ supports diversity, as we saw in Herder, this is for Humboldt no invalidation of the simultaneous sameness or consistency of languages, and this apparent human universality can look like innateness — that is, something “already in place” as the first word is spoken, though not somehow a pre-prepared “given.” However, we may also understand this sameness or unanimity (“the work of all humankind”) as an expression of the specific objectivity, what we might call the public sociality, of language.⁷²

Because it concentrates what joins their projects into a single term, the animus of both Herder and Humboldt toward overreliance on linguistic “arbitrariness” highlights the stakes of their intellectual kinship. Humboldt’s resistance to *Willkür* as a constitutive element of language is deeply resonant with, but also at times tellingly different from Herder’s. In the short text “Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken” (1801-2), Humboldt describes the trouble with arbitrariness in the context of an improved systematic practice of etymology. In this early fragment, even before it is applied to language, the word “arbitrary” is marked as negative: Humboldt suggests that the reason “so many find etymology an arbitrary and fruitless science” can be attributed to the insufficient assumptions and practices that guide philologists. For Humboldt as for Herder, the *Willkür* attributed to sign relations seems to infect the logic of the would-be linguist: in the voluntarist sense of willfulness, it clings to certain irresponsible scholarly practices, and leads to unscientific or selective and uneven results. (One could choose here to catch a glimpse of Herder’s suspicion of “cold,” asocial armchair philosophy.) Such arbitrariness in scholarly procedure insinuates itself into its scientific object through accidental or happenstance changes in language’s development, or in what Humboldt oddly enough calls the “Gedankengang der Sprachfinder”:

Hätte auf diesen Gedankengang der Zufall, die Blinde Willkür, oder die besondre Eigentümlichkeit jedes Sprechenden einen sehr großen Einfluß gehabt, so wäre auch der Versuch eines solchen Unternehmens eitel. Allein da die Sprache das Bedürfnis und das

⁷¹ Morpurgo-Davies, 98. Since Humboldt represents for some historians a sort of bridge between the philosophical speculation on language of the eighteenth century, and the intellectual practice legitimized by the gradual institution of a scientific discipline, a discursive solidification, of linguistics in the 19th century, it would also be interesting to inquire what, if anything, the cause of “embarrassment” in this philosophically sophisticated language theory has to do with *romanticism*.

⁷² What I have been calling the “paradox of origins” also divides linguistic philosophies, as Formigari explains, into a conflict between two opposed extremes (the “empiricist” and “rationalist” approaches), generally exaggerated for heuristic purposes: “A philosophical theory of language has to keep the two aspects of the problem together. In other words, it must explain semantic arbitrariness without denying the universality of the mechanisms governing the logic of language, describe the multiplicity of languages without denying the unity of language, distinguish between the accidental aspects of learning and the results of language instinct. In short, it has to keep history and nature together” (40). This mediating position, stated in this diplomatic form (and linked to the Epicurean tradition), helps to understand the efforts, and the theoretical juncture, of Herder and Humboldt.

Werk des ganzen Menschengeschlechts war, so muß in demselben eine gewisse
Allgemeinheit und Klarheit liegen. (14)

As the voluntarism lodged in the concept of “Willkür” is denounced as a force in the formation of linguistic ideas, “Erfinder” counterintuitively comes to express the *opposite* of intentional invention. Each speaker is, in this formulation, a language inventor in as much as she is a creature of language, and all collaborate on the joint project of language (the phrasing is reminiscent of the Lucretian quotation with which we began, in which individual influence or *Eigentümlichkeit* is rejected in favor of collective creativity). This shared work is in fact what guarantees the possibility of a systematic pursuit of etymology. Humboldt argues that the development of language occurs by a kind of “analogy,” a sort of socially responsive linguistic consistency that is produced out of forms and associations that accrue among a community of speakers. In succeeding generations of linguists, this naturalized law of language change would focus on phonology (e.g., Grimm’s Law); but, generally speaking, Humboldt does not restrict the application of the laws of analogy, claiming its force may rather be analyzed among *all* elements of language.

Humboldt’s rejection of arbitrariness at such moments apparently flirts with more classically ‘naïve’ forms of naturalism. In the *Baskenfragment*, for example, he has earlier stipulated that the task of the etymologist is to find out “the laws of analogy between the sounds and the meanings of words” (14). But even this apparent simplification of “natural” analogy proves, if we read Humboldt carefully, not to lead merely to a correspondence theory of “sound symbolism” (classically posed in the idea of onomatopoeia-as-language-origin), since in a later work he will classify these “laws of analogy” into three types, the last of which has no preference for a semantic essence or even particular associations carried in individual sounds (though he maintains that sound clusters and their associations do attract semantic forms to group in particular patterns).⁷³ The passage above, however, deals more broadly with the way that the linguist’s notion of “blinde Willkür” violates the laws of analogy, ignoring language’s systematic consistency or autonomy, which Humboldt regularly pictures through metaphors drawn from the natural world.⁷⁴ In then describing how this consistency is produced, he proceeds, in a deeply Herderian vein, to its constant formation, by contextualizing arbitrariness within a particular form of life: “Man erfand nicht willkürlichen Zeichen, um ein äußeres Bedürfnis zu befriedigen, sondern aus dem innern Bedürfnis, Mensch d. h. ein anschauendes und denkendes Wesen zu sein... als dem Resultat der menschlichen

⁷³ See *Verschiedenheit*, 73-4; Humboldt says of the last sort, that in the naturally-occurring process that causes words of similar concepts to “gather,” as it were, around similar sounds, “there is no regard here to the character inherent in these sounds themselves” (74).

⁷⁴ We can see just how slippery ‘arbitrariness’ really is, when we note how similar Humboldt’s view is to Saussure’s — as Müller-Vollmer demonstrates. Saussure insists on the fundamentally arbitrary nature of linguistic signs, in order to counteract the tendency to view ‘natural’ relationships too simply or unscientifically (e.g., through onomatopoeia). Humboldt insists that seeing *beyond* the arbitrariness of signs will guarantee a scientific basis for linguistics, the move “to view language less and less as arbitrary signs” (53). In both cases, a historically informed systematicity is promised; but Humboldt takes in more territory, requiring more of human thought and behavior to be considered ‘language’, and refusing the ease with which the so-called transfer model of communication becomes standard. Saussure, we could say, further shrinks the field within which linguistics can ‘properly’ be practiced, so that arbitrariness reigns in the non-discursive no-place of *langue*.

Denk- und Empfindungsgesetze, entwickelte man notwendig nach Analogie derselben Gesetze neue und abermals neue.” This is the first time “willkürlich” has been used in this text to describe signs, and like Herder, Humboldt plots what he in passing acknowledges as invented, arbitrary signs, into the milieu of analogical laws internal to the thinking and feeling creature. Nothing like a naturalism that tries to anchor linguistic origins in the naming of essences or in empirical encounters, this process of invention occurs “neue und abermals neue,” continuously anew.

Giving his use of the term a decisive final naturalizing context, Humboldt then shows how what first appears as an arbitrary linguistic sign is, through use, likened or assimilated through communicative traffic to the analogy of its linguistic interpreters and social environment. Through this discursive leveling process, that is to say in the “tägliche Übung” which constitutes language’s development, “das scheinbar Willkürliche” is gradually laid aside; a language comes constantly in this manner into being as the communal product (“gemeinschaftliche Resultat”) of its speakers’ communicative efforts (16). It is striking that even when acknowledging what seems willfully arbitrary in language, Humboldt is striving with every rhetorical muscle to overcome it.

But in what sense is this daily practice or communal effort something *natural*, according to Humboldt? We have mentioned Humboldt’s recourse to natural metaphors, suggesting that language obeys dynamic laws akin to those of nature, but it is also important to bear in mind his insistence upon the *metaphorical* force of his images, since their proper sphere remains human. This shrinking of language’s frame distinctively alters the picture Herder drew of language: in Humboldt, the line between human nature and *other* nature is not crossed. While Herder places *menschliche Natur* within the context of a broader cosmic or natural history, invoking a natural language alongside human language, Humboldt’s “human nature” abides *within* the (equally Herderian) concept of an encompassing logic of analogy according to which human language is sustained and transformed. Humboldt’s human grammar can never lead us beyond the sphere of human life and its cultivation: language is a “product of nature, but of the ‘nature’ of human reason” (45).

Having glanced at the ways Humboldt shapes the domain of language study as, in its basic commitments, necessarily paradoxical and oriented against arbitrariness (in the senses he intends this term), we can now pursue this question of language’s naturalness back into the domain of its origins. I have suggested that the problem of origins, as Herder handles it in his *Abhandlung*, is part of what animates Humboldt’s founding moves toward the construction of a field of linguistics; yet it is precisely the origin of language that is, as a result of Herder’s philosophy, decisively reimagined in Humboldt’s writing as inaccessible. Humboldt’s references to language origin constitute an unmistakable effort to locate what in Herder seemed the implication of a vaguely evolutionary natural history of language, in an unfathomable moment of linguistic emergence outside of historical chronology, mediating between the human subject and its world. As Humboldt puts it, in order to achieve the goal of outlining a field of comparative linguistics, “it is necessary that the origin and the completion [Vollendung] of language be viewed together [zusammengenommen werden]” (53).

For Humboldt this ecology is no longer nature-historical, even as it remains within the realm of the anthropological. What is “dark” in Herder becomes, in Humboldt,

strictly transcendental.⁷⁵ Thus he writes, “The truth of language invention lies not so much in the stringing together and hierarchizing of a great number of links that relate to one another, but far more in the unfathomable depths of the most common process of understanding, which belong absolutely to the apprehension and utterance of language, even in a single one of its elements” (45). This is an explicit move from narrative origin myths to a concept of linguistic simultaneity. Trabant refers to the origin Humboldt claims we cannot know as the “transcendental origo,” and these “unfathomable depths” are, for Humboldt, unknowable.⁷⁶ Language invention is turned away from narrative chronology and concentrated in the cognitive procedures of semiosis (sign or meaning creation), which despite their abstraction retain a local, minute fluidity.⁷⁷

This fluid dynamism is made vivid in part through Humboldt’s attention to how language changes. Humboldt gives a much fuller account than Herder of how internal language formation coincides with a constitutive *social* dimension, how the individual utterance or its Herderian precondition, the *Merkmal*, is already in social circulation. Directly before that Herder-esque moment in the Academy lecture mentioned above (“The human is only human through language...”), we find another: “However natural the assumption of language’s gradual development is, its invention could only have happened *with one stroke*” (44). This “stroke” throws us back to an earlier pair of metaphors used in the *Baskenfragment*. In the first, language itself is compared to the “spark sleeping in stone” (“die Sprache gleicht dem im Stein schlummernden Feuerfunken” [15]): once it is released, this fire is transparently simple to “communicate,” and it is difficult to understand that, prior to the spark’s release, fire was once a miraculous natural element independent of human agency. The utterance of articulate tones, as opposed to “Empfindungslaute” (akin to Rousseauvian passionate cries), is that *one stroke*, the single stroke itself a figure for what the structuralist would call “synchrony” (by extension, the unanimity or objectivity of language).

This first metaphor leads to another, which, by imagining the discursive alterations that bring about language change, gives the first a curious twist. Regarding the apparent objectivity of language, once it is in circulation, as closely dependent on its historical emergence, Humboldt turns the elements of language themselves to stone: “language is sculpted by each refinement to accommodate the understanding, and like the small stones thrown reciprocally back and forth by the river’s currents, polished and

⁷⁵ Perhaps the best short summaries of Humboldt’s particular ‘idealist’ definition of language are in the early short text “Über Denken und Sprechen” (1795), and in a letter to Schiller from 1800, in which he writes that “the language capacity” is “the capacity to generate internal thoughts and sensations and external objects mutually from each other by virtue of a sensible medium that is both human deed and expression of the world; or rather [the capacity] to become aware of oneself as partaking in both.” Humboldt here concentrates on spontaneity, not receptivity, and the agency of the language user. For useful accounts of Humboldt’s philosophical absorption of Kant and Fichte, see Trabant, Esterhammer, and Müller Vollmer.

⁷⁶ Once again, we have backed into Kant: Humboldt’s absorption of Herder through an idealist filter leaves intuitions blind without their concepts, whereas Herder would have allowed that even when it is too dark for intuitions to see, they would still know how to move around in the darkness; this sense would be another kind of knowing.

⁷⁷ Müller-Vollmer proposes that this aspect of Humboldt’s linguistic model be considered as a precursor to Saussurean ‘synchrony’, indeed that Humboldt’s cutting off language’s historical dimension in order to organize language study within the template of a continuous sign-driven recreation of meaning was (and presumably remains) *superior* to Saussure’s constraints upon the scope of linguistics.

ground down for ever better use” (“um immer besseren Gebrauch” [15]). The metaphor is both telling and obscure. It evokes an instrumental sense of language, and a progressive improvement in its changes, but we cannot understand, in the metaphor’s “natural” context, what the “use” of the stone in the brook should be. If language’s efficiency is communicative, what *use* are these river pebbles being imagined for? Isn’t it *use itself*, the gradual alteration through the social traffic of communication, that is being likened to the liquid matrix within which language is slowly dissolved?⁷⁸ Language, whose origin is momentarily made visible as an anthropological transition of progress when the spark is released from the stone (and of mastery over nature, as the taming of fire), is then returned to the substance of the stone itself, and its temporality imagined in a geological process of dissolution.⁷⁹ In these several short paragraphs, Humboldt turns from an image of the instantaneous, to one of bare movement, in which language’s transformations are attenuated, rendered in effect so slow that they become imperceptible to the casual or ‘unphilosophical’ eye.

This effect of prolongation, of slowing the senses’ appreciation of linguistic change, will become a major preoccupation in the following chapter about Blake. One could imagine that the juxtaposition of *two* geologic forms in different states of decomposition might be precisely the jog of recognition needed to visualize this process of change, to understand in abbreviated form what took place in the elapsed time the simultaneous changed states summarize, and this is precisely what Blake offers us (alongside his contemporary James Hutton). It is the comparison of *states* of language’s grammar which, when superimposed, allowed for the ‘scientific’ insights of comparative philology: indeed, part of the process of comparison lay in the initial assumption that languages might be viewed as sequentially arranged or related, stemming from one another or sharing a parent (a term used, as it happens, for both languages and rocks), in order to discover systematic changes in sound and meaning. In order for this leap to be made, language would need to be viewed as an object subject to something like natural forces.

In all probability not unique to Humboldt as he composed the *Baskenfragment*, the image of language’s elements as pebbles in a brook has proved an important figure for the tendency in language speculation I am tracing. Yet it is only one of a number of such metaphors in Humboldt’s writings, which though apparently contradictory serve similar rhetorical purposes: “Language arises, *if the simile be allowable*, in much the same way that, in physical nature, one crystal builds up upon another. The formation occurs gradually, but according to a law” (*Verschiedenheit* 148; emphasis added). To

⁷⁸ Compare an analogy from *Verschiedenheit*: “Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbor does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, through the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding, all concurrence in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence” (63).

⁷⁹ When Humboldt suggests that language change is like the process of a stone polished by a stream, which thereby seems to become more ‘functional’ or efficient, his metaphor awakens an odd feeling that language is set on a course to some kind of perfected symmetry or shapeliness, an absolute fitness or utility, although of course in fact this metaphor implies gradual destruction, literal dissolution or liquidation. One could imagine this as a hypothetical state of unmediated communion, in which language would no longer be necessary. The image of functional improvement through a natural process is odd, though familiar enough through instrumentalist evolutionary models (in critique of which, see e.g. Lewontin, Gould, Midgley, Lewens).

“allow” Humboldt’s simile means to register that this *naturalizing* is itself a manner of speaking; and even when he writes that “language... is a fully fashioned *organism*” (*Verschiedenheit* 90), we cannot emphasize enough that for Humboldt, it is a *fashioned* organism. These metaphors drawn from the natural world (blending, incidentally, what we would think of as organic with inorganic processes) exemplify Humboldt’s pointed use of natural imagery in order to imagine language’s autonomous *Selbstätigkeit*, while bearing in mind its continuous reformation through the work of its speakers. The image of the disintegrating pebble functions as an illustration of the temporal effects of a hardened or objectified language, yet this solidity allows it simultaneously to change shape, to soften or disintegrate. Through such images, we grow accustomed to feeling language’s systematically solid and soluble forms through recourse to the figurative effects of “naturalization.” In the chapters to come, we will see these effects alter: for example, as voices are characterized through contrasting geological forms, in Blake; as Wordsworth’s landscapes, both artificial and natural, express themselves through accumulation and dismantling; as spring reanimates the frozen earth, in Thoreau.

IV. For a Romantic Etymology

In the mode of naturalism developed by Herder and Humboldt, the possibilities for viewing language historically alter distinctively. Their innovations abandon the view of language as a collection of decontextualized, ahistorical names, words or elements, whose inability to fasten us referentially to some stable reality is perceived as regrettable. They substitute instead a web or organism whose component parts function and change through relations of mutual responsiveness. Though both Herder and Humboldt at times assume problematic developmental narratives, and retain implicitly hierarchical views of world languages, at times promoting qualities of linguistic “naturalness” by importing into it scales of value specific to their respective philosophical projects, this chapter has sought to show that a primary aim of the linguistic naturalism pursued by both was *to reintegrate process into form*. The effect of viewing language’s elements as non-detachable from the circumstances of their utterance (whether physiological, social, national, or anthropological) denies the separability of language from its historicity and its social reality. Its emergence is context-dependent, but the phrase is hardly sufficient; for language’s natural “contexts” or environments are themselves in part shaped by language’s continuous re-creation.

My aim in presenting the comparison between “contexts” and “ecologies” of language is to throw light on the problems of imagining a *rooting* between human language and material and social surroundings. Though called “natural,” usually precisely to eclipse the contention that linguistic relationships are purely arbitrary, this does not mean the natural relation can be simplistically captured as a belief in mimetic representational relationships or organic, unmediated origins. Nature, in this tradition, does not only imply a motivated fit between word and world, either material or divine. As we see from both Herder and Humboldt, it is by redrawing the scope of what is recognized as language in the first place that “arbitrary” relationships are recast as “natural.” Though not deliberately negating referential correlations between language and nature, Herder and Humboldt nevertheless seek to *diversify* our understanding of what correlations between nature and language can look like by proposing relations of contextual dependency not reducible to reference. Romantic writers placed great stock in

the process through which human thought spins or frames the world from its own linguistic resources, and in such writers we find a constitutive collusion between the linguistic creature and its environment.⁸⁰

In order to see how these ecologies attempt to alter available forms of linguistic history, I close with the criticisms both thinkers level against what they seem to have regarded as etymological malpractice. For both, etymology's abuses or unphilosophical applications bar the way to a properly capacious definition of language and its entanglements. It is thus in part through a broader notion of etymology that they helped shape (to return to Voloshinov's characterization) the Romantic "reaction against the alien word." Herder — whose voice is the more impassioned — is critical of etymology because it divorces language from its living contours, and forgets or explicitly abjures the essential role of usage in shaping meaning. Indeed, the very premises of much etymology would have made whole dimensions of Herder's language philosophy invisible.⁸¹ His discussion of etymology recognizes that its revelations are too often illusory or oversimplifying, its methods unsystematic and inevitably biased in favor of an expected outcome. The reasons for his skepticism over the success of a definitive compendium of true etymologies ("wahres Etymologikon") for Hebrew return us to a passage noted above: relationships of meaning in such ancient languages are, over time, obscured by the loss of "dunkle Gefühle," "flüchtige Nebenideen," "Mitempfindungen"; they are dependent on their use within a given form of thought, "nach der eignen Denk- und Sehart des Volks"; all of this nuance is necessarily and indeed painfully oversimplified by "langen, kalten Umschreibungen," i.e. textual paraphrase; and in such various ways expressions are divided from the necessity which produced them, the "Affekt" or "Gefühl" or "Verlegenheit des Ausdrucks." The idea of recapturing a meaning is practically unthinkable (64-5). For Herder, attempts to quickly assimilate the losses associated with the constitutive contextlessness of linguistic reproduction becomes a source of outrage or anguish. Though primitivist in posing these objections against reconstructing Hebrew as an emotion-laden language of the distant past, the shift of attention onto language's unrecoverable "original" affective attachments (etc.) is recognizable also in his discussions of language considered in its current state.

Finally, etymology's attempts to reconstruct history are, according to Herder, often mistaken (111-2), and one underlying motive of the etymologies he criticizes, to find evidence for the historical migration of language populations, is hobbled by its narrow focus and reductive notion of cause and effect: "...for how many, many unseen causes [Nebenursachen] can make alterations in this ancestry, and in the recognizability of this ancestry, which the etymologizing philosopher cannot take into account" (118).⁸² Kin to the "einsame Sprachphilosoph" (119), this "etymologisierende Philosoph" must take lexicographic lists of strange languages provided by missionaries as a basis for building family trees; because these theorists work from abstractions, they produce

⁸⁰ Humboldt: "By the same act whereby [man] spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it" (E60).

⁸¹ Herder is not explicit about which etymologists he criticizes. Perhaps this would include the French Enlightenment authors with echoes of Cratylism, such as Antoine Court de Gébelin and Charles de Brosses. See Genette, *Mimologies*.

⁸² The controversial practice known as "linguistic paleontology," so named in the nineteenth century, seems uncannily similar to the scholarly impulse Herder criticizes here. This sub-discipline still structures some discussions on the spread and fracturing of Indo-European: see Garrett.

abstractions: “die Absätze der Etymologie sind auch nur Abstraktionen, nicht Trennungen in der Geschichte” (111). For Herder, etymology in its proto-philological forms too often relied on a model of language that betrayed entire realms of meaning, and unwittingly grounded itself upon a reductive economy of original institution, possession, transparency, and conscious exchange. The *Haushaltung* Herder defends is, by contrast, attentive to a fault, if also somewhat erratic and contradictory. It affords an “ecology” that is excessive, governed by laws from beyond our private viewpoint (yet not permanently or divinely ordered), from beyond individual language communities, grounded in a darkness that nevertheless shades into the light of our “mean” or common perceptions. What etymology could satisfy such a welter of activity, such a many-layered pattern of uncontainable dynamism?⁸³

Humboldt’s *Baskenfragment*, we have seen, also recommends a thorough overhaul of the linguistic methods that have given etymology its reputation for producing arbitrary results. But there is one more echo of Herder worth mentioning. In an impassioned closing argument to Part One of his treatise, Herder, invoking an intelligent readership who will join him in believing our language a specifically *human* development, gathers this imagined agreeable audience rhetorically as anyone “who has ever attended philosophically to the elements of language” (“sich um die Elemente der Sprache philosophisch bekümmert”), stemming in part from the “analogies” of its formation.⁸⁴ In his fragment, Humboldt applies the same notion, using strikingly similar wording, to etymology specifically, writing that etymological pursuits must be aligned with a general linguistics (“Sprachstudium im allgemein”) that, when “considered philosophically,” turns out to be “nothing other than the investigation of *all possible analogies among the manifold elements of language*” (emphasis added).⁸⁵ Characterizing these analogies through a precise attention to their static and mobile features, for Humboldt, entails a figurative naturalizing of human language, in order to show the blend of active and passive participation of speakers in language’s formation. If we were to adapt this embarrassingly inclusive definition of linguistics as a backdrop for individual poets and writers, the phrase might serve as a catch-all for the Romantic etymologies, in their various forms, that populate the pages to come.

⁸³ Note here the tendency within contemporary pragmatics to note, even to welcome, this welter as an embarrassment of detail: e.g., Silverstein, “Context: When is Enough Enough?”; Verschueren. And how — so the question will run, throughout this project — might this apparently anti-etymological impulse work forms of temporality into language study which could still be thought of as etymological speculation?

⁸⁴ The passage also stands as a concise encapsulation of Herder’s ecological conception of language: “Ich bilde mir ein, das *Können* der Erfindung menschlicher Sprache sei mit dem, was ich gesagt, von *innen aus der menschlichen Seele*, von *außen aus der Organisation des Menschen* und aus der *Analogie aller Sprachen und Völker*, teils in den *Bestandteilen aller Rede*, teils im *ganzen großen Fortgange der Sprache mit der Vernunft* so bewiesen, daß, wer dem Menschen nicht Vernunft abspricht, oder, was ebensoviel ist, wer nur weiß, was Vernunft ist, wer sich ferner je um die Elemente der Sprache philosophisch bekümmert, wer dazu die Beschaffenheit und Geschichte der Sprachen auf dem Erdboden mit dem Auge des Beobachters in Rücksicht genommen, der kann nicht einen Augenblick zweifeln, wenn ich auch weiter kein Wort mehr hinzusetzte” (79).

⁸⁵ “Auf diese Weise schließt sich die Etymologie dem Sprachstudium im allgemeinen, das, philosophisch behandelt, nicht anders als ein Aufsuchen aller möglichen Analogien zwischen den vielfachen Elementen der Sprache ist, aufs genaueste an...” (14).

Chapter II

“Voices of the Ground”: Blake’s Language in Deep Time

And why, after all, should matter be ‘resistant’?⁸⁶
— T. J. Clark

Then what have I to do with Thee?
— Blake, “To Tirzah”

I. Introduction: Slowing Desire

“Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen, entstehn”: Hölderlin’s line once prompted Paul de Man to remark in passing what a different “effect” the emblematic Romantic gesture of imagining words through organic growth would have had if the poet had likened language to stone, instead of to a flower. “The effect of the line,” he wrote, “would have been thoroughly modified if Hölderlin had written, for instance, ‘Steinen’ instead of ‘Blumen,’ although the relevance of the comparison would have remained intact as long as human language was being compared to a natural thing.”⁸⁷ The thought experiment is intended to illustrate, by negative comparison, a generalized “nostalgia for the object” exemplified in the flower’s seductiveness or desirability; next to the flower, the stone plays hard to get. De Man emphasizes that, despite any difference in poetic effect, the substitution of stone maintains the same (false) link between language and nature.

I want to borrow this thought experiment, but this time to look more closely at the gradations of effect elicited from different models of relationship between language and nature, and in particular to dwell at length on the consequences of comparing language to stone. What difference would it make to our pictures of language, if language were imagined (as it was by Humboldt) to be formed like stone — effectively *slowing* the flower’s desirability, the desire we might feel to see language “rooted,” like a flower, in a grounding nature? This image of stone has the effect of decelerating language’s temporality, giving it hardness and solidity; yet paradoxically, part of the point of its still being a “natural” figure is to guarantee a long-term softness, and a process of change over time. Language has its short- and long-term horizons, and this thought experiment also shows how different pictures of language permit language’s attachment to *multiple* temporal realities. How might a stoniness rendered through deep time’s flux then alter the relationship of language “users” to their own language? What difference does it make to

⁸⁶ Cited in Marjorie Levinson’s “Pre- and Post-Dialectical Materialisms: Modeling Praxis Without Subjects and Objects” (112). Levinson evokes alternative conceptions of nature incipiently present in some trends of romanticism, and reemerging in today’s sciences. “Nature,” she writes, “is no longer that *substantial resistance* invoked by Kant in his preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, lacking which the dove of thought could not take flight” (117, my emphasis); rather, a change in our conception of subjects, objects and their relations must extend our awareness of their shared basis, hints of which may be gleaned from some of Romanticism’s “more retiring representational effects.” This chapter is meant in part as an exploration of what I take to be one such “retiring” effect, that of giving language the figurative hardness of stone, while reminding us of stone’s “life” by giving it language. I take Levinson’s recent work on diverse materialisms in Romanticism as a point of reference for the “ecology” linking this chapter with the last (e.g., “A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza” (2007); “Of Being Numerous: Counting and Matching in Wordsworth’s Poetry” (2010)).

⁸⁷ “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” *Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 6.

perceive language as under the sway of natural laws of formation not wholly driven or circumscribed by the anthropocentric aims implicit in the apparent laws of communicative efficacy, stability of meaning, or subjective intent?

Blake's short lyric "The Clod and the Pebble," from *Songs of Experience* (1794), is not a conventional reference point for the limited scholarship on Blake's theory of language:

Love seeketh not itself to please
Nor for itself hath any care
But for another gives its ease
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair

So sung a little Clod of Clay
Trodden with the Cattles Feet
But a Pebble of the Brook
Warbled out these Metres meet:

Love seeketh only self to please
To bind another to its delight
Joys in another's loss of ease
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite

What does this lyric have to say about language? Isn't it (rather, only) some sort of dialogue about innocent and experienced love? In the reading this chapter moves toward, I will propose that the internal stanza, which curiously situates the dialogue as a geological conversation, assume a greater responsibility over the poem, and that the insights gathered help read Blake's "voices" more generally. We can see already how in speaking of love, the poem's vocal attitudes are keyed to a figurative softness (Clod of Clay) and hardness (Pebble). I will argue that the poem's voices are not only acting out a minor melodrama about the capacity to love, but are also gesturing toward a drama on materialist themes, which introduces the specter of geological time into language's formation. By giving language — meant in a purposefully expansive sense — scales of time that both harden its apparent subjective malleability and soften its apparent objective "naturalness," Blake strives against the effort to secure a "fit" between word and world which we might otherwise associate with linguistic naturalism. Language, here, is closely akin to worldview, in a sense that mixes cognitive, epistemological, and cultural or ethical registers. It is thereby "naturalized," in a sense, but Blake's idiosyncratic linguistic naturalism is ill-served by resorting to conventional paradigms for "natural signs," in part because he is less focused on units of language than on their patterns, and on a quite literal version of what Wittgenstein called "forms of life." Here I want to indicate the relation of these patterns to the "language ecologies" of Chapter I (showing how the individual voice is partly shaped by natural and cultural environments), and to the temporal complexities of linguistic experience, or "Romantic etymologies," laid out in the chapters to come.

Things that form "like stone" appear less as forming, and more as passively *formed* from without by external forces — weathered, sculpted by time, sedimented, worn into incidental shapes. (Goethe refers to geological landscapes as the "entstandene Welt," a *natura naturata*, perhaps suggesting how the apparent inertia of stones presumes a passive unknowability.) This is precisely what makes de Man's thought experiment so

striking: when words form like flowers, we understand this as growth, and as an organic process; but if they form or are formed like stones, the irony of their “growth” is that it is most evidently erosion, the processes and forces involved largely inorganic. The desirable flower is quickly decomposed. To grant stone sufficient animacy that it may, by its incremental movements, render language’s apparent stability naturally explicable, is to relax the assumption of matter’s resistance. This is, I propose, one effect of this particular romantic animism, giving stone a voice (a trope related to, yet significantly different from, that of merely comparing words with stones). Carrying out this thought experiment alongside the recent critical preoccupation with scales of animacy that propose to engage with things, objects, and inert matter,⁸⁸ we get a clearer picture of how Romanticism’s investigations of figurative poetic language use animism in part as a linguistic critique. Their experiments show how giving life, voice, and language to natural objects imagines a link or relationship of non-referential continuity between language and nature through means that are inarticulate, but not for that reason false.

Haunting this chapter, then, is the figure of stone, the natural substance that often serves as the repository of our imaginative maximum for inert matter, its conceptual burden being to stand for the “ultimate example of materiality,” the “dominant instance of the primitive reality of things.”⁸⁹ There is, I will show, ample warrant for investigating this poetic figure within the philosophical currents of the era that joins the Enlightenment to Romanticism. Though stone has never ceased to embody rhetorically matter’s apparent resistance and inhumanness, the eighteenth century was rich in theoretical proposals placing geological forms in various continua with animate entities, from “thinking matter” or hylozoism, to Spinoza’s monist *Ethics*, to the materialism of the *Encyclopédie* authors, harkening back to Lucretius.⁹⁰ Herder, for example, writing in Spinoza’s wake, points out the relatively unknowable liveliness of stones, their internal “Trieb der Bewegung” or impulse of movement: “Vom Gefühl der Pflanze wissen wir nichts, und vom Phänomenon des Triebes der Bewegung im Steine noch minder.”⁹¹ The attraction to stone as that really, *really* objective substance, what we might call an extreme case of nature, lies not in some primordial materiality, but in its cultural availability as a figure of

⁸⁸ With apologies to all for evoking such disparate projects as an undifferentiated bloc, space permits me only to gesture at a theoretical trend toward finding words to represent, speculate about, or imagine the experience of inhuman or inanimate objects (a 2012 conference at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee called it “the nonhuman turn”): stone-colored criticism (Fry); thing theory (Brown); object-oriented ontology (Harman); speculative realism (Meillasoux); dark ecology (Morton); thing-power materialism (Bennett); action-network theory (Latour); animacy studies (Chen); alien phenomenology (Bogost).

⁸⁹ Ferguson (see below); Heringman. Noah Heringman, in his recent work on the relations between the geological sublime in art and nature, writes: “The otherness of rock finds expression in the stubborn, enigmatic materiality, the alien exteriority, developed in literary figures of the earth’s material. By virtue of this otherness, rock stands as the dominant instance of the primitive reality of things, of the illegible substance of nature. The aesthetic is the sphere designated for the creative approximation of preconscious, prelinguistic experience, of the physical content of sensations, such as the tactile solidity and resistance of a stone” (68).

⁹⁰ The forthcoming work of Amanda Goldstein will, I am sure, add much to our understanding of the presence of Lucretius in familiar Romantic texts. Her stimulating conversation has often influenced my thinking during this project.

⁹¹ “Of the feelings of plants we know nothing, and of the phenomenon of impulse toward motion in stone, still less”; *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* (1778), 547. Such a thought points us not only toward Herder’s reading of Spinoza, but also his appropriation of Böhme’s “language of Nature,” which as I have suggested already is perhaps the source for his claim that each living thing has a voice according to its form of life.

inanimate, hence nonlinguistic, natural form. To render this figure animate or linguistic obviously alters what stone is capable of connoting, but I want to show how it less obviously stretches the limits of language, and helps to come to terms with the muteness internal to what (human) language normally includes.⁹²

One of the intellectual forces submerged — or subterranean — within Blake's poem above is the study of geology, a discipline nascent in the late eighteenth century, whose study has obvious links to the Romantic era's renegotiations of materialism. Indeed, the most celebrated British geologist of the era, Scottish Enlightenment thinker James Hutton (about whom more below), was also the author of an ambitious philosophical work (*An Investigation of the Principles of Knowledge* [1794]) whose innovative materialism declared the ceaseless mobility of matter (and thus looked forward to Whitehead's dictum, "There is no nature at an instant").⁹³ Among stone's figurative gradations are inertness or passivity, heaviness, density, solidity, hardness, coldness; but finally, its apparent inanimacy is recognized by writers like Hutton as an invisible, elemental — temporal — *slowness*, a kind of obstacle to thought. Stone chastises the desire for immediacy, and becomes thereby a figure for human finitude. But it is one of the signal properties of Romantic expressions of such finitude that the limits it imposes may be felt affirmatively, without regret.⁹⁴

De Man's Hölderlin example is meant to show that there are varieties of linguistic naturalism among the Romantics that wished for words with a perfect referential "fit" to sprout organically from their objects, or for language to be born as an image or echo of its referential ground. Such desire, with its apparent wish for immediacy, might furthermore

⁹² This inability to put everything felt into words becomes formalized, in linguistic anthropology, in domains of "non-lexicalizable" cultural belief, which emerge with greater clarity through language comparison and the phenomenon of "incommensurability." As recent studies have stressed, the theoretical premise that individual languages are not equipped to express the same relationships articulated grammatically and indexically through other languages need not be reduced to a crude caricature of, for example, Whorf's much-maligned writings (Leavitt, Silverstein 1976.) One crucial modification of that caricature would be to emphasize that this view is less interested in what a speaker *cannot* say, or see, with a given language, than in the patterns through which a speaker is *compelled* to articulate herself.

⁹³ Vol II, Section IX, entitled "Concerning the apparent Inactivity commonly, but erroneously, attributed to Material Things," works through Hutton's proof of this principle: "a body, for example, of stone or metal, is said to be matter, without any other thing besides form; and it is from the examination of such bodies, that the nature of matter...has been esteemed passive" (366); "inactivity, and the idea of rest, which is founded on the apparent immutability of perceived things, are, like equalities of things, only a supposition, and not reality" (373); "[it may be proved that] every part of every material thing, is in motion in relation to all the rest...that not only no principle of inactivity appears, but, on the contrary, that there is action or activity wherever there is material or perceived things...[the mistaken system] founded upon that apparent inactivity, conceived from the apparent immutability and equality of perceived things...must be corrected by...attending more minutely to the inequalities and changes of things, which are not barely apparent, but are real (382)." His geology is the product of just such a minute attention.

⁹⁴ This is why none of these features make stone, despite its indifference, irredeemably *undesirable*. For we sometimes feel, with the Romantics, that the "heart luxuriates" in "indifferent things" — "stocks and stones" included (Wordsworth, "Nutting"). Indeed, it is interesting that so many critics today seem to follow new cultural trends for investing attention in apparently inanimate forms of life. Is this new investment with objects different from "nostalgia for the object"? Is such a nostalgia always an illegitimate desire? We might think back to Frances Ferguson's "Shelley's *Mont Blanc*: What the Mountain Said," in which for her Mont Blanc represents "the 'thingness' of things." Shelley's poet tries to fill its silence, failing to "let Mont Blanc be merely a blank, merely a mass of stone" (202-3), but this eagerness to speak for inanimate things conveys an ethics of relation, the "impossibility of seeing the mountain as alien" (204).

understand the project of fixing language in this way nostalgically, as a return to a former ideal state. Hence, its notion of etymology would tend to produce a narrative contingent on a temporally distant source, whether material, divine, or otherwise authenticating. This primitivism, I want to argue, doesn't adequately reproduce Blake's vision. Such paths to a "nostalgia for the object" might be called overcompensations, different strategies to "stuff nature into words"⁹⁵ rather than simply note the ways in which words inevitably have a natural side. The urge to force a relation between language and nature (hardly unique to Romanticism) attests to a potentially reductive etymological thought, residual in different forms through folk epistemologies, the organicism of language associated with figures like Friedrich Schlegel, or indeed the invented "roots" of positivist philology. But there are other effects ascribable to the relationship of language to nature, and other naturalisms; Blake's work represents a complex naturalism quite different from these. The idea behind this chapter is to show how pulling stone's inarticulate material into the conversation by turning language to stone, giving language geological features, presents the 'life' of rock through its passive or active transformations, and in the process implants the lifespan of stone — deep time — into our "picture of language."⁹⁶ This marks another way in which language *origins* are displaced in favor of ongoing processes of formation, as in Herder and Humboldt, whose proto-linguistic anthropologies lead away from "origins" and toward a model of formation-in-the-present.

I will begin this chapter by orienting Blake within the late eighteenth-century geological and philosophical discourse alluded to already, via Hutton. These theoretical pronouncements focus on learning from rocks something about human matters, and in the process end up empathizing with their stony objects. In the readings that follow, I will isolate familiar instances where Blake takes up the idea of language voiced by different geological forms, including the Pebble, the Clod of Clay, and the "Ground" itself, in *The Book of Thel*. Between the geological, the philosophical, and the poetic spheres, I argue that language "hardens" to the extent that it takes on the mute alienness of stone, giving it a social solidity that exceeds the timescales of individual human actions; but as long term temporal processes are recognized in geomorphological features, all forms of solidity become mere shorthand for their invisible processes of formation, erosion and accretion, so that language "softens" along with this analogy. Like stone, it undergoes imperceptible alterations. How, I want to ask, does this destabilizing naturalization allow a representational shift in the *reification* of language, making it solid and objective, so that it can be perceived as a "thing" that changes unbidden, over which the finite linguistic creature must surrender the illusion of control — and yet at the same time, how does the comparison of language to natural forms also potentially *reanimate* the dead texts of language, the "alien word," bringing to life different histories of signification?

⁹⁵ I adapt this phrase from Stanley Cavell, "Texts of Recovery," *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (60). Cavell proposes the phrase in relation to a reading of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," suggesting that the mariner's unexplained shooting of the albatross may be read as the poet's misguided effort to force a natural relation: he has "murdered to connect, to stuff nature into his words." If skepticism names the drive "to deny [an] internal, or natural, connection with others," the mariner/poet's murder here hence figures a forced over-correction.

⁹⁶ Others have recognized this transition from a fixation on *origins* to the thought of immeasurable temporal extent within which language change is a constant, and need represent neither improvement nor "fall": see Leavitt and Turley. The work of Rudwick and Heringman suggests that we ought to see this shift toward imagining the world's, and language's, transformations over a "deep" temporality, formalized by Lyell, as present already in the early Romantic period.

II. No Vestige, No Prospect: “Mute Teachers” and Legible Rocks

In observing nature on a scale large or small, I have always asked: Who speaks here, the object or you?⁹⁷
— Goethe

Discussing the onset of comparative philology, Leavitt presents the shift from Mosaic to geological chronology as follows:

Up to the early nineteenth century, most Europeans accepted calculations based on the Bible that the earth was a few thousand years old. Most of the early comparative philologists therefore presumed that whatever the ancestral form of the Indo-European Languages might have been, it had to be close to the original language of mankind. The opening-up to “Deep Time” (Gould 1990) came in the work of the Scottish geologist Charles Lyell (1795-1875). In his *Principles of Geology* (first volume 1830), Lyell adopted the principle of uniformitarianism: the kinds of processes we observe around us today must be used to explain processes in the past... Suddenly the earth, and with it the living world, looked much, much older — old enough, in fact, to think seriously about transformations in living things, and of humans and their languages, over a long period.⁹⁸

The relation between an expanded historical scale and the study of human and linguistic origins is well expressed here. But it is generally accepted that Lyell developed his principle of “uniformitarianism” from its earlier form in Hutton’s *Theory of the Earth* (1788), and this shift toward thinking “seriously” about evolution in “humans and their languages” over an extended timescale was clearly underway some decades earlier. Before turning to Blake’s poetry, I want to interpose several intellectual backgrounds ranging from the scientific to the philosophical, each of which allows in different ways for Romantic reorientations of linguistic perspective accompanying the gradual shift toward an awareness of what is now called “deep time.” These backgrounds appear to have informed the geological discourse as it was picked up by figures like Blake. In order to maintain momentum toward Blake’s poetry, I will only indicate these in passing, through representative moments drawn from Hutton, Spinoza, Diderot, and Goethe.

James Hutton’s theories were popularized through the writings of John Playfair, the friend who in his memorial “Life of Dr. Hutton” (1797) also left the clearest picture of the intellectual accomplishments of the author of *Theory of the Earth*, now recognized as the founding work of modern geological study. While it is Hutton himself who wrote most famously that in his view geological processes revealed “no vestige of a beginning, — no prospect of an end” (radically changing the very problem of origins), it is the famous line from an anecdote in Playfair’s “Life” that leaves us reeling, dropping out the

⁹⁷ *Scientific Studies*, “Aphorisms.” Like Goethe, Kenneth Burke has considered our encounters with apparently external objects as shaping our mode of inquiry: developing the question as Goethe’s aphorism poses it into a conversation, Burke writes, “In studying the nature of the object, we can in effect speak for it; and in adjusting our conduct to its nature as revealed in the light of our interests, we in effect modify our own assertion in reply to its assertion” (*A Grammar of Motives*, 237). Though nominally offered as a paraphrase of the thought of pragmatist George Herbert Mead, it is interesting to imagine here what Burke’s take on the “nonhuman turn” might have been.

⁹⁸ Leavitt 101.

temporal *depth* of this new science: “The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time” (73). Playfair is preoccupied in this document with the legibility of stone to the attentive observer: “with an accurate eye for perceiving the characters of natural objects, [Hutton] had in equal perfection the power of interpreting their signification, and of deciphering those ancient hieroglyphics which record the revolutions of the globe” (89). But such standard metaphors of “reading the characters” of nature (here in order to explain a fossil’s age and formation) are sometimes also inverted by Playfair, so that geological forms themselves speak. When Playfair describes the triumph of Hutton’s hunt, in the Glentilt valley in central Scotland, for evidence to support his theory that intruded granite veins are an example of geological restoration (that is, formed through regenerative processes of heat and compaction), he declares that “of all the junctions of granite and schistus which are yet known, this at Glentilt *speaks the most unambiguous language*” (69, my emphasis). This rock formation — actually a *disjunction* between two types of rock — ‘told’ Hutton within what immense scales of time it was undergoing its continuous processes of erosion and reformation. (This might be a good time to ask, with Goethe: *Who speaks here, the object or you?*)

Blake’s career roughly corresponds historically with the troubling, exhilarating geological discoveries of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and with the developing scientific language that instantiated the consistent legibility of geological features.⁹⁹ Noah Heringman draws the parallel between Blake and James Hutton on the grounds that Hutton “challenged the view of rock as primitive matter . . . much as Blake challenged the philosophical regime of solid surfaces in his negative images of petrification” (96). What was needed, for both, was a “new account of solidification,” with a vastly attenuated temporality to match it, an account that would balance the weathering forces of dissolution with stone’s “growth.”¹⁰⁰ As the arguments between advocates of Neptunism and Vulcanism and the solutions volleyed over what Stephen Jay Gould has called the “paradox of the soil”¹⁰¹ occupied the intellectual energies of romantic-era savants, the actual awe-inspiring age of stone gradually became an accepted, if necessarily unfathomable, possibility.¹⁰² Playfair’s vertigo is usually taken to be symptomatic of this shift: the substance, organization, and arrangement of stone were definitively recognized as markers of the extreme separation in age of the human species and the mineral content of the ground supporting life.

⁹⁹ The term “deep time” was apparently coined (quite recently) by John McPhee (*Basin and Range*, 104), though I would argue that a spatializing of time’s *depth* is figuratively present in much of the literature I am citing (most famously in Playfair’s ‘giddiness’, above).

¹⁰⁰ Heringman’s *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* is the most thorough critical assessment of romanticism’s engagement with the proto-geological sciences. See also Wyatt, *Wordsworth and the Geologists*; and, most recently, Jacobus, “Senseless Rocks,” in *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*.

¹⁰¹ Gould 76. The “paradox of the soil” was the problem, as Gould coins and defines it, that Hutton set out to solve, which boiled down to a paradox in final cause: namely, the fact that though soil is a regenerative support for life, it is most obviously also a product of destructive forces. Thus Hutton posited a “restorative force” which for him resolved the apparent contingency of deep time, restoring a teleological cause to nature, that is, the provision of soil fertility for the purpose of the human species’ survival.

¹⁰² Martin Rudwick’s work has generously documented historical attitudes toward the changing study of geological processes, most recently in *Bursting the Limits of Time*. See Rudwick for a summary of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century estimates of the earth’s lifespan, as well as Kant’s 1755 observation (in his *Theorie des Himmels*) that since the *universe’s* formation “millions of years and centuries have probably elapsed” (115-131).

The late eighteenth century philosophical exchange on stone had another source in the metaphysical system of Spinoza. A controversial philosophical touchstone for Enlightenment thinkers, German Idealists, and Romanticism, Spinoza proposed that stones (like all bodies) exist and persist within a scale of animacy, distributed and determined by coordinates of force to which all bodies inevitably respond.¹⁰³ In a 1674 letter defending his views on freedom and determinacy, Spinoza develops an analogy between a human's and a stone's perspective, in order to show the limits of awareness enclosing individual "agency" in each. He illustrates how "created things" are "determined by external causes" invisible to them using the simplest example he can imagine, a stone flying through the air.¹⁰⁴ "While the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue to move. Of course since the stone is conscious only of its striving [*conatus*], and not at all indifferent, it will believe itself to be free...[just as] men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined."¹⁰⁵ Though it strikes us still and at once as provocative that stone is given, in this letter, a certain agency, in fact a dynamic *passivity* is the conceptual lever that lifts the comparison: just like stone, humans passively "act" according to certain external forces which they cannot recognize.

This is the line of ethical reasoning which Diderot carried to one possible logical endpoint, in the opening lines of *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*:

D'Alembert: ...il faut que la pierre sente.

Diderot: Pourquoi non?

D'Alembert: Cela est dur à croire.

Diderot: Oui, pour celui qui la coupe, la taille, la broie et qui ne l'entend pas crier.¹⁰⁶

"*Dur à croire*" indeed: Diderot's preoccupations here, which would circulate around Herder, Goethe, and Blake, followed questions raised by philosophical debates around eighteenth-century hylozoism, the doctrine of "thinking matter." These were perilously impious proposals for animating the inert, for locating the inhuman in human frames, for coming to terms with and rearticulating material resistance.¹⁰⁷ It was within the reach of

¹⁰³ From the *Ethics*, Pt. II, Prop. XIII, Scholium: "The propositions we have advanced hitherto have been entirely general, applying not more to men than to other individual things, all of which, though in different degrees, are animated."

¹⁰⁴ This moment itself finds, no doubt among many others, a late echo in another philosophical context, questioning its premises and its results for linguistic and logical grammars: analyzing the possible "primitive" sources of the concept of *causation*, J. L. Austin writes, in "A Plea for Excuses," "We take *some very simple action*, like shoving a stone...and use *this*, with the features distinguishable in it, as our model in terms of which to talk about other actions and events..."

¹⁰⁵ Curley, *A Spinoza Reader*, 267-8. This episode is discussed in Sharp, 740; and Bennett.

¹⁰⁶ D'Alembert: ...then stone must feel.

Diderot: Why not?

D'Alembert: That is hard to believe.

Diderot: Yes, for the person who cuts it, carves it, crushes it yet doesn't hear it crying out.

¹⁰⁷ Yolton, *Thinking Matter*. Was it, then, a materialist response, when Johnson famously 'refuted' Berkeley's idealism for Boswell, by kicking a big stone "till he rebounded from it"? See Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (as well as Cavell 2005 and Morton, both of whom expand on this moment). This response is akin to the dim "proof" of sense-certainty still enacted by, for example, knocking on a table-top (a pitch-perfect capitulation to what C. S. Peirce called "secondness"). It, too, believes fundamentally in matter's resistance. Yet despite the world of difference between kicking and listening to a stone, the pain of

such speculation that stone itself might be heard “crying out” (and the much later, rather Huttonian corollary, that humans themselves are “walking, talking minerals”¹⁰⁸). Diderot goes on to explain how an inability to hear rock cry out is part of what conceals our own mineral composition: he describes the process by which marble might be pulverized, enter the soil, and be consumed and incorporated along with cultivated plants. In doing so he collapses the necessary timeframe for the sake of his narrative, registering this compression: “let it rot for a year, two years, a century, for I am not concerned with time.” I would argue he is here (quite knowingly) *precisely* concerned with time, as times vastly different in scale are being playfully overlapped. The temporalities in question — stone’s disintegration, human ingestion and absorption, and the time it takes to “see” this process — are not merely joined; they are materially inseparable.

A philosophical undertow in certain Romantic writers thus takes its pull from the thought that humans are affected or shaped by the same forces and elements that shape stone.¹⁰⁹ Goethe was one of several German romantic-era literary figures who were trained and active in the scientific sub-fields that preceded geology (Novalis and Alexander von Humboldt, Wilhelm’s brother, being obvious others). Among his morphological and scientific aphorisms, his exploration of a quasi-linguistic mediation between the observer and the observed emerges in geological terms: “Stones are mute teachers; they render the observer mute, and the best part of what one learns from them cannot be communicated.”¹¹⁰ Here a certain ambivalence allows Goethe to lean on stone’s inaccessibility, while claiming that its very “muteness,” however exemplary of the alienness of matter, can be learned; “muteness” is that same figuratively sublime, forbidding, inert silence, but placed now on a spectrum of linguistic experience. Goethe suggests that there are ways of relating to material surroundings, even of the stoniest kind, that relax our assumption of matter’s resistance. More specifically, the aphorism nudges us to imagine language differently, by proposing a kind of linguistic re-education, one that involves being taught muteness (if perhaps a muteness we already possess). The attentive relation to nature, which Goethe models linguistically by imagining this muteness, stands as a rich point of comparison for Blake. What could be thought of as shared origins with stone is expressed through a potential for inarticulate communication, a mode of knowledge other than “grasping” — a way of listening, a mode of faith, or a variety of “deference.”¹¹¹ (Indeed, in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Novalis’s poet comes to see the world of natural objects with an even greater reverence, as forms that “wished to be known once again”: “Jeder Stein, jeder Baum, jede Anhöhe wollte wieder gekannt sein” [255]).

What is the relationship between hearing a rock cry — or listening to a rock — and comparing language to nature more generally? The answer has much to do with

Johnson’s ‘proof’ feels like a familiar, even a proper, stage of reaction to theories that blame our ignorance of the world on its inaccessibility, or alternatively paint human finitude as human negligibility.

¹⁰⁸ The quotation is from Soviet geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, and cited in Bennett 360.

¹⁰⁹ Emerson: “We first share the life by which things exist and afterwards see them as appearances in nature and forget that we have shared their cause” (“Self-Reliance”).

¹¹⁰ “Steine sind stumme Lehrer, sie machen den Beobachter stumm, und das Beste, was man von ihnen lernt, ist nicht mitzuteilen” (Maximen und Reflectionen, #853; the citation also appears in *Wilhelm Meister’s Wanderjahre*).

¹¹¹ This thought of “deference” to inanimate objects and concepts the better to understand or “represent” them is elaborated in Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (130-143).

scale: the recognition of geologic time, while emphasizing the relative shortness of human time, also reveals humans to be participating in something “deeper.” It is interesting that a particular immodest paragraph of Freud’s is repeated more than once in the literature on deep time’s discovery, concerning the gradually solidifying sense of human “finitude.” Freud lists Copernicus, Darwin, and himself, as having successively reduced the presumed extent, centrality, superiority, and stability of the sphere of the human, in the realms respectively of astronomy or cosmology, the natural historical or biological order, and psychology or rationality. Their contributions are understood as cutting the human sphere down to size.¹¹² In these citations, the (oversimplified) historical turn from the Biblical chronology to deep time is claimed as a further reduction in this series.¹¹³ But if in a certain sense the awareness of deep time, of geological timescales, does fixate on the smallness or insignificance of the human timescale, it does so specifically through comparison and disjunction of vast to infinitesimal. The layering of human and geological times gives anthropology its secular edge, as the contingency of human history looks vertiginously precarious, hence heretical. Yet for romantics like Goethe and Blake, the sense of our finitude is not cause for panic; rather, it is what relates us ineradicably to our worldly or secular environments, where “secular” collapses materialist *worldliness* with a sense of the eons’ cyclical depth.

This comparison between timescales thus echoes the analogy between linguistic life and stone, and helps explain the usefulness of the figure of mineral material that speaks (or at least teaches). The animism of nature in romantic writers — and particularly stone as that special, because extreme, case of nature’s temporal extent — can on the one hand be understood to inflect or complement a growing anthropological discourse, and, in the sciences, a solidifying sense of human finitude, even as, on the other, it clearly seeks to establish not merely a *distance* between the timescales operative in these figures, but equally and somewhat contradictorily the simultaneity of their terms, the coincidence of geological with human matters. Hutton’s skill, as Playfair puts it, in “marking the gradations of nature, as she passes from one extreme to another” (89), is precisely an exercise in demonstrating the “continuity of her proceedings.” (Such an ecological continuity principle should remind us of Herder’s adoption of the Leibnizian use of the phrase “Natura non facit saltus”: nature does not make leaps.)

The simultaneity of stone and human worlds is exemplified well in Goethe’s short text “On Granite,” where he describes the differences, but also the continuity, between granite — which, unlike Hutton, he believed to be the oldest, original form of stone — and the human “heart”:

¹¹² The classic work on the cultural transition to a comprehensive sense of human finitude remains Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. Interestingly in this regard, not mentioned in these passages (including Freud’s) is the Kantian “Copernican” turn in philosophy so central to Foucault’s thesis (see also Foucault’s early *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*). This turn is itself something of a paradox, since if in one sense the self-conscious rhetoric of modesty in Kant’s ‘critical’ solution attests to human finitude, it also allots to the human at the same time a great deal of creative power, the sense of a world that starts with the “I,” further developed by the Idealists who succeeded him.

¹¹³ See both Gould and Rudwick. See also Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time* and Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*. As Emerson would put it a half century later, in 1844, “geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature” (“Nature”); and Tennyson, writing contemporaneously around 1850 of human things “Foreshorten’d in the tract of time” against “the secular abyss,” can help us see the semantic involutions of Emerson’s “secularity” (*In Memoriam*).

I do not fear the accusation that it must have been a spirit of contradiction that led me from the contemplation and depiction of the human heart, the youngest, most multiform, most restless, most changeable, most tremor-filled part of Creation, to the observation of the most ancient, most firmly fixed, deepest, most unshakeable of Nature's sons [i.e., granite]. For it will be willingly agreed that all natural things exist in a certain connection, and that the spirit of exploration little likes to cut itself off from something that lies within its reach. Indeed, I will likely be indulged in the sublime silence, which that sole mute region of this great, softly speaking Nature offers (as I have undergone, and continue to undergo, much through endlessly shifting human attitudes, through the rapid reorientations in myself and in others)...With these attitudes [*Gesinnungen*] do I bring myself closer to you, most ancient, most worthy memorials to time.¹¹⁴

Directly addressing the mountaintop he sits on, Goethe places the human against the inhuman, but not only to remark upon the resistance of his earthly support, or the distinction between organic and inorganic forms: rather he wants, through cultivated "attitudes," to "to bring [him]self closer" to Nature's only "mute region" (otherwise, it is pervasively talkative), the isolate felt most concretely as physically alien and temporally ungraspable, to establish a relation. Whereas Hutton had recognized that the Glentilt granite was *younger* than the schist into which it had intruded, for Goethe, the very fact that granite is the extreme case of durability against which to measure human changeability renders its "connection" to the human heart, and the gradations separating them, the more wondrous. Taking Goethe's "most firmly fixed, deepest" extreme as temporal metaphor of depth — and it can hardly be literal, since he is on top of a mountain! — we can easily imagine a convergence between Goethe's "mute" communion and Playfair's Huttonian encounter with the "characters of revolution," a written record of mutable form: "it is on the objects which appear the most durable and fixed, that the characters of revolution are most deeply imprinted" (54).

Thanks in part to Hutton, debates and discoveries regarding the properties and history of land masses and rock formations at the tail end of the eighteenth century revolved in part around the problem of whether and how stone, which clearly *degenerated* through erosion and weathering, might also *regenerate* (hence the "paradox of the soil" referred to above). One can only imagine that the theories of stone's self-restoration or matter's regeneration offered some warrant for the poets' experiments with the trope of bringing stone to life. In the selections from Blake's poetry below, we find several approaches to the linguistic possibilities of enlivening geological forms, accelerating the alterations of stone in order to make their metamorphoses visible to us, so that we can "hear" what their language sounds like. But the experimental thought of a metaphorical comparison between the two scales that allows us even simply to *see* geological formation or decay within human time is already a way of attributing

¹¹⁴ Goethe, "Über den Granit" (1784). "Ich fürchte den Vorwurf nicht, daß es ein Geist des Widerspruches sein müsse, der mich von Betrachtung und Schilderung des menschlichen Herzens, des jüngsten, mannigfaltigsten, beweglichsten, veränderlichsten, erschütterlichsten Teiles der Schöpfung zu der Beobachtung des ältesten, festesten, tiefsten, unerschütterlichsten Sohnes der Natur geführt hat. Denn man wird mir gerne zugeben, daß alle natürlichen Dinge in einem genauen Zusammenhange stehen, daß der forschende Geist sich nicht gerne von etwas Erreichbarem ausschließen läßt. Ja man gönne mir, der ich durch die Abwechslungen der menschlichen Gesinnungen, durch die schnellen Bewegungen derselben in mir selbst und in andern manches gelitten habe and leide, die erhabene Ruhe, die jene einsame stumme Nähe der großen, leise sprechenden Natur gewährt...Mit diesen Gesinnungen näherte ich mich euch, ihr ältesten würdigsten Denkmäler der Zeit."

liveliness to stone: it needs “quickenings,” and this is something attempted in different ways equally characteristic of Blake by both *The Book of Thel* and “The Clod and the Pebble.” As W.J.T. Mitchell suggests in explicating the emergent coexistence of “dream time and deep time,” or mythic and geological temporalities, widely distinct timelines accompany the terms of such figures, allowing a consciousness of variable temporalities to find its way into pictures of language.¹¹⁵

Emblematic of nature’s apparent *passivity*, stone may seem to reinforce the anthropocentric sense of man as sculptor, shaping nature’s incomprehensible stoniness.¹¹⁶ But this is, finally, not the (only) way stone is viewed in Blake’s poetry. The gradations of animacy attributed to the world’s forms may also be indicative of a spectrum of varying intimacy with our objects of knowledge, or variations on the desire for closeness.¹¹⁷ Within this ethical worldview, the anxiety of human finitude implied by nature’s historicization can be mitigated by a relation to the world based less on *knowing* it with certainty than on *listening* to it, attending to its mute voices — so a certain Romantic logic seems to run. And perhaps this will help to see a difference between Wilhelm von Humboldt’s figuring language *as* stone, imagining language change through the metaphor of pebbles tossed back and forth in a stream, and Blake’s poetic figures of geological forms as speaking bodies. Humboldt hints that language’s “use” is on a path of progressive improvement, as it becomes more and more “natural” to its speakers; whereas for Blake, a different regeneration — deeply tied to poetry and his expansive picture of language — serves as an imperative against familiar and stifling modes of knowledge, or of grasping at the world, classified in Blake’s mythography as “Urizenic.” Though most learn to simply tune out the voices populating the world, Blake suggests, the capacity to hear the pattern of relations sustaining the world’s forms can still be accessed.

III. Matter’s Heart: Vocal Forms in *The Book of Thel*

In Humboldt’s analogy, a stone’s erosion was used to model how language changes *naturally*. Indeed, we would be unable to see — to understand, to hear, to imagine — language change without such an analogy: the analogy’s effect is to recognize an apparent objective inertia in language-forms, and then to add to this hardness the enlivening processes of long-term change. Instead of *quickenings* language, bringing it

¹¹⁵ Writing of a certain strain of materialism in romantic figures, W. J. T. Mitchell writes, “Dream time and deep time, modern anthropology and geology, together weave a spell of natural imagery in the poetry of the romantic era” (Mitchell [2001], 183-84). Here, I concentrate on the effects of a contrast in temporalities that cling to these respective domains, and pursue the thought that this poetry stands open to the reader as a revised picture of language.

¹¹⁶ Hodder, *Entangled*; Arendt, “The Durability of the World,” *The Human Condition*.

¹¹⁷ Introducing the field of “animacy studies,” in her recent book *Animacies*, Mel Chen notes the correlation between attributions of animacy and language, remarking the frequency with which stones are offered as “‘bad’ verbal subjects.” The book argues that the “animacy hierarchies” built into grammatical active and passive markers (of widely divergent languages) serve to structure and reinforce hierarchical frameworks of social organization (including, for her, presumptions regarding species, race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability). Despite the broad applications of her study, she begins, perhaps inevitably, with a familiar example: “While in my own perusing of linguistic theory and philosophy of language I have certainly seen prolific examples of stones as ‘bad’ verbal subjects, I will insist in this book that stones and other inanimates definitively occupy a *scalar* position (near zero) on the animacy hierarchy” (5).

organically to life, this linguistic “geologizing” necessarily petrifies it, slowing language’s “life” to a glacial pace, bringing it *almost* to a standstill. Yet at the same time it introduces the imaginative capacity to think of language as always invisibly in motion: to repeat Hutton’s formula, a closer observation of phenomena will reveal those minute “changes of things, which are not barely apparent, but are real.” So-called “deep time” presents a viewpoint from which even those language forms that seem the most still and concrete, changelessly “natural,” can be presumed subject to imperceptibly slow shifts of dissolution and regeneration.

Blake explicitly, if enigmatically, proposes that language’s specificity can be in a sense defined through processes comparable to hardening and softening, in what is perhaps the best-known of his direct references to language. In the final, apocalyptic illuminated plates of *Jerusalem*, the manifold dimensions of significant form are expressed this way:

...every Word & every Character
 Was Human according to the Expansion or Contraction, the Translucence or
 Opakeness of Nervous fibres. Such was the variation of Time & Space
 Which vary according as the Organs of Perception vary...

In the linguistic “Visionary forms” that constitute conversation among the reconfigured creatures Blake imagines here, language is thoroughly re-theorized as a function of the body (if it can still be called that).¹¹⁸ I would go so far as to argue that throughout his poetry, Blake offers illustrations of an implicit theory of language that widens the reach of linguistic processes for living things formed within semiotic ecologies. In portraying Blake as a language theorist focused on the dispersion of linguistic change in forms of life, I want to propose that his view of language’s embodied temporality makes visible a deep implication in variable structures of knowledge. These structures are inextricable from the material and ethical composition of linguistic bodies.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ In the resonant word “according,” we might catch the Latin word for heart, defining, and refining, in its alternations or variability, a linguistic pulse, kin to that productive moment when in *Milton* the period or “Pulsation of the Artery” measures the speed at which the “poet’s work” is done. For a cursory but representative sample of similar images across European Romanticism, see Jean Starobinski, “Dead World, Beating Hearts,” in *Action and Reaction*. For a far more engaged encounter with Blake’s use of the circulatory rhythm of pulsation, see Steven Goldsmith, “Strange Pulse,” in *Blake’s Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions*.

¹¹⁹ While Blake’s language itself has long been a topic of critical discussion, the language philosophy it presupposes has rarely been considered at length. Traditionally, studies of Blake’s attitude toward language proceed by reasoning through his attentiveness to a disorienting yet repetitive vocabulary (in conjunction with his mythological ‘system’); a syntax clearly designed to throw the reader off balance and add texture to lexical ambiguity; or distinctive elaborations at either of these levels (for example, the daunting resources of Blake’s wordplay, in Nelson Hilton’s *Literal Imagination: Blake’s Vision of Words*). In addition, the reader of Blake must inevitably confront his rhetorical slipperiness (for example, the interrogative mode, or the often ironic tone of his ‘citational’ diction, e.g. framing sentimentality or piety). Moreover, the claim for Blake’s avant-garde aesthetic practice, in poetics as in visual art, is closely related to the difficulty of access into his private idiom. In each of these domains of linguistic investigation, it is customary to use as a guide for Blake’s language corresponding features of the mythology that organizes his illuminated poetry. Two exemplary studies of Blake’s linguistics that have influenced my reading here are Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* and Esterhammer, *Creating States*. Essick explicitly sets out to sketch Blake’s theory of language, using a comprehensive range of Blake’s own writings and his philosophical sources. The work approaches Blake within the methodological framework of intellectual

One ready point of reference for Blake, the *Logosmystik* of seventeenth-century mystic-philosopher Jakob Böhme, helps to clarify what Blake's linguistic "naturalism" consists of, if in part through negative comparison.¹²⁰ Böhme's "Language of Nature" seems significantly to inform the "voices" that weave the texture of Blake's poetry. For Böhme, the expression of a spiritual force emanating from each thing or creature (its *signature*) is revealed in its "external Form," but also equally in its "Instigation, Inclination and Desire," and in its uttered "Sound, Voice and Speech": "for Nature has given to every Thing its Language according to its Essence and Form." As though to render this metaphor more readily visualized, Böhme goes on to fill nature with mouths, ceaselessly uttering their internal essence: "Every thing has its Mouth to Manifestation; and this is the Language of Nature, whence every Thing speaks out of its Property, and continually manifests, declares, and sets forth itself."¹²¹

Yet this astonishingly capacious notion of language, despite certain affinities, undergoes significant modification in Blake; for one thing, the majority of his "voices" give utterance to quasi-allegorical abstractions generalizing tendencies of thought, rather than to "creatures" in the sense of denizens of Creation. However, since my focus here will be on a vocal minority of Blake's creatures, geological forms given voice, I want to dwell on a more localized difference from Böhme's naturalism: the way in which temporality or lifespan influences perspective and expression. One of the affinities between language in Böhme and Blake is a slippage between voice, appearance, and drive or "desire." Yet Blake is focused not on hidden *qualities* (essences or "signatures") revealed through these characteristics, but on the alterable perspectives they typify: hence the voice's epistemology or ethical mode of knowing emerges as crucial to the production of its world. By abandoning such qualities, his naturalism demotes relations of referential immediacy or iconicity; it is not primarily concerned, for example, with the fitness of names, as a residually Adamic theory might be, but with an expansively conceived language and how it structures experience. Such "etymologies" as it performs, finding reasons for linguistic habits or tracing histories of passionate response, point us not toward a universal language where, for example, discrete phonemes denote fixed ideas, but toward something more like the "indexical types" of contemporary linguistic anthropology, that is to say regulative functions of language that guide what is

history, and finds a Blake with a roughly phenomenological linguistics, programmatically seeking to subvert traditionally available versions of how signification occurs and preserves itself through communication. *Creating States* looks at aspects of the Miltonic influence on Blake through a performative poetics, itself explicitly drawing from and elaborating on, or reinterpreting, the linguistic power of Genesis. (This "performative" dimension of linguistic efficacy in Blake clearly prepares the path for Esterhammer's more recent study *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism*.)

¹²⁰ See Formigari for an account of Böhme and *Logosmystik*. See also Essick's account of Böhme's relevance to Blake.

¹²¹ The passage comes from Chapter 1 of *De Signatura Rerum* (1635): "dann an der eusserlichen gestaltniß aller Creaturen / an jhrem trib vnd begierde / item an jhrem außgehenden hall / stim vnd spraache / kennet man den verborgnen Geist / dann die natur hat jedem dinge seine spraache (nach seiner Essentz vnd gestaltniß) gegeben" ... "ein jedes ding hat seinen Mund zur offenbarung / vnd das ist die Naturspraache / darauß jedes ding auß seiner eigenschafft redet / vnd sich immer selber offenbahret / vnd darstellt" ... (518-19) The embodied language or "signature" is thus manifested in all forms of nature, including "trees and herbs," "stones and metals": "...man das an allen lebendigen Creaturen an gestalt deß Leibes / vnd an Sitten vnd Gebaehrden sihet: Jtem am Halle / Stimmen vnd Spraachen / so wol an Baeumen vnd Kraeutern / an Steinen vnd Metallen / als wie das ringen in der krafft deß Geistes ist" (622).

expressible for individual creatures based on their social coordinates, as these coordinates have evolved through bodily composition and cultural forms of life.

The extension of voice to natural, and more specifically to *mineral* forms, is explicitly thematized in Blake's *Book of Thel* (1789). The protagonist (whose name, as critics often note, is evocative of Greek *thelo*, "I wish/will/desire") is a sprite-like creature whose philosophical temperament leads her to a paralyzing despondency over life's transience. This gloomy mood inspires a series of interrogative complaints, which are answered by a series of personified features of the landscape around her, each seeming to try to offer reassurance: a lily, a cloud, a worm, and a clod of clay. Finally, in a world underground to which the clod of clay invites her ("my house"), she hears those "voices of the ground" which culminate in a voice issuing from her own "grave plot." This voice poses a series of questions about sensory and epistemological limits; when the series ends, Thel flees "with a shriek" back to her home, Har. Initially, hers is an anxiety over temporal finitude; but the climactic encounter with this underground voice seems to radicalize that anxiety, so that its depth is felt not only temporally, as the brevity of individual life, but epistemologically, as an inkling of the limits on what can be known.

If Thel allegorizes discontented desire, she does so by playing out reactions to the world internal to a certain kind of reason. Her sequence of encounters insists on the prejudices inherent in voicing, listening, misunderstanding or mishearing. It dramatizes the movement between seeing and hearing, mistrusting the senses or trusting the senses too much, and dwells most intently on the effects of voice, how hearing a certain way creates a certain world. Her complaints, delivered to "the secret air," are posed in a contradictory form: she laments her own disappearance, which is itself guaranteed by the individuated autonomy she clings to. It comes as a surprise to her, then, that her invocations are attentively answered by a succession of forms and voices, which we see as clearly inflected by her attitude toward them: "O little Cloud the virgin said, I charge thee tell to me, / Why thou complainest not when in one hour thou fade away...ah Thel is like to Thee...The Cloud then shew'd his golden head & his bright form emerg'd, / Hovering and glittering on the air before the face of Thel." As this structure of address and personification is reiterated, we may find ourselves reading the poem as a study of the idea of the pathetic fallacy. Or we may see these personifications as the simplifying effects of observing with a kind of species-narcissism: appearing human, Thel's perception is inevitably anthropocentric, for she must see and hear "according to" the shape of her embodied experience. Yet Blake does more: even as her speech seems to act by materializing fit addressees, Thel is puzzled by being brought face to face with the world as it comes alive; eliciting linguistic life from the world of nature, hearing its voices, alters the sense of that life which having a voice is presumed to bestow.¹²²

Marjorie Levinson (1980) has developed the notion of Thel as allegory of desire, whose personifications or "ventriloquisms," and the dialogues they instantiate, lead her to argue that "the fact of speech — the *act* of speech — is the hero of the poem" (296). For

¹²² We can see how Blake has compromised the Cloud's Böhmean "signature" by introducing the mediations of interpretive perspective or phenomenological process. For Blake, an object's form and voice depend when, how, by whom, in what mood the object becomes visible — and the subject and object work, of course, reciprocally on each other: sometimes it seems the latter is shaped by the former ("What is Man? The sun's light when he unfolds it / Depends on the organ that beholds it"), other times the reverse logic holds ("they became what they beheld").

Levinson, the idea of knowledge spheres, or “paradigms,” from the poem’s Motto (“Does the Eagle know what is in the Pit? / Or wilt thou go ask the Mole?”) is enacted by Thel through the invocation of animate interlocutors from her natural surroundings. This indicates that epistemological and linguistic frames, as well as their limits, are being aligned. These limits haunt and shape Thel’s journey. That for which “Thel’s vocabulary lacks a word” (294) escapes her perception; even as language enables some kinds of communion, it disables others. These limits are provisionally surpassed when she descends into the underworld, where voices emanate from the ground (including her own grave), granting access to a kind of knowledge otherwise denied, giving her the temporary ability to hear beyond her linguistic capacity. Here, as Levinson puts it, Thel is “rewarded with a visit to Experience,” which is then compared explicitly to the Motto: “That is, the Mole has gained awareness of the Sky world’s existence and is given the opportunity to survey his Pit from that altitude” (295). Levinson’s choice to compare Thel to a Mole in the sky, rather than an Eagle in the Pit, is interesting, given that Thel is given not altitude, but depth, or entry into the earth. Thel’s descent into the “land unknown,” like the *katabasis* of classical literature, serves as a provisional death, in this case in order to allow an impossible fantasy of communicability between live and dead matter that renders this “animacy hierarchy” moot.

Thel’s progress from creature to personified creature is characterized by a kind of material softness, her own unwanted mutability. Blake emphasizes not only temporary life, liquidity and “fading,” but a generalized softness introduced through her “soft voice” and “gentle lamentation.” Thel’s first question is, “why fades the lotus of the water? / Why fade these children of the spring?” before then launching into a litany of things evanescent, to which she likens herself: “a watry bow,” “a parting cloud,” “a reflection in a glass,” “shadows in the water,” and so forth. Countering Thel’s disappointment at sensing her own impermanence, these conjured creatures seem at peace with their formal fluidity: though only “a watry weed,” the Lilly is content to wait for its evaporation in “eternal vales”; the Cloud explains its afterlife as nurturing moisture. They want to placate her by tempering her complaints with gratitude for her “blessings.” But when Thel despairs at the thought of becoming “only...the food of worms,” her personifications, which originated through the imagery of fading flowers (“children of the spring”), begin to condense and descend to earth. That *liquidity* of the Lilly (which “the summer’s heat melts”) and Cloud (which “court[s] the fair eyed dew”) gives way to the pre-linguistic Worm, so resistant to Thel’s interpretive assimilation (“Art thou a Worm?...art thou but a Worm?...Ah weep not little voice, thou canst not speak...Is this a worm?”), and its interpreter, the Clod of Clay. “My bosom of itself is cold, and of itself is dark,” the “matron Clay” tells Thel, while reassuring her much as the Lilly and Cloud have, that “we live not for ourselves.” Her pious modesty takes that of the Lilly and Cloud to an extreme — “Thou seest me the meanest thing,” she says — and, while this reiterates the crucial power of Thel’s *sight* to shape “her” as a recognizable form (with a gender, as well as familial, social, and cosmological functions), the phrase “meanest thing” also seems to draw this element of nature closer to our “ultimate example of materiality,” stone.

This Clod declares her comparative inanimacy, the “hard”-ness and “cold”-ness signifying apparent resistance, before inviting Thel to know more, suggesting that she cross a threshold of knowledge: “all thy moans flew o’er my roof. but I have call’d them down:/ Wilt thou O Queen enter my house.” Calling Thel’s plaintive language down into

the earth itself, the Clod seems authorized to grant Thel temporary access to an inhuman perspective: "'tis given thee to enter,/ And to return." This vision will finally and understandably be upsetting, but she remains at first silent, observing "where the fibrous roots/ Of every heart on earth infixes deep its restless twists" and listening to "the voices of the ground." These represent a literalized imagining of the inarticulable roots that bind the human "heart" to earth, or its material ground,¹²³ where an invisible relation or simultaneity (akin to Herder's "Dunkelheit") is fleetingly sensed. Blake turns our attention to just how spooky it would be to know or understand, with some unimaginable external access, the Herderian "sap" that runs through the fiber, the heart of the human, an impossible etymology passing directly to a non-linguistic origin.

Underground, Thel's serial progress slows, as she herself is quieted, becoming a rapt observer — she "wander[s]," is twice "listning," is now "waiting oft," now stands "in silence," now "sat down / And heard this voice." Her wandering and listening are a slowing of desire.¹²⁴ Her complaint aboveground was that time passes, and the futile body dies — but time passes, it turns out, in different ways. Those "voices of the ground" are mineral voices come alive, as she experiences her own death, her "mortal part" or matter: to understand your part in the ground's voice, you have to rot in it (this makes Thel a cousin to Wordsworth's Lucy, whose name calls to mind another Greek near-cognate — *luein*, to loosen, release, dissolve). Thel's "experience" underground manifests the effects of slowness, and above all shows what such slowness would *sound* like.

In Thel's eerie, earthy voice, the Blakean motif of a provocative stretching of the form of human sensory apparatuses is registered as a fear of intimacy with the world, as a protest against too much knowledge, in a series of rhetorical questions implying that perception is not limited or private *enough*. "Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction," breathes Thel's grave, "Or the glistening Eye to the poison of a smile! / ... Why a Tongue impress'd with honey from every wind? Why an Ear, a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in?" This voice asks why the senses must know experience, why the body must confront its mortality, rather than being "closed," resting in a state of innocence or at least individuality. Why, in other words, must it exist within a timeframe in excess of its own?¹²⁵ This voice invents, through an immature desire, a chimerical

¹²³ The anagram "heart/earth" puts the relationship between language, body and nature yet another way, but should not be mistaken for an intractable fastening in Blake's symbolic vocabulary; in the "Proverbs of Hell," it is the "beard" that is aligned with earth, through a similar provisional linguistic ingenuity.

¹²⁴ Speculating about the companionability of Hutton's metaphysical system with his geological work, O'Rourke reminds us of the "almost imperceptible" nature of stone's mutations: "Most of the geological process is inaccessible to view, because it occurs on the sea bottom or deep inside the earth or is just too slow to watch. How can you base a theory on the perception of what is almost imperceptible?" (12). Thel, exploring the Clod's "house," seems to be slowed down in order to perceive the imperceptible.

¹²⁵ The staging of this complaint might be seen as a reading of the constitutive tension characteristic of human rational powers expressed elsewhere by Kant, in the first Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Human reason has this peculiar fate that...it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer." In each case, how we accustom ourselves to this ignorance is crucial: citing this phrase of Kant's, for instance, Cavell writes, "The reason we cannot say what the thing is in itself is not that there is something we do not in fact know, but that we have deprived ourselves of the conditions for saying anything in particular. There is nothing we cannot say. That doesn't mean that we can say *everything*; there is no "everything" to be said" (*Claim* 239). The decontextualization of the particular is, for Cavell, a self-inflicted deprivation.

innocence sufficient to its own world, an autonomy that was never the case. It observes and recognizes a world beyond the individual, a temporality in excess of its private lifespan, but thinks of it as indifferent, and rejects it. Thel is that part of the will that glimpses its participation in a “greater than itself” (“To Tirzah”) and refuses it: “The virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek./ Fled back unhinderd.”¹²⁶

At this point, it might be objected that the question of language, and its relative “naturalness,” seems to have been lost. Yet as I read him, Blake’s focus on the mutual influence between bodily or intellectual shape and natural or material environment precisely encompasses his interpretation of how human language operates within ecologies of meaning. While language is always formally vital to Blake’s philosophy, he isn’t often preoccupied with signs or words; rather, he broadens language, until it inhabits the complex activities and cultural “conventions” comprised within interpretive processes crossing physiology, epistemology, and society. In *Thel*, we could say we find the desire for a circumscribed language, and though we may sympathize with her rebelliousness, Blake stages her defiance in part as a stubborn resistance to an awareness of those ecologies. At another level still, the poem is about the artificiality of seeking solace from nature; the solace Thel receives from the shapes she conjures, and her voyage underground, is felt as cold comfort. Coaxing language from the ground seems to invite the side effect of confronting mortality head-on, linking the somehow affirming metaphor of “clay” to the more alienating, easily dispersed figure of “dust.” Such a mortality-effect follows a simple principle of inversion: to allow that metaphorical language may lend a stony world life may also mean to show how life may be turned to stone.¹²⁷

In *The Book of Thel*, Blake borrows (among other things) the generic descent to the underworld, through which we glimpse eighteenth century theories of geological regeneration and matter’s flexibility; but I would argue that, using these narrative materials, the poem begins to formulate a theory of linguistic geology, about vocal form and language’s softness and solidity. That “deep” place where subterranean hearts “infix” their “fibrous roots” is in part a temporal depth; in Thel’s provisional death, we glimpse a momentary collapse of the figure enacted by the comparison between human and mineral, where their “lifespans” are joined. Levinson points out that *The Book of Thel* was composed between the *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, and may be read as a transition between the two — a transition which does not simplify their relation, but which presents their dialogue in a different register. We now move to a more concise

¹²⁶ In some copies, the final two questions before this conclusion stray into apparently contradictory territory, asking why desire must be repressed (“Why a tender curb upon the youthful burning boy!/ Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?”) as though, perhaps, these questions follow somehow both from *and* in contradiction with the foregoing — and Blake’s decision to sometimes include them, sometimes paint them out, allows Thel’s reaction to communicate the same refusal either way.

¹²⁷ This point has been made in different contexts by numerous critics. Compare Mitchell, describing Marx on the fetish: “The ‘horror’ of fetishism was not just that it involved an illusory, figurative act of treating material objects as if they were people, but that this transfer of consciousness to ‘stocks and stones’ seemed to drain the humanity out of the idolater” (“The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm,” *Iconologies*, 191); or Paul de Man, on epitaphic address, which he describes as “the latent threat that inhabits prosopopoeia... that by making the dead speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (“Autobiography as De-Facement,” 78). Recent important additions to this literature include Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things*, and Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality*.

expression of Blake's linguistic geology, in the form of a conversation *between* experience and innocence.

IV. Metres Meet: Linguistic Geology in "The Clod and the Pebble"

Let my attitude be what it may, it cannot turn a stone into a human being.¹²⁸
— Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone.
— Blake, *Jerusalem*

Northrop Frye once described "The Clod and the Pebble" as expressing "irreconcilable attitudes to love" (72-3), and this reflects an available, common sense reading of the poem. When, for example, George Eliot chose a selective citation as the epigraph to a single chapter in *Middlemarch* (1871-2), she emphasized this evident possible reading: a dialogue on love, contrasting optimistic and pessimistic caricatures of the moods of love's possible drives. Though I am interested in why the poem's strange set-up stages attitudes toward love, or attachment to self and other, I want to balance this reading by dwelling on the poem's apparent contingencies. In particular, I want to focus on the stanza quietly intervening between these opposed views, which grounds the poem's voices by naming their utterers, and thereby makes it not only a dialogue on love, but a dialogue voiced by geological forms.

Blake habitually uses the language of solidifying, contracting, narrowing, or shrinking as indicative of restrictive epistemological conditions, or a progressive sensory straitening (hence what Heringman called his revolt against the "regime of solid surfaces" is usually interpreted as anti-materialist).¹²⁹ But, as I have already tried to show, solidity functions in more ways than one: a stone that speaks can communicate that language's forms have a substance that cannot simply be manipulated at will. Like Humboldt, Blake casts language's invisible temporality as geological matter, but instead of letting language-as-stone be lifelessly worn away, he gives the stone a voice to express its attitude in the midst of disintegration: this kind of attention to matter's mobility might be viewed as another kind of materialism. The stone's language animates it, dramatizes its attitudes. Figural properties of stoniness are magnified, cast in conversation with one another. We might say that Blake raises the questions, on the shrinking stone's behalf, — worn away until what? Until it is nothing but gravel, sand, silt, liquid? What happens along the way? When does a lifeless thing 'die'? How does a language mark out what it feels like to inhabit a body with a given composition? Never mind origin: what does it feel like to be *in the midst* of language?

The poems (or plates) of *Songs of Experience* were published in numerous sequences, but I will take up "The Clod and the Pebble" as it appears in the most frequent of these. In a number of manuscript copies, the poem is the third of the *Songs of Experience*, following the "Introduction" and "Earth's Answer," the pair that always

¹²⁸ Cavell 398

¹²⁹ See accounts from Frye to Heringman and Gigante, in which solidity is viewed in a negative light. I would want to modify this view to admit the possibility that tropes of solidity do important work in Blake's poetry, showing how shared cultural forms become naturalized over time.

begins the book.¹³⁰ The “Introduction” begins with an imperative to “Hear the voice of the Bard,” whose experience extends to the “Holy Word / That walked among the ancient trees,” and moves on to exhort the earth to “turn away no more”: “O Earth, O Earth, return!” This invocation of Earth transmits to it a personified form, an earth whose hard “answer” sets the tone for an attitude imbued with what these songs will portray as “experience”: as with Thel, this can mean a skeptical defiance or restless disobedience, but it also stands for a resistance that will take many negative shapes — put-upon, resigned, cynical, hard, cold, poisoned, sulky, passive (and in the language of psychology “passive-aggressive,” exhibiting a “learned helplessness”), a prototype for Nietzschean *ressentiment*.¹³¹ In this opening poem, the Earth refuses to look forward to the dawn of its night, attributes what is best to the lost past, and projects the selfishness it absorbs from its own self-pity outward onto its objects, which from then on bear and reflect the hostility of its accusations. By turns it is unable to see, care, or enjoy that it transforms its world through its own attitude — a capacity which, of course, is a constant through Blake’s writing (along with its corollary: “they became what they beheld”). In short, it illustrates how imagining oneself as literally *bound* by one’s limits blames that resistance on an unspecified “other,” turning its world (and itself) to stone.

From “Earth’s Answer” we move to “The Clod and the Pebble,” a transition that grows significant when we turn our attention from the global address of the introduction and the subsequent personification of the earth, to the way this Earth is then in turn answered at a more local level by two of its mineral constituents. The voice we hear first, without yet knowing whose it is, is the Clod’s, and it takes up the subject of “love” as it has been bitterly tossed out by the Earth’s final line (“Eternal Bane! / That free love with bondage bound”), as though in surprised or quizzical, if only oblique, rejoinder:

Love seeketh not Itself to please
Nor for itself hath any care
But for another gives its ease
And builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.

This expression of faith bears a certain determined naiveté, as though the Clod were repeating what it had always heard to be true; its faith is a received, as though a quoted, optimism. The absence of quotation marks, so common to the overlapping voices of Blake’s poetry, only reinforces the rehearsed quality of its speech. The succeeding stanza introduces the voices formally, encouraging us imaginatively to flesh out the parable-like pair of the title, giving bodies to the voices:

¹³⁰ “The Clod and the Pebble” also sometimes appears as the final poem, and somewhat less frequently near the middle. These alternate positionings in different editions represent other compositional “readings” of the poem’s place in the course of the work, and certainly merit further consideration; indeed, part of this poem’s usefulness to the work as a whole is its uniquely explicit, apparently simplistic, dialectical exposition of two polar points of view interpretable as “innocence” and “experience” respectively; hence it does different but related work as an opening, a medial term, or an endpoint. For more on the notion of shuffling and intertextuality among the “Songs,” see Rajan, “Early Texts: ‘The Eye Altering Alters All’,” from *The Supplement of Reading*.

¹³¹ Numerous following “characters” or voices from *Songs* will clearly fall into this category: the infant of “Infant Sorrow” the ‘sullen’ exemplar of learned helplessness, the voice of “A Poison Tree” propelled by repressed aggression, the voice of “The Garden of Love” expressing the personal anguish of the unjustly wronged.

So sung a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattles feet;
But a Pebble of the brook,
Warbled out these metres meet.

The conjunction “But” implies an unbalanced exchange, as though the rejoinder to come is expected to refute, or at least to legitimately counter the first voice; and the “little”-ness of the Clod is pointedly met with the “meet”-ness of the Pebble’s “metres”: the Pebble’s stanza, so well-matched in diction, so apparently harmonious in sound, may come off like a parody, a dry and cutting rebuke. Or perhaps it is rather the case that the second voice, the Pebble, answering the same prompt to address what may be the trouble with “love,” *has not even heard the first*:

Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to its delight;
Joys in another’s loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven’s despite.

Are these voices arguing? Are they even aware that they are part of the same conversation? On initially examining the poem, we may find that the Pebble gains the upper hand, turns a trump over the Clod, with this wry satire (hence the poem’s position in *Songs of Experience*, rather than *Songs of Innocence*). Yet when we return to the beginning, as the reader is not unlikely to do, if only to try to get the voices straight, we find that the “but” that offsets the halves, or the voices, of the poem, and gives the Pebble the last word, is itself countered or balanced by the evening “and” of the title, and arguably the pride of place given to the Clod’s opening.

And yet, the poem leaves open the possibility that their songs, though read in sequence, occur *simultaneously*, narratively speaking. That is, the temporal progression of the two voices is not finally settled by a mere “but” (as it would be, more definitively, with a “then”). This leaves open the possibility that, though we cannot read them this way, the voices are meant to sing simultaneously, sing over one another, that in their contradictory tones they nevertheless carry a kind of dissonant harmony. Superimposing the songs (that is, the first and third stanzas), we find that 15 of the 32 syllables (counting “Heaven” as elided, “heav’n”) — almost exactly half — are identical, with “heaven” and “hell” occurring precisely ‘on top’ of their opposite terms, striking a chord of discord, suspended in their attempts to cancel the other out or take precedence. (Stacking the stanzas in this way may glance toward the structural principle of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.) The forms seem to enact variations on a single form, the voices appearing as temporarily distinguished layers of the same ground (a layering also conveyed by the plate’s image, in which the words of the poem seem to sediment the space where the brook flows, between the drinking livestock above and the amphibious and reptilian life-forms below). Thus there are several distinct senses in which this particular “Song” carries two songs in one.

There is, moreover, a more immediate sense in which the personified earth of “Earth’s Answer” has cleaved, in “The Clod and the Pebble,” into two of its many forms, and that these geological forms themselves express different geological truths, their attitudes figured according to their lifespans. A clod of clay has then a view of the world

quite different from a pebble: the Clod's "lifespan" is presumably comparatively short, as its material composition is poignantly vulnerable to erosion, the weather or, in this case, cattle's feet. It is pictured in blissful ignorance, on the point of being pulverized even as it runs through its sunny creed. The Pebble, by contrast — having doubtless watched the Clod's "little" drama play out again and again — is wearied by its comparatively slow decomposition: the brook that is its home gently abrades its surface, dismantling it grain by grain, and in the meantime it has the leisure to grow nihilistic, or at least sufficient time to cultivate its bitter, skeptical worldview. The two worldviews, as the reading above suggests, can be imagined as timeframes overlapping one another: in the "world" of the poem, the songs take the same amount of time to sing, and the same space on the page, though the "warbling" of the pebble's voice gives it a different sound to match its different temporality, as though it had to be treated somehow to be understood, like a cassette tape whose sound is manipulated, a sluggish resonance distorted to a warble by being accelerated.

In this case, the pebble, due to a literal hardness, actually has a wider or longer view of life than the literally soft Clod. We might see this as the physiological — but clearly also enculturated or 'citational' — composition of the Clod and Pebble emerging in accordance with worldview. Such a theoretical declaration will hardly surprise readers of Blake, since some of his best-known passages recall the coincidence of bodily and especially sensory limits with epistemological and ethical views (e.g., "The eye altering alters all," "Nor is it possible to Thought/ A greater than itself to know," "How do you know but every bird that cuts the *airy way*, is an immense world of delight, closed by your *senses five*?"). From a Böhmean vantage point, there is a strong "natural" correlation, a mutual formation, between how a creature is made and how it expresses itself, the way it grasps or attaches to its surrounding world. (This need not imply that bodily technology *determines* knowledge; correlation does not require a strictly functional, mechanically causal, or behaviorist account, and Blake certainly does not give one.) A different, more stabilizing kind of linguistic naturalism might link the mere sounds a creature is capable of making, segmented by a given metric — alphabetical, onomatopoeic, phonemic — with its thought-capacity, attributing its limits to corporeal equipment. But Blake, like Herder, views bodily composition within more encompassing systems of social and environmental involvement or commitment. In fact Blake is if anything more intent still on aligning apparently psychological states (joy, disappointment) or intellectual attitudes (optimism, skepticism) with physical and cultural coordinates. For Blake, language is deeply enmeshed within — emergent from, beholden to, creative of — other attitudes and behaviors, material, social and spiritual considerations, expansive patterns or structures of knowledge and feeling inevitably subject to change.

To achieve these effects, and to stretch our picture of language in this manner, the poem's parable crucially relies on an illustration of how conceptions of time inflect such knowledge structures, and the attitudes toward the world that knowledge helps create. "The Clod and the Pebble," with its bluntly contrasted voices, reveals more directly than most of his obscure poetic dramas that for Blake, the voice is shaped by manifold external influences, usually invisible to the speaker; and that one may heuristically imagine these external influences by thinking of them within differentiated geologic scales of time. Then we can see that many conceptions of time may find their way into matter, or that matter simultaneously inhabits numerous temporalities, substantively

altering how the world is interpreted. By reimagining the mineral world's hard, cold matter in the contexts of familiar attitudes, correlated with material lifespans, Blake compels the speaking subject to feel complicity or material cooperation with the surrounding world, a feeling that may come as a threat (as it did for *Thel*), but also potentially as a comfort (though we may associated this "comfort" more closely with Wordsworth than with Blake). These correlations are recognizable in the philosophical and geological speculations of the era, as suggestions for understanding deep relations between forms of matter as superficially opposite as granite and "the human heart" (Goethe). For this reason, materialist and geological discourses in the final decades of the eighteenth century, like the afterlife of Spinoza's monism in the peculiar materialisms of Diderot or Goethe, or the innovative materialism underlying Hutton's geology, can help us magnify the conversation in "The Clod and the Pebble," and see its stark contrast playing out in different ways across Blake's poetics. These debates contextualize Blake's experiments with voices acted out not only in deep time (the reanimated "voices of the ground" heard by special dispensation, in *Thel*) but in times of *different* depths (the clod against the pebble). But Blake's "naturalizing" linguistics correlates not individual language units with objects in the world, but rather embeds abstract voices in socialized and materialized worldviews; and because this is so, the animation of geological figures as linguistic creatures clearly transforms the desire to read the geologic record into something more like a "linguistic geology," a quasi-materialist poetics that sets out to alter our very perception of matter and its apparent fixity or permanence. One rhetorical effect of animating mineral matter is to set in motion the theoretical premises introduced in the linguistic anthropologies of Herder and Humboldt, picturing language as a sort of concrete expression of culturally inflected modes of apprehension, brought into focus by imagining a graduated continuity with what lies outside that finite ability to apprehend. The 'finitude' of the linguistic creature can then be represented as a gift, rather than a curse: if the limits of its awareness are invisibly in motion, language's hard or fixed forms also have room to breathe.

The final passages de Man discusses in his tremendously influential essay "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," with which I began, exemplify an early Romantic metaphysics whose figurative structure outlines a "new kind of relationship between nature and consciousness" (14), an innovation that inverts the desire for "earthly things" upward toward a lifting, spreading ether.¹³² Contrasting these passages with Hölderlin's apparently straightforward desire for words to grow like flowers, de Man writes:

The ontological priority, housed at first in the earthly and pastoral 'flower,' has been transposed into an entity that could still, if one wishes, be called 'nature,' but could no longer be equated with matter, objects, earth, stones, or flowers. The nostalgia for the object has become a nostalgia for an entity that could never, by its very nature, become a particularized presence. (15)¹³³

¹³² De Man himself of course defends the romantics against those critics inclined to call them "'primitivist,' 'naturalistic,' or even 'pantheistic'": indeed, he names the romantics "the first modern writers to have put in question...the ontological priority of the sensory object" (16).

¹³³ Whether and to whom the current critical purchase of "new materialisms" — e.g., "object oriented ontology," thing-power materialism, and so on — will seem another "nostalgia for the object" has, perhaps, something to do with an ongoing Romanticism.

Despite the sense that these various things (“matter, objects,” etc) are being reduced to one *kind* of thing by de Man’s list, I have pursued the gradation among kinds of matter which de Man himself invited us to recognize, between the affective associations conjured respectively by the figures of *flowers* and *stones*. De Man might be read here as combatting the presumption of Romanticism’s complicity in valorizing the *Boden* of *Blut und Boden*. But of course the same transposition characteristic of Romanticism that he describes, necessitating a new “nature,” necessitates a new “matter” as well, and the different geological world opening up through scientific and philosophic debate is very clearly present in the Romantics’ visions of material landscapes shaped by natural processes.

Note that in order to attain this ethereal, rarified atmosphere, each writer de Man cites, as he himself notes, presents a scene in the craggy heights of the Swiss Alps. Bearing in mind Heringman’s account of the relation between the sublime in aesthetics, the cultural discourses of tourism and the picturesque, and an increased interest in mining and geological processes around 1800, I would argue that the imaginative transports reached in these figurative flights never fully dispose of materiality — even if in order to keep it in play, they must shift *matter*’s range of application, just as the upward thrust of what de Man is identifying in Romantic poetics might still be “called ‘nature’.” Not unlike Goethe sitting on the mountain and addressing his granite seat, the Alpine scenes de Man tracks are haunted not only by air but also by rocks. Stone’s formation and peculiar animacy, so distant from the flower’s, slows the passage of time, something that is pivotal for the “new kind of relationship” being established between nature and consciousness or language.¹³⁴ (It would be interesting to contrast these literary examples that seem to migrate upward with Thel’s progress from flower, to cloud, and back down to mineral matter.)

To look ahead to Wordsworth the “naturalist” linguist of Chapter Three, there is actually a moment in de Man’s citation here from Book VI of the *The Prelude*, known also as “Simplon Pass,” in which something like the thought experiment of seeing words act in the manner of stones takes place. Amidst a rapid sequence of natural imagery, which Wordsworth will claim is “all like workings of one mind,” we find:

The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them...

In these audible images, we get some idea of the mobility of the idea behind “The Clod and the Pebble”: if Blake seems to frame his figures allegorically, albeit in a somewhat inscrutable allegory, Wordsworth tames the thought by couching it as visionary hallucination. In these lines of Wordsworth’s, language doesn’t *originate like* stone, as it does with Hölderlin’s flowers; yet clearly *a* language issues from these stony forms, if only as the psychic residue of the encounter, from the consciousness of their looming, ineffable and ominous. One can see how the impressions of geological investigation and debate persist alongside

¹³⁴ As I will show in Chapter III, de Man’s own essay “Time and History in Wordsworth” helps establish the importance of temporality, and of plural temporalities, for comprehending what Wordsworth hopes to convey through his natural imagery. See also Wyatt, *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (particularly “Duration and decay: the abyss of time,” 150-168).

impressions of poetic sublimity, and the question of stone's animacy merging with that of its linguistic capacity seems to give them slow, invisible motion. There is little more than the recognition here that a language is happening; there seems to be no question of understanding this audible yet inarticulate expression. Yet the unequivocal insistence on stone's presence as linguistic — “muttered,” “spake,” “voice” — *animates* these geologic forms, by *hearing* them as talking things. If the “as if,” in Wordsworth's lines, seems at first to undermine the solidity of the metaphor of speech, still, at the point it appears, almost as an afterthought, we have already imagined our way too far into the geological conversation to cancel its impression: the hallucination has taken effect. The net result is in fact to attract attention to a language *already present*, something not reducible to individual words: this is the *felt* language which I will argue coincides with Wordsworth's “nature,” in Chapter Three. Wordsworth's natural world in a sense confirms the moves traced in Blake's poetics, with its different kinds of solid surfaces — inclusive of artificial and felt languages — changing over different scales of time (or ‘lifespans’).

Such moments in Romanticism as “The Clod and the Pebble” ask what correlations between language and nature can look like by, again, contemplating linguistic roots as patterns of changing relations, whose lines may be traced but whose ends or final limits cannot be found. Romantic “etymology” names, as I have argued, a desire to uproot fixed forms of nature ratified by older linguistic naturalisms, even as it maintains that something called “nature” always stands by to dissolve the cultural distinctions imposed by language. A prime technique for modeling this dissolution is to reveal how disparately temporality can be imparted to language. The fact that not all timescales or “patient periods” are visible to the speaker in language's midst does not mean they can't be imagined, and the sense of stone as a “resistant” material moving or changing invisibly over deep time is used an effective way to represent this invisible process (again, I view this as one of Romanticism's “more retiring representational effects”: see footnote 1, above). This is one way to show how words' affinity with aspects of the linguistic environment exceeding perceptual awareness are constant and inevitable: seeing words as issuing forth from earth and stones is a figurative resource, supplied by historical discourses, for “natural” reliability or apparent universality but also for those externalized alien forms of language, and encompassing systems of signification, which are so difficult to express. The questions I ask here form a trivial entry in the history discoverable through the new figurative possibilities allowed by the shifting connotations of “stoniness.” Recall geologist Charles Lyell's later claim, cited earlier: “it is time that the geologist should in some degree overcome those first and natural impressions which induced poets of old to select the rock as the emblem of firmness.”¹³⁵ Concealed by this apparent “firmness” is a longer-term mobility that figures like Hutton and Blake cannot help but see and illustrate. Showing how even what seems most solid is invisibly moving may seem to cause the ground to give way; it may, to a questing desire like *Thel*, feel like an abyss of uncertainty (cf. Humboldt's reference to language's inaccessible origin as its “dark unrevealed depth,”¹³⁶ which gestures back to Herder's “darkness”), and language's limits once imagined and feared have sometimes

¹³⁵ Cited in Balaam 17.

¹³⁶ Humboldt, *On Language*, 62.

been imagined as precipice-like. But by appealing to nature's "differences of scale," as Whitehead would later advocate — the depth of time made visible in rock's forms, but also the simultaneity of matter's diverse temporalities — Blake, not unlike Hutton, suggests that the profile of this linguistic abyss has a gradient, which all living and material forms occupy, and that its different surfaces, however apparently solid, mute or resistant, may still when closely attended to teach us to think in new ways — to hear new languages, or give us new sense.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ An alternative metaphor to the abyss of uncertainty relevant here is the "bedrock," alluded to in both Freud and Wittgenstein (in crucially different senses), beyond which there is nothing more to be said. In Freud, this bedrock [gewachsener Fels] is biological; in Wittgenstein, it is a bedrock [harten Felsen] of criteria of agreement between linguistic creatures, a point at which justifications are exhausted, or at which a speaker's "spade is turned" [Spaten biegt sich zurück] — perhaps again like Johnson's boot rebounding from a boulder. Both are on some level different constructions of limits of 'belonging' to a social community. Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable"; Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §217. Cf Emerson: "[Intuition is] the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, where all things find their common origin" (Self-Reliance).

Chapter III

Diversions of Etymology: Tooke, Coleridge, and Wordsworth

“Was ich bin, bin ich geworden”
— Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* (1778)¹³⁸

“How shall I trace the history, where seek / The origin of what I then have felt?”
— Wordsworth, 1799 *Prelude* (2.399-400)

I. Introduction: Felt Transitions

In his two-book 1799 *Prelude*, Wordsworth “traces” and “derives” features of a “felt” language that can only be captured by expanding familiar linguistic frameworks. There is a strange vacillation, in this poem, between the impulse toward origins expressed in the epigraph above, and the conviction that such an impulse will inevitably be frustrated: “Hard task to analyse a soul,” he writes, simultaneously declaring his aim and its difficulties, for the soul’s instincts and thoughts have “no beginning.” Wordsworth’s vacillation defies the way that most people, confronted with the task of tracing the meaning of their thoughts, will happily “Run through the history and birth of each / As of a single independent thing.” It is not a coincidence that this simplistic principle of causation, happy to settle individual origins for the “birth” of things, approximates the typical etymological habit of believing in a stable, true meaning for a given word, independent of its temporal or indexical attachments. Wordsworth’s difficult “analysis” — and I take it that the etymological sense of “unloosening” or dissolving is in play — strives to trace or follow vast complexities in signification. Once called “Wordsworth’s essay on the origins of language [as poetic language],”¹³⁹ the famous passage about “infancy” that follows uses this pre-linguistic state to reveal how a mind first “spreads” and accumulates associations, how of itself it “gives” meaning and equally “receives” it from nature. For Wordsworth, this “infancy” or unarticulated, *felt* language is always with us; its “beginning” is ongoing. In what follows, I want to account for the etymological mood of Wordsworth’s poetic method, as well as for its innovation in expanding, through *nature*, an unthinkable slow temporal motion through its picture of language.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Herder, *Werke II*, 692. The passage uses the organic metaphor of tree-growth, but not to emphasize grounding or rooted unity; rather, Herder emphasizes temporal process and interaction with a contingent environment (made of elements not orchestrated by an agent, “die ich nicht um mich satzte”): “Je tiefer jemand in sich selbst, in den Bau und Ursprung seiner edelsten Gedanken hinab stieg, desto mehr wird er Augen und Füße decken und sagen: ‘was ich bin, bin ich geworden. Wie ein Baum bin ich gewachsen: der Keim war da; aber Luft, Erde und alle Elemente, die ich nicht um mich satzte, mußten beitragen, den Keim, die Frucht, den Baum zu bilden.’”

¹³⁹ Paul de Man, “Wordsworth and the Victorians,” 90.

¹⁴⁰ Throughout this chapter, I use Wittgenstein’s term “picture of language” as shorthand for what anthropologists call a “folk” linguistic theory (see note 3 below), a set of assumptions or rules defining how language is understood to function. The visual metaphor, though convenient, has clear limits, which Wittgenstein himself recognizes: the “ideal” that functions as one dominant picture of language is “like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off” (39). This reminds us that the “picture” is a medium, rather than an image. Stanley Cavell has pointed out that the line about removing the glasses does not actually claim that such a thing would be possible.

This will take us first on a detour through the work of the preeminent figure in etymological speculation in England, during the period when the early British Romantics were establishing themselves. Asserting enthusiastic praise for the “invention of signs,” celebrated etymologist and radical John Horne Tooke cautioned, in 1778, that there was nevertheless “nothing more productive of error when we neglect to observe their complication” (13). This admirable caveat looks unfortunately ironic once we observe Tooke’s own theoretical drift toward reductive simplicity, already suggested in the phrase “*invention of signs.*” Still, his technique for debunking a dominant picture of grammar by unmasking the meanings of “insignificant” words through etymology resonated with his contemporaries, from Bentham to Godwin, from Erasmus Darwin to Hazlitt and Coleridge. Tooke argued that apparently meaningless parts of speech were formed by gradual abbreviation: “if” was simply the distant but legitimate offspring of “yifan,” Anglo-Saxon for *to give*, and “yet” that of “yetan,” *to get*, their legitimacy testified to by that fact that such words “still retain their original signification” (105). Different aspects of his theory emerged for his diverse readers as primary; for the early British Romantic poets, it was not the thrill of debunking, much less the restitution of a singular or “original” sense, but rather the prospect of linguistic change visibly guaranteed by its reshaping over a span of time. The approaches to etymology of Coleridge and Wordsworth were intended to offer correctives — different in their respective cases — through the dissolution of the hardened associations latent in the language of a society. Through a language given time, they found the complications — to take up Tooke’s term — inherent in superficially simple “signs,” words and associations, but without trying to reduce them, as Tooke had, to an “original signification.” To read Wordsworth’s poetic narratives etymologically, it helps to find the distinctive innovations for a Romantic etymology contributed, in interlocking sequence, by Tooke the linguist, Coleridge the critic, and Wordsworth the poet.¹⁴¹

Tooke is widely remembered for proposing the impersonal principle of *abbreviation* activating language change. Rarely considered, however, is the degree to which Tooke’s influence was responsible for urging Coleridge to the concept of a language’s “Law of growth,” or the correspondent cultural “instinct of growth” guiding the production of meaning and its “desynonymization” or refinement. Partly in response to Coleridge’s picture of language, Wordsworth was in turn compelled to enact language’s temporal life in his poetry, through the accumulation of passional affinities that register the course of meaning’s transformation, encouraging in his readership (or so he fervently hoped) the poetic practices that were to stimulate change; but, as we will see, the change he envisions tends less toward Coleridge’s cultural *growth* than to natural *overgrowth*. Especially in the *Lyrical Ballads* and earliest draft of the *Prelude*, but also in his prose works, Wordsworth’s myths break down human linguistic origins by picturing them within vast natural histories. These histories contrast the perspectives of varying scales of time, emphasizing an attachment that comes about not through locating common origins, but through tracing the common tendency of things. This switch is

¹⁴¹ Such a corrective, already following different paths with Wordsworth and Coleridge (not to mention, e.g., Tooke or Bentham), has its share of descendants, among them Kenneth Burke’s “disintegrating art” — an aesthetic concept he coined in the 1930s in part as an alternative to the simplifications of the “emotivist” linguistics favored both by Ogden & Richards (much influenced by Bentham) and by logical positivism: “society might well be benefited by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity” (*Counter-Statement*, 105).

articulated, in the first “Essay Upon Epitaphs,” in the thought that the inexorable question of “whither” is as pressing as the question (customarily pursued by etymological logic) of “whence.” Thus the tracing work of etymology tends to carry Wordsworth not just backward, but forward as well, since for him “origin” is reconceived as a continuous process.

This linked trio of thinkers gives us a sense of the dissolution of language that, particularly in Wordsworth, counteracted that atomistic habit of depending on its concretized units — bounded lexically, as words, or even more narrowly *nouns*, the part of speech often privileged either implicitly or explicitly in linguistic theories (though one controversy of eighteenth-century language theory debated the relative originality of the verb versus that of the noun).¹⁴² Such emphasis on the solid-seeming parts of speech can scarcely help but encourage conceptions of language favoring narratives of naming, of active invention — and a consequent notion of agentive arbitrariness stemming from the “contract” myths of sign production.¹⁴³ In this chapter, I propose to view this notion of words as names, obediently accompanying “real” objects, as presumptively dissolved in the alternative etymological worlds of Coleridge and Wordsworth. Instead of resting with the idea of elements of meaning as “arbitrary,” or arrived at through a species of “voluntary Imposition” (as Locke had it), as though signs were artificially invented tools deliberately wielded by rational individuals for specific purposes (as in grasping, naming, and communicating), the sign is rather understood to come about (and disappear) through some natural process or history.¹⁴⁴ Such a process diverts emphasis to the temporal and impersonal “life” of signs. The life of the sign is then predicated on its supersession, its transformability, and language itself envisioned as material and soluble. For Coleridge and Wordsworth, the necessity of dissolving, through poetic activity, what both call “arbitrary” in language-formation, and the problem of describing “parts of speech” or

¹⁴² Blanchot addresses this “ancient prejudice” so: “Etymology fixes the attention upon the *word* as the seminal cell of language,” turning language into a “nomenclature” (96). One might readily compare this habit with the tendency to regard language as composed essentially of names of objects, the first “picture of language” with which Wittgenstein takes issue in *Philosophical Investigations*. This primitive “picture” finds an echo in the notion of the dominant “folk linguistics” of Western language theories described in the linguistic anthropology of Michael Silverstein, which his own work counters: namely, the idea that language is primarily a way of referring to or predicating about the world, i.e., is a “semantico-referential” tool. As cultural myths (deeply intertwined with supposedly non-mythic cultural forms), the concepts of a “picture of language” and of a “folk linguistics” are comparable to but perhaps somewhat more flexible than Roy Harris’s critique of the “Western myth of language,” a useful if broad dissent from the trend in linguistic thought which takes for granted that the basis of language is the transparent transmission of ideas between the individual minds of linguistic subjects. Coleridge and Wordsworth, in their joint ventures into language philosophy, carry out something like these attempts to let the look and feel of language be transformed.

¹⁴³ For example, James Harris, an important foil for Tooke (as we will see), expresses this contract myth of language origin when he writes, of the articulate yet residually “animal” sounds of human speech, that “the *Meaning* of those Animal Sounds is derived, not *from* Nature, but *from* Compact” (314), rather as though it were agreed upon by committee.

¹⁴⁴ As at every point that the terms “arbitrary” and “natural” are used with relation to language, I am recalling questions raised in the opening introduction: What was the polemic force of a reaction against the “arbitrary” dimension of signs, for Romantic era language theorists? What are the most important features of “nature,” especially, here, in Wordsworth? How are “natural” and “arbitrary” features able to coexist in certain accounts of language — yielding the suggestion that both are indicative of ways of thinking or feeling *about* language? And how does attention to language formation in particular raise this suggestion, proposing (sometimes natural) *histories* of the formation of arbitrary terms or units?

elements and aspects of discourse not recognizable as words or segmentable as lexical units, allows each to theorize aspects of language which may be felt but not articulated (which are, perhaps, “non-lexicalizable”¹⁴⁵); though at least for Coleridge, they may *become* articulable. Focusing on their awareness of the temporal in language will show us how the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Wordsworth’s “Hart-Leap Well” conjure up a picture of “felt” language, within whose expressive frame one can at best feel one’s way around.

If what Coleridge eventually called the “radical difference” between their respective pictures of language comes into focus when we compare their attempts to mark out a desirable sense of the “common,” it is Wordsworth’s version that strives to feel change as language’s constant, to make language visible in motion. Wordsworth’s time-lapse views of language change, exemplified in “Hart-Leap Well,” make visible its reformation through disintegration. In his distinctive differences from Coleridge, he thematizes the effects of weathering and decay, through analogies between mental processes and physical manifestations, which concentrate on the creative efficacy of dissolving in a manner quite distinct from that “dissolution” which Coleridge ascribes to the Imagination, in the famous definition of the *Biographia Literaria* (see below). Amid nature’s forms, and particularly the woods and crags whose muteness and “deep quiet” (“There is an eminence”) can, despite their obscurity, nevertheless be felt within the frame of Wordsworth’s picture of language, the poetic attention recognizes its inevitable conversation with the “mighty sum/ Of things forever speaking” (“Expostulation and Reply”).

One can see how Wordsworth’s conception of nature — crucial to his linguistics — offsets what has been called his “green language”¹⁴⁶ with a *grey*, but not merely indifferent, language, with the “rocks that muttered close upon our ears.../As if a voice were in them” (“Simplon Pass”).¹⁴⁷ Mortality reorganizes matter in unthought forms of vitality, and Wordsworth watches how uniquely various bodies, in these various forms, experience changes of state, how despite the appearance of solidity they “feel/ The touch of earthly years,” participating in earth’s spin and orbit, as the inexhaustible phrase has it, “With rocks, and stones, and trees” (“A Slumber”). This vision of the world through inhuman scales of time prompts a parallel vision of language, in its continuously changing state, as biodegrading. For readers of Wordsworth, it has been all too easy to let the grey get upstaged by the green, but the complicity between the forms of nature and language in Wordsworth lies, I think, in their being given, in parallel, the invisible but continuous change conceived through the viewpoint of geologic time. So, though I am conscious that words like “biodegrade” threaten to reinstate a simplistic organicism to Wordsworth’s “natural forms,” I hope it will be understood within the sophisticated,

¹⁴⁵ See Silverstein 1976 for an account of “non-lexicalizable” language (“Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description”).

¹⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature.”

¹⁴⁷ This “grey” or stony language, a language of nature which is irreconcilably but not indifferently alien, carries out the promise of Blake’s thought experiment in “The Clod and the Pebble,” described in Chapter Two, where the two forms converse without really noticing one another. Wordsworth and Blake both contrast not just languages but *pictures* of language, framed by forms of life. This is perhaps akin to Timothy Morton’s investigation in *Ecology Without Nature* of how Romanticism represents gradations of “atmosphere,” when he writes for example that “The juxtapositions in Wordsworth and Blake set up complex rhythms between different kinds and levels of framing device” (Morton, 168).

temporally fraught concept of nature that emerges from his poetry. If so, this would be the result of the “etymologies” he traces through natural forms. This falls in line with those ecologies proposed in the previous chapters, meant not to reclaim the safe haven of nature, but to recall to the interactions of nature and its opposites (culture, the human, arbitrariness) the broader sense of contextualizing, interdependent, dynamic forces. Hence in the reading of “Hart-Leap Well” below, I aim to step back from the “green criticism” that settles perhaps too quickly and firmly on what is essential to Wordsworth’s “nature,” in favor of what one critic, writing of the changing significance of Wordsworth as “nature poet,” has recently called a “stone-colored criticism” (Fry).

In this manner, the cluster formed from the disparate thoughts of Tooke, Coleridge and Wordsworth — I will characterize them in succession as radical reformer, neologizing critic, and poet of “tendency” — helps understand how language appears differently to us when we see it through a different temporal lens, and how it behaves when framed by social histories and natural timescales of contrasting magnitudes. The concept of “nature” to which Wordsworth significantly contributed in his poetry takes shape in large part through the natural histories of language he composes. Following readings from the prose of Tooke and Coleridge, I examine Wordsworth’s “Hart-leap Well” in order to see how solidity and solubility take on a rhythm, mark the time, in his version of language change. Wordsworth’s picture has in its background the complexity of linguistic signification developed by Tooke and Coleridge, but he stretches this domain of signification until it is deeply interwoven with what he calls “nature and the language of the sense” (“Tintern Abbey”).

II. Dissolving the Problem: The Radical Reformer¹⁴⁸

The substance...of all that I have...to communicate on the subject of Language...would probably...have been finally consigned with myself to oblivion, if I had not been made the miserable victim of — *Two Propositions and a Conjunction*¹⁴⁹
— Tooke, *Purley*

According to Tooke, there were pressing reasons for publishing on language: defending himself in court on charges of treason, he tried ostentatiously to reanalyze crucial “Indeclinables” that formed part of the prosecution’s evidence. *A Letter to Mr*

¹⁴⁸ John Horne Tooke (the surname “Tooke” was, aptly enough, taken from a patron) was the son of a successful poulterer, and was as a result fortunate enough to attend Eton and Cambridge. The only British citizen to be jailed for his support of the American Revolutionary War, he was barred from Parliamentary office, and from a legal career, because he had been ordained a priest — though he preached only briefly (the conflict did not prevent him from arguing in the courts over the years or, eventually, from becoming an MP). A friend, then rival, of the infamous John Wilkes, he was also a member of the circle of literate radicals surrounding publisher Joseph Johnson (among whom he met Godwin, Hazlitt, Coleridge, and others), notorious in his time as host of his own raucous social gatherings, and as a tireless political organizer, letter-writer, pamphleteer, rabble-rouser and sponsor of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Besides exerting considerable pull in several careers he was professionally cut out for, but cut off from, Tooke also devoted a significant portion of his later life to linguistics, and was widely hailed at the time as the discoverer of indispensable truths about language change, before being more or less completely eclipsed in one generation, then more or less forgotten in two.

¹⁴⁹ *Purley*, 37-8; The passage retells Tooke’s version of the trial that led to his serving a year’s time in the King’s Bench Prison, at which he represented himself. See Olivia Smith, “Winged Words: Language and Liberty in John Horne Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley*,” in *Politics of Language 1791-1819*.

Dunning on the English Particle, written while he was in jail, was published in 1778; this was followed by the two volumes of *Epea Pteroenta: or, The Diversions of Purley* (in 1786 and 1805).¹⁵⁰ Once Tooke rewrote the *Letter* for inclusion in *The Diversions of Purley*, his etymological technique acquired a philosophical frame that implied, following Locke, that language might be reduced to fundamental ordinary empirical encounters with sensible phenomena. Carried to its extreme, one imagines this absolute reduction would result in something like Cratyllic or literal, physical origins of language, though this falls outside Tooke's scope. Because he is primarily concerned to show that the most common words (that seem least "significant") are signs of older, eroded signs, yet still retain their now concealed but permanent and stable signification, his etymological reductions are only carried out over a short chronology, just far enough to show that words like "if," "and" or "but" have meaning (but only one meaning), which has been forgotten due to their grammatical use. From this point of view, the excessive concentration on the intricacy and reality of syntactic distinction in the authoritative philosophical grammars of the time, James Harris's *Hermes* being the prime example, was a distraction from language's empirical basis (and gave unwarranted social privilege to the classically educated). Proceeding through the indeclinable particles, the first volume of *Diversions* declares at regular intervals this putatively empiricist, Lockean allegiance, e.g., "For *prepositions* also are the names of *real objects*" (259).¹⁵¹

Volume Two then extends the technique to demystifying abstract terms by vigorously reducing them to concrete and unified designations: so that after calling up a

¹⁵⁰ In the best-known account of Tooke's place in the history of linguistics, Hans Aarsleff (1967) uses Tooke as case study for the bridge between 18th century language philosophy and 19th century philology, traditionally recognized as the threshold of the modern science of linguistics. This is an instructive narrative, but one which forces us to dismiss his influence as an obstacle to philological progress. Foucault's *The Order of Things*, which mentions Tooke by name only once in a footnote, also suggests that he was a threshold figure. (Hazlitt apparently agreed: "Mr. Horne Tooke was one of those who may be considered as connecting links between a former period and the existing generation," 147). For Foucault, Tooke is the sort of pre-philological thinker who still does not recognize that languages are governed by internal variations dependent on regular patterns of grammatical coordination, on systematic structures; instead, language change occurs relatively haphazardly (285). This is true, up to a point. Yet though he does not see regularity in language change in the same way that the comparative philologists do, I would argue that the imaginative possibilities opened by the principle of *abbreviation* leaves language just impersonal enough to suggest a kind of independent structuring animus, and yet not cut ties with the speaker or her dialect.

¹⁵¹ The aim of tracing particles back to nouns or verbs is generally understood as a result of Tooke's indebtedness to materialist metaphysics, to Locke in particular, and especially to the idea that language derives originally from sensory impressions. But Tooke goes far beyond Locke in this pursuit. In a notorious passage from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke famously wrote: "I doubt not but, if we could trace them to their sources, we should find, in all languages, the names which stand for things that fall not under our senses to have had their first rise from sensible ideas. By which we may give some kind of guess what kind of notions they were, and whence derived, which filled their minds who were the first beginners of languages, and how nature, even in the naming of things, unawares suggested to men the originals and principles of all their knowledge" (Locke *Essay*, Book III, 5). As Aarsleff 1982, Land 1986, and Norton have each pointed out, this intriguing faith more or less directly inspired many of the eighteenth century's most feverish speculations about the origins of language on the one hand, and its forays into etymology on the other, even if for Locke (as Aarsleff in particular explains), this was not the beginning, but the end of the question. Tooke claims Locke as his guiding light, but the allegiance is more politically convenient than philosophically consistent: e.g., for the empiricist's "ideas," Tooke suggests we substitute "terms," throughout the *Enquiry*, so that language is understood to comprehend *all* aspects of thought (19).

list of seemingly unrelated words (e.g. *shot, shotten, shut, shuttle, shuttle cock, shoot, shout, shit, shitten, shittle, sheet, scot, scout, scate, skit*), Tooke can write, “All these, so variously written, pronounced, and applied, have but one common meaning: and are all the past participle [scaet] of the Anglo-Saxon and English verb [scytan], [scitan], to shite, i.e. projicere, dejicere, to throw, to cast forth, to throw out” (102). That initial call for attention to the “complication” of signs is lost, in fact directly confuted, by the repetition of the formula *x* “is merely,” “is but” *y*, which renders what he announced as the “complications” of language change a compact melodrama of intrigue and unveiling.

The technique of unveiling, in order to dissolve and even out syntactic categories, results in a strange paradox: Tooke’s linguistics, so manifestly driven by his radical politics, rest on this conservative principle of stabilization and unification. The most forcefully reductive feature of Tooke’s theory is his insistence that words have only one proper *meaning*, independent of their use or historical variation. So all this dazzling performance of language’s changes, in written form and pronunciation, through combination and abbreviation, contributes to the rather dull thought that many words are really one, and that there is one meaning per word, and one meaning only, held equitably in common by a language community. What has been thought of as Tooke’s chemical procedure of dissolution sets out programmatically to find such “radicals,” elementary particulate matter or precipitates, and the purpose of this method is to be rid of inessential grammatical distinctions (this procedure being explicitly politicized, with the social resonance of *distinction*); but his aim, to find a basic few syntactic categories, and reduce all lexical items to abbreviated transformations of these, puts *meaning* change out of the question. The result is that his revolt against what he perceived as grammatical conservatism results in semantic fundamentalism: “the words themselves appear to me to continue faithfully and steadily attached, each to the standard under which it was originally inlisted [sic]” (42).¹⁵² Tooke’s politically motivated attacks against the picture of language defined by a stiff universalizing grammar resulted in an etymological method that allowed language’s temporality to take fluid shape, yet paralyzed itself with its claim of semantic permanence. How might we then understand the relation between the linguistic analysis Tooke performs, and the conclusions he draws? For the poets, the promised reforms of radical politics may have seemed aptly emblemized both by the way Tooke’s etymology changed conventional pictures of language, and by the revolutionary possibilities of language change itself; yet the interdict on meaning change and the philosophy that imposed it must have seemed, by contrast, inept.

What did it mean for Tooke to bring his politics to bear on the study of language? Just as the paradigm of “reform” demonstrably stands as the pattern behind Tooke’s virtuosity in reshaping familiar parts of speech, there is notable poetic justice to the convergence of senses in the term “radical,” allowing a more than accidental resonance between politics and language origin. When Hazlitt puns that the radical Tooke “strikes at the root of his subject,” for example, he seems to call both to mind (along with its chemical meaning, a “radical” could refer to an indeclinable lexical item).¹⁵³ Indeed

¹⁵² Olivia Smith writes that Tooke “intended to situate abstract terms within a temporal rather than an idealist context” (Smith 144), giving them a human dimension in their pronunciation and usage, historicizing them. But this temporality, despite illustrating the historicity and plasticity of word-forms, is perverted by the claim that their individual *meanings* are single and permanent.

¹⁵³ The same point is made in Turley, in his intriguing new reading of Wordsworth’s “Simon Lee,” in which the poet’s narrator assists an old man he comes across to remove a tree: “with a single blow / The

Tooke writes already in the *Letter to John Dunning*, “They will probably say that I carry with me my old humour in politics, though my subject is now different,” and early reviews were much concerned with whether his reputation in his two favorite “subjects” could be separated.¹⁵⁴ In fact the political epithet “radical,” a shortened form of the term “radical reformer,” is first attested in the 1790s, so that it is easy to imagine Tooke, the tireless organizer and pamphleteer emblematic of late 18th-century progressives, relishing his additional reputation as an accomplished etymologist of indeclinable particles, i.e. a *reformer of radicals*.¹⁵⁵

Tooke’s “exceptionally retaliatory” reformism in language theory is directed especially toward the conservative politician and linguistic philosopher James Harris (a nephew of the Earl of Shaftesbury).¹⁵⁶ Harris, Tooke remarks, had argued that the particles were literally insignificant, “held to have NO meaning” (38), mere ligatures connecting the necessary parts of speech. Yet (as his own case made clear) any such words can be immensely powerful in the law-courts, exploited for the disenfranchisement of those without a socially authoritative voice: “For mankind in general are not

tangled root I sever’d” (47). In Turley’s account, the poem represents a “highly self-reflexive” commentary on philology.

¹⁵⁴ For summaries of his critical reception, see Smith; Bewley; and Turley.

¹⁵⁵ To grasp this pun’s complication, we need at the very least to recognize three semantic colorations: the political, the linguistic, and the organic. The last becomes increasingly divisive among linguists in the nineteenth century, and Coleridge is fond of botanical metaphors (presumably German-derived) for language — e.g., “the Plant” as organic model for associations. According to the OED’s entry, the 16th and 17th centuries introduce the application of “radical” to language, meaning “original” or “native,” applied especially to “uninflected” lexical elements or symbols, comparable to its use in mathematics (with its roots and radicals); the “root” in each case is an absent thing retroactively conceptualized as preceding, and giving rise to, a present or current form. From here it enters chemistry as an element that can’t be broken down or “analyzed” further. Its most common sense seems to have remained “thorough,” from the bottom up. The political meaning emerges, in the late 18th century; what initially meant “thorough” is thereafter turned to the sense of extreme, advanced, democratic or liberal. (By the 1820s the adjectival noun could be used to describe a particular white hat worn *by* some radicals.)

¹⁵⁶ Smith 115. Olivia Smith’s indispensable account of Tooke, which supplements Aarsleff’s earlier narrative of his historical significance, crucially reveals Tooke’s primary targets to be philosophical grammars written from politically conservative viewpoints. Not only did Tooke’s individual derivations attack conservative pieties about church and state, but the overall emphasis on Anglo-Saxon over classical sources and grammars suggests the work’s democratizing intent (and aligns interestingly with a Romantic temper). Tooke’s enthusiasm for the Germanic language family leads him to argue that Latin is actually descended in part from the “Northern languages” (403, 638). He thus set himself against a tradition represented by Harris, whose grammar partitioned language according to Latin and Greek syntactic taxonomies (698, 709).

This enthusiasm for native folk linguistic and musical traditions is of course a trend exemplary of European Romanticism. With implications that parallel Tooke’s claims, Coleridge recounts conversations with Wordsworth on the ill effects on English poetry of the “public school” classical education; through “the custom of writing Latin verses,” minds were habituated to translating prosaisms into elevated language. The parallel attests to the perceived necessity for reform toward a legitimate model of “native” grammar, and equally for a revitalized native poetry, which would recalibrate “the heart with the head” (*Biographia Literaria*, 11-13). Smith outlines a relationship between *The Diversions of Purley* and the *Lyrical Ballads* “experiments,” but the connection she draws is limited to the emphasis the works share on native and common features of language, inasmuch as the “Preface” takes an interest in the experience of the poor. By contrast, I stress the effect Tooke’s focus on temporality had for reimagining language’s formation, particularly when the explicit question of its “discovery” is replaced by illustrations of change. Smith’s influential intervention has lately been supplemented by further accounts of the political dimension of Tooke’s linguistics. These include Turley, Manly, and Tomalin.

sufficiently aware that words without meaning, or of equivocal meaning, are the everlasting engines of fraud and injustice” (38). The very fact that a majority are ignorant of the non-transparency of language’s smallest parts makes language all the easier for those in power to use as an apparatus perpetuating inequality through linguistic “imposture.” Though the analogy collapses if pressed too hard, it is interesting to find the distribution of class power actually projected onto parts of speech. Tooke’s efforts seem in part designed to show that a theory such as Harris’s assumes a false hierarchy among linguistic elements, while he presents the humble particles instead as abbreviated forms of such “necessary” units of language as nouns — seeing them, that is, as their equals.¹⁵⁷

Superficially a Homeric reference, Tooke’s title itself, *Epea Pteroenta* or “winged words,” refers obliquely to Harris’s *Hermes*, one of the great pillars of 18th century British language philosophy, and a standard grammar of its age. Hermes, messenger god and inventor of language, is depicted in both works’ respective frontispieces, but in strikingly different ways, reflecting a crucial difference in what was invoked by words with wings. Harris’s Hermes is a bodiless statue, immobile, stony and passive, “Inventor of Letters and Regulator of Language,” clothed in a toga-like mantle (or “Veil”). The figure is actually what is called a “herm,” a square column with a carved head, wearing the winged helmet; as Harris writes, the god is pictured with “no other part of the human figure but the Head, because *no other* was deemed *requisite to rational Communication. Words* at the same time, the medium of this communication, being (as *Homer* well describes them) *Epea Pteroenta, Winged Words*, were represented in their *Velocity* by the Wings of his Bonnet” (325). “Velocity,” frozen solid in this depiction, here describes the efficiency of communication.¹⁵⁸

The engraved frontispiece to Tooke’s *Diversions* instead shows a naked, athletic youth seated atop a block of stone in an active pose, much more human, smiling and caught in mid-motion. His liveliness and bodily integrity are in pointed contrast to Harris’s statue, but especially important is the fact that he is not wearing his wings: his clothes and all trappings of his divine roles — mantle, winged helmet, caduceus, ankle-wings — lie discarded around his seat. To show that his act is in the midst of unfolding, he is pictured still holding one wing up against his right ankle. This more fluent figure hints that language’s wings, the parts that adapt it for rapid mobility, are a sort of necessary artifice, a mechanism that animates its progress. Below the image is the caption, *Dum brevis esse laboro, obscurus fio*: “As I labor toward brevity, I grow obscure,”¹⁵⁹ as though the voice of Horace’s poet issues instead from Hermes, or indeed

¹⁵⁷ One wonders, in this context, what to make of Godwin’s inclusion, in *Caleb Williams*, of the brief, odd pastime in which his hero indulges while on the run from Mr. Falkland, after coming across a “general dictionary of four of the northern languages”: “I determined to attempt, at least for my own use, an etymological analysis of the English language. I easily perceived that this pursuit had one advantage to a person in my situation...” (294). Though it seems we are meant to read this “one advantage” as temporary intellectual employment, I think we ought also to presume that this pursuit — though it is shortly afterward abandoned — has some distant bearing, via its obvious association to Tooke, upon those “modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism” which Godwin promised, in his preface, his novel would expose (1).

¹⁵⁸ On this image, and what it concretely reveals about the lack of any *developmental* dimension to the eighteenth-century concept of universal grammar, for which Harris’s text stood as prime exemplar, see Harris, *The Language-Makers*; and Sorenson, *The Grammar of Empire* (12).

¹⁵⁹ The caption is borrowed from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, ll. 25-6, only with the addition of the initial adverb, *dum*. It is offered by Horace in a list of caveats to the would-be writer; interestingly, it precedes the section authorizing coinages, and describing the fortunes of individual words due to the regulating laws of “usage.”

from language itself. As a result, the motive force of compaction through abbreviation in Tooke's allegory occurs impersonally in the process of language change, altering the appearance of words consistently; in due course, the traces of its past appearance are "obscured." The "velocity" emphasized by Tooke's adoption of language's "wings" describes the motion of words not only between interlocutors, but also *through time*.

Though critics sometimes refer to the frontispiece image as showing Hermes strapping *on* his wings, in preparation for flight — and obscurity — the image only suspends activity somewhere between assuming and removing the wings, so that this Hermes is uncovered and humanized, brought to life or 'mortalized', by his mobile depiction. If abbreviation produces those parts of language that seem superfluous, the puzzlingly uninflected parts of speech, these "particles" ensure that language moves more swiftly: "Abbreviations are the wheels of language, the wings of Mercury" (14), and words like "if" and "yet" "are the artificial wings of Mercury, by means of which the Argus eyes of philosophy have been cheated" (part of Hermes' myth was to have blinded the giant Argus). In the dialogue format of the *Diversions*, Tooke's conversational foil "B" extends the metaphor:

Proceed, and strip him of his wings. They seem easy enough to be taken off: for it strikes me now, after what you have said, that they are indeed put on in a peculiar manner, and do not, like those of other winged deities, make a part of his body. You have only to loose the strings from his feet, and take off his cap. Come — Let us see what sort of figure he will make without them.¹⁶⁰

Tooke wants, then, to restore vision to the "Argus eyes of philosophy" by disabling obscurity, indeed by disarming what he saw as the obscurantism of Harris's *Hermes*. He represents words as mobile, their forms compacted in order to accelerate over time in the processes of transmission, so that their earlier shapes are forgotten; it is this which allows him to halt them in their tracks, to reverse the process of winging forward and show them in earlier states. To "mortalize" this deity, this allegory of language, both gives language time and makes it human, as Tooke's language philosophy democratizes English, attempting to make its words "common." Harris's *Hermes* was "hermetic" in the sense of being esoteric and exclusionary; to borrow forward from Wordsworth's Preface, Tooke tried to make Hermes speak a real language of men.¹⁶¹

Harris's way of understanding language effectively reinforced social categories shaped and sustained by refined speech and access to learning. Having "resolved Language, as a Whole into its constituent Parts" at the close of Book II, Harris writes: "But now as we conclude, methinks I hear some Objector, demanding with an air of pleasantry, and ridicule — *Is there no speaking then without all this trouble? Do we not*

Though Tooke has little or nothing to say on the subject of neologism, Coleridge, as we will see, turns it to an imperative.

¹⁶⁰ Tooke 14.

¹⁶¹ After the second volume of *Diversions* appeared, Leigh Hunt wrote in *The Examiner* that he "bade adieu to the leaden *Hermes* of Harris to admire the more vivacious, engaging and informative spirit of *The Diversions of Purley*" (Bewley 242). Nor was the thought of Tooke's work replacing the older authorities, and Harris in particular, by any means unique to Hunt: his work was hailed by many as a revolution in linguistic thought (both Bentham and Coleridge refer explicitly to the need for Tooke's "system" to be completed — presumably in rather different directions).

talk every one of us, as well unlearned, as learned; as well poor Peasants, as profound Philosophers?" (293). Using the analogy of laborers' simple machines and the science of physics, he replies to this imagined skeptic that it is one thing to use language, quite another to understand how it works. When Tooke himself fills this rhetorically imagined skeptic's role, alluding to Hermes as the one who "blinded philosophy" (8), he claims directly to the contrary that "a man of plain common sense may obtain [wisdom and true knowledge], if he will dig for it; but I cannot think that what is commonly called Learning, is the mine in which it will be found" (6). Tooke's tone makes clear that he has no great opinion of the norm for "Learning," nor does he seem to care much for the distinction between philosophers and peasants. That Philosophy stands with Learning, and both apart from lower classes, would be targeted by the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in phrasing that suggests with frank counter-intuition that what is truly "philosophical" lies far from artificial learning.

All of this confirms the intriguing if uncontroversial opinion that Tooke's reductiveness is also a form of populism, and that at least the rendering language as common property in all likelihood appealed to the progressive politics of the young Coleridge and Wordsworth. But — as I will argue below — a more sustained link to their own theories is formed by the recognition that Tooke's radical reform of language achieves its democratic effects only by first picturing language as sustaining its own "velocity," by in effect *temporalizing* language's forms. As Hazlitt wrote of his personal style, Tooke "wanted effect and *momentum*" (151), and I want to show that this basic mobility, the changeability manifested in linguistic forms, left its mark in the eccentric etymological thought of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Changeability is precisely what is rendered visible by the variety of lexical forms in the *Diversions*, between for example "shut" and "shitten" and "scate." Tooke spends a great deal of energy straining against the rule of abstract terms and distinctions, specifically when the representatives of abstraction are top-heavy with legal, regulatory, and economic power, and when such powers are abused.¹⁶² His theory proposes the importance of airy abstractions to the social constitution and distribution of power, resulting in wrongful exercises of will perpetrated on the less educated, the voteless and voiceless "vulgar" classes. Such "imposture" is precisely what Tooke's entire etymological edifice corrects. Thus commonness is affirmed through recourse to immediacy, against inflated rhetoric, where apparently empirical objects and acts are posited, retroactively, to account for abstract "universals."¹⁶³ Tooke's desire to account for language with common, sensible origins, suggests that words have a solid foundation, a resilient meaning, drawing from some temporally distant direct encounter with what is meant, that can be recounted through etymology.

¹⁶² "Technical terms are not invariably abused to cover the *ignorance* only of those who employ them," writes Tooke; "In matters of law, politicks, and Government, they are more frequently abused in attempting to impose upon the ignorance of *others*; and to cover the injustice and knavery of those who employ them" (57). As noted above, Book Two is entirely devoted to tracing abstract terms to more homely sources, usually participles, as in *wrong* from "Wrung, or Wrested from the Right" (366), or *law* from Anglo-Saxon "Laegh," meaning "Laid down — as a rule of conduct" (306); as well as the often cited derivation of *truth* via the past participle of an Anglo-Saxon root, through its modern reflex "troweth," "*To Believe firmly, To be thoroughly persuaded of*" (606, 610), and the derivation of *think* from *thing*, on the analogy of Latin *reor* from *res* (608-9). The latter, as McKusick has pointed out, shows up repeatedly in Coleridge's writings.

But this fixity is undercut by his etymological method. Tooke's etymologies, despite themselves, cannot leave the reader standing on the solid ground of a changeless meaning; on the contrary, they rather show decisively and insistently to what extent what changes relies for its solidity on the fact of its mutations; and equally, that the mutability of form cannot help but redound to meaning. This apparent contradiction in spirit accounts, I think, for much of the confusion or inconsistency perceived in the philosophical dimension of the work. Hazlitt thought it a "pity" Tooke should have dispensed with "the old metaphysical theories of language" only to replace them with one of his own. Per Tooke, words were not supposed to have any relation to "the nature of things or the objects of thought," yet according to his theory language is restricted in an essential way by the empirical encounters it memorializes (Hazlitt 156-7). His implicit value-system ensures that a world of fixed objects, sensations and truths is prior to language, and suggests that the primordial acts of individual wills established its terms.

The contradictions of his method are manifest when we consider that deriving *truth* from *throweth* does not make it especially concrete, nor deriving *think* from *thing*; in fact, it merely begs the question of what sort of criteria we use to *decide* something is concrete. The Scottish common sense philosopher Dugald Stewart, one of Tooke's early critics, betrays his prudery in an allusive reference to Tooke's gleeful derivation of *shit* as a mere alternate of *shoot*, *shout* and *shut*. The two take opposite views on the "false delicacy" which "proscribed a very innocent and decent word" (Tooke 399). "I should be glad to know," complains Stewart, "what practical inference Mr. Tooke would wish us to draw from these discoveries."¹⁶⁴ What is Tooke's aim, he wonders: the advancement of "shit," or the loss of its more seemly cognates — "Is it that the latter should be degraded on account of the infamy of their connexions; or, that every word which can claim a common descent with them from a respectable stem is entitled to admission into the same society?" (Stewart 180). Stewart's confusion seems to be a pose, since Tooke's sympathies are hardly obscure, but again, it begs the right question. How is "throw," though involving in its literal sense physical movement and an object to let fly, more or less abstract than "shoot"? Surely "shit" can be used as abstractly or as concretely as any word?¹⁶⁵ It is as though the intellectual act of reduction, from many words to one, is for Tooke its own justification.

Stewart revealingly presumes the reader's endorsement of class exclusion ("connexions," "descent," "entitled," "society"), thus betraying an anxiety about preserving "customs" derived from privilege. In discussing Dugald Stewart's sustained criticism of Tooke's theory, Olivia Smith suggests that the former's mistrust of word history as a guide to semantics means he "favors permanence," where Tooke's technique stresses the historically dependent nature of language. Yet although in general Stewart's claims serve politically reactionary ends and support the maintenance of class distinctions, it is oddly enough Tooke who strives for permanence. Stewart's stated authority is "propriety"; he speaks of propriety as though it involves merely deferring to "custom and to the ear" (181), and what could be less permanent than custom? The problem is not that Stewart favors permanence, but that he favors *certain* customs,

¹⁶⁴ Stewart, "On the Tendency of Some Late Philological Speculations," 180.

¹⁶⁵ Hazlitt's reservations belong in part to this line of thought: In the preface to his "New and Improved Grammar of the English Tongue" (1810), Hazlitt writes in a footnote, "So he has brought 2000 instances of the meaning of words to demonstrate that we have no abstract ideas, not one of which 2000 meanings is anything else but an abstract idea" (*Collected Writings*, Vol II, 390).

certain ears. Tooke's semantic stability, the surety for his democratization of language, tries to level the grammatical field, but it is clear that this aspect of his theory is one reason Hazlitt and Coleridge, for example, even in moments of praise, are always put off by a tendency toward crude and willful oversimplification. They want to think of language as in flux, the changes of its past guaranteeing its present solubility.

Hazlitt in fact exploits the metaphor of chemical solutions to describe how Tooke's theory alters language, in an essay written after Tooke's death in 1812. Though he uses Tooke's own metaphor of unmasking, saying that Tooke "threw aside" the veil of customary usage, and that he "saw language stripped of the clothing of habit or sentiment," this etymological stripping also has a "penetrat[ing]," almost corrosive effect on the "web of old associations wound round language" (154-5). Tooke approached the vexed question of indeclinable ligatures by investigating their evolution, essentially dissolving hardened specimens back into their earlier forms. The method developed was, as a more recent critic puts it, "aimed at the analytic dissolution of all syntactic distinctions,"¹⁶⁶ but also simply at the dissolution of individual words: for Hazlitt, "Mr. Tooke, in fact, treated words, as the chemists do substances" (156).¹⁶⁷

Hazlitt rather craftily generalizes this analogy to Tooke's approach to life, and indeed Tooke's caustic tone is everywhere evident in the political and personal bite of *The Diversions of Purley*. According to Hazlitt, he "had rather an ill-natured delight in contradiction, and in perplexing the understandings of others" (148), and his real objective was "negative success," that is, the rewards of dismantling, while remaining himself "impenetrable"; indeed, "He would rather be against himself than for anybody else" (152). Hazlitt paints Tooke as unimaginative and literal-minded, but I think sharpens these apparent slights to a brilliant point when he remarks that what might seem a liability, Tooke's antipathy for mystification, was really his trump card: "he was, perhaps, aided not more by the strength and resources of his mind than by its limits and defects." This becomes a revealing, if backhanded, compliment, regarding Tooke's drive for simplification: drawing out and deepening his chemistry puns, Hazlitt writes that "Mr. Tooke's work is truly elementary" (154). Pointing out that where Harris's *Hermes* cannot properly be called "analysis," since it multiplies rather than reduces taxonomic distinctions, he suggests that Tooke's instinct toward *reductiveness* grounds his work's salutary insights (though perhaps even then both in a positive *and* negative sense): "This is getting at a solution of words into their component parts" (155).

We must bear in mind, then, that Tooke's devotion to reduction issues from the voice of a dedicated reformer in language philosophy (as in politics), but that the same corrective reform he launched against grammatical conservatism led him to semantic claims no less conservative. Remembering this fact makes it easier to understand how the drive for reduction conflicts with his broader picture of language change, and especially with the instinct for tracing language's self-sustained "complications" or transformations. The *Diversions* contains page after page of citations from early English literature,

¹⁶⁶ Land 1974, 116.

¹⁶⁷ The relationship between Tooke's theory of "imposture" and Bentham's theory of "fictions" remains, so far as I know, largely unarticulated. Though the intellectual link deserves a treatment of its own, it is much easier to understand Bentham's views on the abbreviations of language change with Tooke in the background, and with the chemical metaphor intact: e.g., "Words may be considered as the result of a sort of analysis — a chemico-logical process for which, till at a comparatively much later period than that which gave birth to propositions, the powers of the mind were not ripe" (Bentham/Ogden, 68).

attesting to how the shape of language dissolves over time; if Tooke's theoretical demonstrations of "abbreviation" are devoted to a debunking reduction *and* a dissolving act, it is a version of the latter that takes hold in the poetry and philosophy of the early British Romantics. I suspect that the Romantic vision of language change that emerges in Coleridge and Wordsworth's early collaborations was profoundly affected by the cultural ripple effect of Tooke's blunt but ingenious derivations. In spite of his claims to anchor words to a stable meaning, Tooke's practice of enacting the solubility of words over a circumscribed chronology made language's independent temporality, its "natural" or self-sustained changes, vividly available to his contemporaries.

III. Breaking Up: The Neologizing Critic

...we begin to suspect that there is, somewhere or other, a *radical* Difference [in our] opinions...¹⁶⁸
— Coleridge

A Poet's *Heart & Intellect* should be *combined, intimately combined & unified*, with the great appearances of Nature—and not merely held in solution & loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similes.¹⁶⁹
— Coleridge

If Tooke turns words against abstraction, and gives them a near-material firmness and a changing shape by showing them *in motion*, their dynamic solidity is made the more palpable when it emerges in Romantic poetic theory, as when Coleridge writes that words are "living Things," or when Wordsworth notes that words are "things, active and efficient."¹⁷⁰ Both retain the lively, self-sustaining mutability Tooke illustrated, but turn away from his stable origins. In place of his empiricism, which posited a passive nature whose objects once long ago gave rise to language, we find an attempt to mingle language with nature in the present, or to merge the poet's person with a natural landscape. The failed artifice of "formal Similes," for Coleridge, is the result of an insufficient intimacy with, an incomplete submersion into, "the great appearances of Nature." In principle this implies not yet being fully dissolved, but still recognizably contained in a falsely realized linguistic experiment, as though the hoped for chemical reaction had not quite taken place. Perhaps the full "unification" of self and surround that Coleridge wishes for above hints at one "radical difference" between his and Wordsworth's thoughts; yet a material-soluble language figures equally in the poetics of both.

¹⁶⁸ Letter to Sotheby, 13 July 1802. Coleridge is commenting on discussions with Wordsworth about the *Lyrical Ballads* Preface.

¹⁶⁹ Letter to Sotheby, 10 Sept 1802.

¹⁷⁰ Coleridge, *Letters*; Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*. With the rise of comparative philology, Foucault famously outlined a new quality of linguistic "heaviness" or density symptomatic of a radical shift around 1800 in the picture of language's functional reality (Foucault 281-2). No longer a transparent discourse, language now loomed apart from human agents, in Foucault's account, and solidified as an independent, structured entity, tangible for example in the monolithic, almost glacial phonological shapes shifting imperceptibly over the centuries. Linda Dowling extends Foucault's claims to account for the nineteenth-century anxieties about language's impersonality culminating in a linguistic crisis of language for the Decadent movement at the century's end (the theoretical innovations of twentieth century post-structuralism represent, for her, further manifestations of the same linguistic discontent) (Dowling xii-xiii). Wordsworth and especially Coleridge play an interesting role in her narrative, but not one that emphasizes the role of language's impersonal temporality in their earlier poetics.

Both Tooke's influence on Coleridge and his oblique relevance for understanding the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* are relatively uncontroversial. I follow Olivia Smith in understanding clear parallels between the Preface and Tooke's *Diversions*, and a shared resistance to the assumption of a natural division between classes.¹⁷¹ Both invert hierarchies of taste and cultural influence, presenting and valuing what is "common" across social strata, considering Anglo-Saxon, conversational, or "low" language as equivalent to what was traditionally considered refined, poetic or philosophical. Both do so by revealing something artificial about language: in Tooke's case, the divisions between parts of speech are dissolved and the cultural prestige of abstraction grounded; in the Preface, a certain quality of received canons of diction is revealed to channel thought more narrowly, to its detriment. A certain "rootsiness" acquires value when language is traced to native origins, whether in the Anglo-Saxon philology of Tooke or the Preface's rural-formed "real language of men" and of "nature."

Yet this view of Tooke's influence is circumscribed by a simplistic view of etymology's purpose and effects, and neglects the temporal liveliness introduced by language's solidity and dissolution. My purpose here is to complicate interpretations of the Preface that leave it looking merely naïve about language, or primitivist about authentic expressiveness, in order to focus attention on the variations on timescale that it enacts through language. When we find the well-known pronouncement that "Low and rustic life" lets the "essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they...speak a plainer and more emphatic language," and when the Preface's author writes that rustics "hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived," such intimations of primitivism may seem at first inevitable. These are clearly legible as etymological moments, and Smith herself seems to find language here literally lodged in those "appearances of nature": "Somewhat mystically, the passage means that rustics speak a pure language because they live among and are surrounded by the origins of words, as if they were standing in a landscape of language" (215). The Preface would then seem to blend what is most reductive in narratives of language origin that emphasized nature and the passions, with the rather dogmatic empiricist presuppositions behind Tooke's etymology, and simply to plant such reductions in the soil of present day England. Viewed the wrong way, transporting language origin from a distant mythic past to the here and now, so that language "invention" is reimagined as a constant of use, reinforces the notion that the laboring poor were akin to the savages of colonial exploration, hence to the back-formed ancestors of civilized cultures.¹⁷²

Yet this reinscription of language origin as a constantly formed and reformed feature of common experience is anything but regressive. "The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems," another well-known passage begins, "was to

¹⁷¹ Compare the effects of the incipient linguistic anthropology of the late eighteenth century, described in Chapter One; the effects of "native philology" embraced by the Romantic era (Voloshinov); and Foucault's claim that the resulting comparative philology made possible the leveling of languages: "From now on, all languages have an equal value: they simply have different internal structures" (285). At the dialectal stage of the same problem, both Tooke and the Preface architects are refusing to see divisions in the social world, contingent on class markers in language, as "natural," just as in Tooke's grammar, such distinctions are dissolved.

¹⁷² Hence the complaints by critics that attempts in the Preface to level language to a common plane merely wind up condescending or reactionary. For views claiming the "Preface" was backward rather than progressive, see Keach, McKusick 1986, and Manly.

make the incidents of common life interesting by *tracing in them*, truly though not ostentatiously, the *primary laws of our nature*: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we *associate ideas* in a state of excitement” (my emphasis). Those primary laws exist in a temporality of conjectural history, or anthropological speculation; yet the association of ideas can clearly be read as the familiar private temporality of individual experience, and the “incidents of common life” provide a zone where the two temporalities cross.¹⁷³ If the layering of temporalities is a stubbornly recurrent trope of Romantic literature, this trend defines the theories of Coleridge and Wordsworth, remarked upon in passing by a number of critics.¹⁷⁴ Smith herself notes that Coleridge, in an effort to move between and integrate theories of language and theories of mind, tries to “establish a parallel between the evolution of language and an individual’s psychological relation to words” (Smith 213). The tracing of ideas exemplifies the personal temporality of an individual psyche; the tracing of words or language units conjures the broader temporalities of cultural and social formation. This implies that language change is always the effect of both active and passive modes of speaker participation. One way to characterize the difference between their *respective* definitions of poetic imagination is to say that where Coleridge tends to focus on the active capabilities of the imagination, Wordsworth’s poetry enacts both its activities and its

¹⁷³ Frances Ferguson frames this as one of the Preface’s distinctive moves; it has not received proper attention in the context of what sort of “natural” language is being imagined. As she puts it, there is “a form of primitivism” in the sentiments expressed by the Preface’s authors, yet its fetishization of the language of rural country-dwellers moves the “origin” from the distant past to the present; it “deviates from those conjectural histories primarily in collapsing their comprehensive time schemes... Wordsworth found a paradigmatic emblem of passionate language ‘here, now, and in England’” (18). All I would add to this admirable point is that the phrase “common life” is a hint that the theory takes the psychological temporality of the ‘association of ideas’ and *externalizes* it by making it a public, a shared, an almost physical temporality. Ferguson goes on: “Whether Wordsworth’s appraisal of the life and language of low and rustic men was accurate in sociological terms is an irrelevant question here” (18), and I agree, yet such questions never fail to come up.

¹⁷⁴ Barbara Johnson (1987), in “Strange Fits: Poe and Wordsworth on the Nature of Poetic Language,” has used this same disjunction of temporalities to unravel the logic of evaluation maintained by the Preface, tracking the terms “mechanical” and “natural” through the text to contrast their antithetical uses. She shows how Wordsworth really tells *two* stories of language origin, one resulting in “degradation,” the other in “amelioration.” Though vague about the scale of the former, her citation refers to the linguistic integrity of “The earliest Poets of all nations,” which then gets “distorted,” “adulterated,” “perverted”; this is clearly a conjectural or anthropological history of culture. The second origin story, says Johnson, “takes place in a temporality of the self” (94). Comparably, Paul de Man’s essay “Time and History in Wordsworth” tests traditional ways of reading Wordsworth’s poetry by systematically posing apparent narratives of historical “restoration” in individual poems against greater narratives of decay and dissolution, so that this contradiction is dramatized through stagings “in which the two temporalities are structurally interrelated.” All attempts to see and stabilize an external nature against the self’s construction are swallowed up in a “general movement of decay,” a (relatively speaking) “more originary” temporality that “reaches further into the past and sees wider into the future.” The world that results from this reading of Wordsworth is one “that does not escape from mutability but asserts itself within the knowledge of its own transience” (13). Wordsworth thus develops a more complex concept of nature, “a nature that has been darkened and deepened” by its plural temporal narratives. De Man dwells on the contrast between temporalities: for him their tension infiltrates every aspect of Wordsworth’s poetry, and time, just as much as nature, gets darker and deeper. Where such accounts contrast *two* temporalities, however, I suggest we attempt to see in Wordsworth a graded series.

passions, not only its openness to nature, but its *belonging* to a nature with temporalities deeper than its own.

To counter readings that miss the full effect of these layers, I suggest we take account of Tooke's influential picture of the palpable temporality infiltrating language's changes. To avoid underestimating the effects and dispersions of etymological thought, we must see that etymology contributed to the theorization of complex temporalities embodied in language practices. Tooke's derivations bring language change to life, allowing language to collect a near material thickness. That Coleridge and Wordsworth drastically transform Tooke's sense of the material basis of language is no objection to appreciating the line of influence. The observation that language is essentially mutable enables more clearly the thought of it as a changing solid, dissolving or growing. Both poets carry out this thought, envisioning it in terms that allow different combinations of timescales (psychological, cultural-anthropological, natural-historical) to occur to us simultaneously, until language itself seems to occur *to us* as well, soaking into us even as we add to it: so that when "using" language we are not just consciously selecting from a hoard of lexical items, but making our way through an ecologically complex "landscape" that precedes and shapes our awareness of it.

Accounting for language's changes necessitated stumbling over the insight that it seems to trade "natural" or "arbitrary" qualities, to become one or the other, in sudden moments when the picture of language changes. Individual words, considered as fixed and atemporal, might well seem arbitrary in Locke's sense; but due consideration of the processes of language change suggests how its "establishment" or formation is not in this sense arbitrary at all. Tooke writes:

Words do not gain, but lose letters in their progress: nor has unaccountable accident any share in their corruption; there is always a good reason to be given for every change they receive: and, by a good reason, I do not mean those cabalistical words, Metathesis, Epenthesis, &c, by which etymologists work such miracles; but at least a probable or anatomical reason for those not arbitrary operations.¹⁷⁵

Leaving aside the words shedding letters as usage wears them down (elsewhere, Tooke speaks of dialect variation, and he might have taken care to specify "sounds," rather than letters), it is interesting that Tooke is, with insufficient self-awareness, critical of etymological legerdemain ("miracles" is clearly sarcastic). More interesting still is the proposal of a vague "anatomical reason" to account for language change; quite differently from the "sound laws" of future generations of philologists, *abbreviation* nevertheless suggests that languages are structured, that is, regulated neither by individual human intent or by social compact, but obedient to a kind of self-sustained logic. The passage concludes that the "operations" are "not arbitrary," meaning here that new forms are generated in some internally consistent manner.

In Coleridge's hands, this internal consistency changes, however. Language is still driven by a quasi-impersonal force, but instead of finding it only in words, Coleridge suggests that it should be experienced and traced through psychological processes of attachment, indicative of pervasive trends; instead of abbreviation, he calls these "growth." In the letter that best indicates his interest in Tooke, Coleridge wrote to Godwin in 1800:

¹⁷⁵ Tooke 712.

I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them — in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tooke's System, and to solve the great Questions — whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the *semblance* of pre-designing Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a *series* of such actions are possible — and close on the heels of this question would follow the old 'Is Logic the *Essence* of Thinking?' in other words — Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? & — how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of their Growth? — In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too.¹⁷⁶

Coleridge's "words &c" are fascinating (what "&c"? further language units? aspects of linguistic behavior?), as is his impatience with the account of thought coordinated through arbitrary signs, but most interesting of all is his question about the "Law of their Growth." Accepting the premise of inevitable mutability suggested by Tooke's idea of abbreviation, Coleridge tries *reversing* this principle, developing out of it a theory of language change driven not by reduction, but by growth active and "organic."¹⁷⁷ Typically, Coleridge converts Tooke's rather stilted image of abbreviation by wheels with a vivid, animate figure, an image of language's internal consistency as an organic "radical." His "emblem of the formation of words" from the *Biographia Literaria* is a tiny amoeba-like entity, which multiplies through mitosis: each word, he writes, is a "minim immortal among the *animalcula infusoria* which has not naturally either birth, or death, absolute beginning or end: for at a certain period a small point appears on its back, which deepens and lengthens till the creature divides in two and the same process recommences" (50). Such words are living things indeed, though their 'unnatural' mode of procreation is a fascinating image, calling upon the strangeness rather than the comfort of nature to characterize how language works.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Coleridge, letter to Godwin, 22 September 1800.

¹⁷⁷ In his article "Coleridge, Etymology and Etymologic," H. J. Jackson combs through Coleridge's works, from early lectures to the *Logic*, as well as letters, notes, and manuscripts, discovering an abundance of instances where Tooke or etymology appear. The implications of this link have yielded interesting results, from Jackson's aggregation of instances to later systematizing explorations like McKusick's and Esterhammer's. Jackson's account offers some sense of Coleridge's ambivalence toward Tooke, while showing the extent of his influence. It is instructive to imagine Coleridge absorbing this in the midst of an alchemical intellectual ferment that experiments with Hartley alongside Schelling, and to see that Coleridge's instinct was to orient his "etymologic" toward less materialist conclusions. Calling etymology a "tool won from the enemy" (81) seems to me melodramatic; that he uses it "heuristically" is persuasive (85). Jackson's own coinage, "etymologic," contrasts Coleridge's *dynamic* with Tooke's *atomistic* method. Citing a letter in which Coleridge speaks of current English style having "rejected all the *cements* of language," adopting a French-ified, epigrammatic or paratactic diction (language as a "bag of marbles" [86]), Jackson suggests that "etymologic" would "supply cement," meaning that etymology would be the key to the process by which ideas are attached. I agree with this last, but wonder if, rather than a restoration of the "cements of language," we might not also see etymology's contribution as a *solvent*.

¹⁷⁸ This description recalls James Harris's analogy for an in-between class of conjunctions, whose status as minimally significant leads him to compare them to "*Zoophytes* in Nature; a *kind of middle Beings*, of amphibious character, which by sharing the Attributes of the higher and the lower, conduce to link the Whole together" (259). Tooke takes exception to precisely this analogy in Harris (and mocks Monboddo for his extensive use of the same) in his effort to reevaluate conjunctions (57-9). Coleridge's animalcule generalizes Harris's zoophyte, shrugging off the hierarchy of life-forms assumed in the great-chain-of-

To rediscover how etymology worms its way into the works of Wordsworth and Coleridge, and the *Lyrical Ballads* especially, we will need to see how closely language change is worked in with the poetic faculty of the imagination. Coleridge's famous disavowal of their joint project in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) nevertheless credits Wordsworth's feeling for "natural objects" as the catalyst for his own epochal definition of "Imagination," as a force which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (167). But equally notable is the fact that Coleridge's initial "desynonymy," or differentiation, of imagination from other modes of creation emerges amid a number of observations on language change. When Coleridge turns, in Chapter IV, to the critical reception of the Preface (following an allusion in the book's very first paragraph), he criticizes its tone, phrasing, placement, and indeed its message; he distances himself from the "Lake School" epithet, as well as from the composition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, all the while purporting to defend the work as poetry.¹⁷⁹ The trouble with the Preface, he notes, was its provocative reversal of values (its resort to the "low" for poetic truth). On the other hand, he claims that it was Wordsworth himself who prompted his own central critical revelations: at their first meeting, he recalls the "sudden effect" of a poem Wordsworth recited (78). The poem drew its strength from according "an additional interest to natural objects" (79); it was, altogether, "the union of deep feeling with profound thought" (the heart joined to the head) that "made so unusual an impression on my feelings immediately, and subsequently on my judgement" (80). This experience, Coleridge suggests, prompts the effort to distinguish "fancy" and "imagination," through a conceptual refinement or "desynonymization" of their customary usage. (The neologism itself is a proud signpost for his intellectual coinage). This contribution to poetic, philosophical, and psychological theory lies at the book's heart, and indirectly animates its odd detours.

Tooke's specter seems to lurk insistently at the margins of the *Biographia*'s fourth chapter, in which this desynonymization first occurs. In fact, in his marginalia to one such passage, John Thelwall more or less accused Coleridge of disavowing what he considered an obvious debt to Tooke.¹⁸⁰ Thelwall's complaint is closely related to the issue of Coleridge's suppression of those early politically radical sympathies that made him, and the other Lake Poets, figures of suspicion, and it is a revealing context for the critique he carries out in the *Biographia*. In distancing himself — from Tooke, from the Preface, from the "Lake Poets" — Coleridge wants to disarm his own critics, and specifically to refute the charge of any "perversion of taste" (53). He does this by breaking up his own association with these contested positions, but also by coming up

being language of "higher and the lower" (which so rankled Tooke), and elevating as its principle feature that bizarre, self-sufficient reproductive process used to illustrate the temporal unfolding of language.

¹⁷⁹ As Coleridge reminds us, though published under Wordsworth's name, the volume was conceived in mutual conversation, when the two were closest. His disavowal begins as an effort to stamp out, or at least control, what he implies are the rampant fires of controversy over poetic language: "But of the objects, which I proposed to myself, it was not the least important to effect, as far as possible, a settlement of the long continued controversy concerning the true nature of poetic diction: and at the same time to define with the utmost impartiality the real *poetic* character of the poet, by whose writings this controversy was first kindled, and has been since fuelled and fanned [i.e., Wordsworth]" (5).

¹⁸⁰ Coleridge's editors note Thelwall's jotting by one conspicuous passage that anyone familiar with Tooke's *Diversions* "will not fail to discover that the fountain of all this reasoning is in that book" (Engell/Bate 83). For a lively background to Coleridge's retrospective political equivocation in the *Biographia*, with further citations from Thelwall's marginalia, see Thompson 108-32, esp 127.

with his own versions of language change, not as an imperative toward efficiency but as a crucial and revelatory reservoir testifying to the characteristic preoccupations and values of an age.

Though it is true that Coleridge doesn't speak of Tooke, or of abbreviation, he does something perhaps more interesting: he diverts the influence of etymology into a new channel.¹⁸¹ He argues that language change is guided and regulated by an intellectual force native to a language community: "in all societies there exists an instinct of growth, a certain collective unconscious good sense working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning" (50). Elaborated at greater length in a footnote, this process is clearly idealized — as terms like *progressive* and *growth* indicate — into a continual refinement or improvement in specificity (though an appealing corollary is recognized, that whatever is progressive, hence language as a whole, is "of course imperfect," hence imperfectible [52]). Though not precisely the opposite of abbreviation, this mechanism emphasizes the proliferation of language in its successive stages, and unlike Tooke it particularly emphasizes changes in *meaning* as it recognizes changes in form. The theory is, moreover, remarkable for its clear-sighted recognition of the interactions of various processes in language change: it takes into account not only formal change through variations in pronunciation and in spelling, but adds to these Tookean thoughts (including at least one of Tooke's own derivations, *if* as a "hasty pronunciation" of *give*) the intrinsic *semantic* mobility and mutability of words.

Where Tooke demonstrated by reduction that what looked like many words was really one, because they had the same meaning, Coleridge shows instead that what appeared to be one word ought really to be more. Per Coleridge, this should occur as knowledge was refined, and meaning evolved accordingly. Indeed, he even suggests how form and usage mutually influence one another: "each new application or excitement of the same sound will call forth a different sensation, which cannot but affect the pronunciation. The after recollection of the sound without the same vivid sensation will modify it still further; till at length all trace of the original likeness is worn away" (50). Not only does this description drop Coleridge's occasional reliance on *words* as the unit of language, but it displaces the assumptions of voluntary will and reference from language's central operations as well: if the "application" of a sound seems voluntary, the "excitement" of the same sound seems the reverse, and the idea that "sensations" inevitably influence or "modify" word-forms, willy-nilly, is a startling insight. Language becomes a partly subconscious activity working accidental modifications; sensory, even tactile, its changes occur while we are under its spell. This thought, in a rather Wordsworthian mold, wholly accepts the inseparability of active and passive association.

Nevertheless this passing insight runs counter to desynonymization, ideally the work of "men of research" who wish to avoid the "erroneous consequences" of sophistry,

¹⁸¹ In a late reference to Tooke's phrase about the "wheels" of language from *Aids to Reflection* (1825), Coleridge diverts their technological "efficacy" into the spiritual realm of the Biblical prophet Ezekiel's vision: "Horne Tooke entitled his celebrated work, *Epea Pteroenta*, winged words: or language not only the vehicle of thought but the wheels. With my convictions and views, for *epea*, I should substitute *logoi*, that is, words select and determinate, and for *pteroenta zootes*, that is living words. The wheels of the intellect I admit them to be: but such as Ezekiel beheld in *the visions of God* as he sate among the captives by the river of Chebar. *Whithersoever the Spirit was to go, the wheels went, and thither was their Spirit to go: for the Spirit of the living creature was in the wheels also*" (62-3).

abuse or mere confusion of terminology, and forcibly supply new words or allocate new meanings at will where they are deemed necessary. (Coleridge's habit of coining words clearly fits this motive, and for every "desynonymize" and "esemplastic," there is a neologism from *Biographia* to which English is now fully accustomed: "intensifying," "reliability," "visualize," etc.¹⁸²) It is interesting to note that even as his diction often implies the purposeful introduction of lexical innovations by speakers, Tooke's *Diversions* by contrast remains wary of imposing improvements on language. A discussion of "abuse" and "corruption" in language, toward the end of Book II, leads to an ironic exclamation: "*F.*— Do you then propose to reform these abuses? *H[orne Tooke]*.— Reform! God forbid. I tremble at the very name of Reform" (666). Such corruptions are so "inveterate" that the venture of setting out purposefully to simplify them is doomed; however tongue in cheek, this suggests an argument against artificially amending language. Coleridge advocates just such reforms toward deliberate progressive improvement.

In spite of his advocacy of scholarly intervention, Coleridge describes well the ungovernably social trickle-down effect of linguistic refinement: "When this distinction has been so naturalized and of such general currency that the language itself does as it were *think* for us...we then say, that it is evident to *common sense*. Common sense, therefore, differs in different ages. What was born and christened in the schools passes by degrees into the world at large and becomes the property of the market and the tea-table" (52). Yet even this linguistic migration, "born...in the schools," follows a self-selected intellectual custodianship, or purposeful guidance offered by the enlightened literati. It is interesting to compare this neutral, perhaps even approving vision of words "naturalized" after deliberative correction, with the thought of those insidious "Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues" from his own earlier poem "Fears in Solitude," those "empty sounds to which/ We join no feeling and attach no form!" When linguistic conventions become "naturalized," begin to "think for us," shouldn't the resulting "common sense" begin to ring the same alarm bells those "empty sounds" had? In this light, the recognition of habituation to linguistic forms takes on a positive or negative glow according to the linguist's picture of language. Habituation describes the inevitable movement of the *concealment* of the sources of linguistic forms. The poet of "Fears" feels governed by a numbing and merciless terminology, inflicted from without; the critic of *Biographia* suggests the salutary benefits of a distantly comparable infliction, from within the self-fashioned class empowered to impose it.

In congratulating himself for being the "first of my countrymen" to recognize and define the distinction in the terms *fancy* and *imagination*, Coleridge refers to the attempt made in William Taylor's *British Synonymes Discriminated* (1813), as well as Wordsworth's earlier discussion of the same.¹⁸³ Coleridge takes it that Wordsworth has satisfactorily demonstrated Taylor's treatment of these terms to be "both insufficient and erroneous"; but it is surely interesting also to note Wordsworth's principal complaint with Taylor: "Here, as in other instances throughout the volume, the judicious Author's mind is enthralled by Etymology; he takes up the original word as his guide and escort, and too often does not perceive how soon he becomes its prisoner" (377). Wordsworth is

¹⁸² See McKusick 1986 for a longer list.

¹⁸³ See the Preface to the 1815 *Poems*, itself a response to Coleridge's definition of fancy from his and Southey's *Omniana* (1811).

referring to Taylor's attempts to define the words by their history, as Tooke's etymologies did, reconstructing the internal components concealing their true definitions. The definitions Coleridge and Wordsworth quibble over are by contrast refinements staking out the terms' current and *future* applications, marking the constant reformation of language in the present, and to this extent their positions are comparable. But one may perhaps also detect, in Wordsworth's reservations about etymology, a veiled criticism of Coleridge's own philological enthusiasm.

There is a poignancy to Coleridge's giving Wordsworth partial credit for recognizing the terms' "diverse meaning," since Coleridge is going out of his way to differentiate himself from Wordsworth, to coin *himself* anew and to disengage pointedly from old associations. The effort of the book is in part a desynonymy — a break-up — of himself from a radical past, and somewhat more painfully (for the reader, at any rate) from a former close friend. That they shared "frequent conversation" on this fundamental semantic distinction, that the distinction was itself one "to which a poem of his own first directed my attention," suggests how close. Both refer to the other as "my friend" in these passages, when they cite one another, with who knows what tone of sentiment, obligation or aggression. Wordsworth, Coleridge writes, has provided a practical guide to poetic imagination and fancy, with examples, a "sketch of the branches with their *poetic* fruitage"; he aims to dig deeper, to describe the "seminal principle": "I wish to add the trunk, and even the roots, as far as they lift themselves above ground and are visible to the naked eye of our common consciousness" (52). It is as though by adding the roots to Wordsworth's picture, Coleridge is once again reinstating the organic sense of "radical" against its political connotations, seeking a stabilizing ground.¹⁸⁴ As we shall see, where Coleridge turns inward, to consciousness, Wordsworth pictures language's growth through the imagination turning outward toward a "nature" or temporal scheme that always exceeds it, that dwells not on integration but on disintegration.

We can see clearly that Wordsworth's poetry introduces the solvent used in Coleridge's desynonymization, breaking up old associations in order to form new ones. Wordsworth's genius lies, Coleridge writes, in "awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom," washing away "the film of familiarity" (169), enacting what Coleridge also describes as his "original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere* and with it the depth and height of the ideal world, around forms, incidents and situations of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the luster, had dried up the sparkle and the dewdrops" (48-9). Such a dispersal, a making atmospheric of what custom had "dried up," seems evocative of a conversion rather like dissolution and vaporizing of a solid, emphasizing a liquidity latent in hardened forms of habit (though the additional stage of evaporation perhaps expresses Coleridge's additional attachment to an "ideal world," further differentiating him from Wordsworth). When at length he does get around to his famous definition of imagination, at the end of Chapter XIII, the imaginative faculty, at least when expressed through its "secondary" echo (which works "with the conscious will"), becomes that powerful solvent cited in my Introduction

¹⁸⁴ From Wordsworth's criticism of Taylor's definitions: "Is not this as if a man should undertake to supply an account of a building, and be so intent upon what he had discovered of the foundation, as to conclude his task without once looking up at the superstructure?" (*Prose* 377). Coleridge's reverting to the foundation seems to raise an eyebrow, in turn, at such focus on the superstructure, what he calls Wordsworth's "branches and poetic fruitage."

above: “It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create...It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead” (167).

The vitality of the imagination, expressed by its power of spreading and multiplying potential elemental attachments, seems to represent how that cultural law of growth *ought* to work. “The Nightingale,” one of Coleridge’s contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*, offers a positive myth to enact this picture of language. The bird’s supposed melancholy is attributed to an artificially elevated poetic trope, repeated unthinkingly by those poets who “nam’d these notes a melancholy strain”: “many a poet echoes the conceit,/ Poet, who hath been building up the rhyme/ When he had better far have stretch’d his limbs/ Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell/ ...to the influxes/ Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements/ Surrendering his whole spirit” (ll. 22-9). In this way the *naming* of the bird’s song as characteristically sad is compounded in the “building up” of poetry, solidifying through custom the association of this nocturnal sound with sadness, until it is taken for granted by those urban “youths and maidens most poetical...In ballrooms and hot theatres” (ll. 35-7). But to listen to the nightingale’s song in another frame of mind, as Coleridge has (and “My Friend, and my Friend’s Sister!”), is to dissolve the association, which has grown mechanical. This is how language is changed, how language change itself is made palpable. Recalling the poet’s aspirant intimacy with the “Great appearances of Nature” cited above, in the midst of his receptivity to those “influxes,” the poet and the poet’s language, by “surrendering,” are made liquid. Crossing temporalities, here origin myth and child psychology, Coleridge then makes receptiveness to such language change a moral imperative, or at least a parenting technique, by proposing to raise his own child “Familiar with these songs, that with the night/ He may associate Joy!” (ll. 108-9). This is, once again, that reinscription of language origin in a persistent present; this is putting language formation into action, yet an action in which agency is difficult to locate. Though in some respects its “agent,” the poet might as well be called the *patient* of this chemical reaction.

Perhaps the most distinctive fact about their early joint project to redraw the picture of language change remains the innovation of taking the retrospective implications of etymology, and applying them to a recurrent “origin” in the present, from which materializes the concept of a futural promise of language. Associations, melted down, reclaim the potential meaning of their individual elements. (We have come a long way from Tooke’s formula: “Words do not gain, but lose letters in their progress.”) This becomes, in practical terms, a *reversal* of origin-seeking, in as much as it asserts by contrast not where language has been, but where it is going. This is what Ferguson called Wordsworth’s “preoccupation with linguistic tendency” (3), an insight pulled from Wordsworth’s first “Essay Upon Epitaphs,” where he writes that children are naturally curious not only about origins or birth — “the whence” — but also about endpoints or death, “the whither.” The rhetorical effect of writing, as Wordsworth does, that “origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative,”¹⁸⁵ is not simply to equalize these terms, but to offset or counter the prevalence of the former by emphatically matching it to the latter: in Wordsworth, origins themselves are often reconceived in the “whither” mode, as tendencies. Wordsworth has been taken to claim that a rural, common language, a “real language of men,” emerges *out of* the landscape; and the stories of newborns, nourished by the inarticulate, inhuman sounds of nature, in both Wordsworth’s and

¹⁸⁵ Wordsworth, *Prose* 324.

Coleridge's poetry, seem to draw from a similar origin myth. Yet there is also a way in which he shows how language is *returned* to the landscape, to its encounters with "indifferent" or "mute insensate things"; that is, he shows how language runs up against, intrudes into, colludes with, and requires, a felt bodily or quasi-material scaffold, an alien matrix within which to be breathed, printed, carved or traced.

Balancing a recognition of the inadequacy of expression with a faith in the shared communicability of passionate response, Wordsworth's picture of language undercuts a representational linguistics that can only read "natural" language origins as organically stabilizing. Words may be evasive, misleading, even dangerous; but they nevertheless become "*things*" for us, "active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passions" (Note to "The Thorn"). To return to Ferguson's phrase, by "collapsing [the] comprehensive time schemes" of speculative histories, Wordsworth blends the conjectural history of language formation with a psychological temporality, which brings us to what she calls his "psychological etymology" (14). Like Tooke and Coleridge, this modeling of language change declares that what accumulates into language is organized, albeit in obscure ways: "For Wordsworth, it was obviously important to establish the associative process as more than accidental" (23), which is to say not precisely arbitrary (in Locke's sense). Yet his view of how language fits in a "natural" scheme does not amount to revealing a stabilizing root covered up by time, nor does it suggest planting a new one through neologism; rather, it seems to distribute a sense of rootedness through receptiveness to "nature" and an acceptance of finitude.¹⁸⁶ Wordsworth acknowledges that language is both impersonal and personal, passively adopted and actively adapted; this duality is encapsulated in the *Lyrical Ballads*' origin myths of the persistent creative relation to language's ongoing formation, including reformation and corruption, growth and decay, voluntary and involuntary participation.

I want to close this section by simply reiterating that the layering or collapsing of temporalities is one source of the confusion that allows us to read a naive naturalness or a willful primitivism into the language theory of *Lyrical Ballads*; Wordsworth seems to assume that a physical proximity to external nature infuses "low" or common language with a reality which the artificial patterns of refined diction has lost. But this same plural temporal scheme can also help us see that Wordsworth's alternative etymologies view language caught up in, and inevitably communicating, the same material histories it describes. Through the implications of both its personal and impersonal timelines of formation, language can thus be thought of as natural in its inassimilable, unwieldy tendencies, rather than in its shared sources or grounding origins; language becomes natural, on some level, in its felt transitions rather than in its graspable forms.

IV. Breaking Down: The Poet of Tendency

¹⁸⁶ There are suggestions in Wordsworth's writing that seem to bring out the "primitivism" residual in his account of "common" language, in particular regarding the matching of the mind to the external world, in other words that "fitness in the latent qualities / And essences of things, by which the mind / Is moved with feelings of delight" (1799 *Prelude*, II.374-6) — though it is never clear to me exactly what such "fitness" implies. Blake commented with suspicion on a similar excerpt from Wordsworth's *Recluse*, declaring he would not be persuaded to believe in mind and world as "fitting & fitted" (Blake, E667); Paul de Man suggests that Wordsworth sometimes evokes a force that balances the two just at this hinge, or "in the dialogue of this distinction" ("Wordsworth and the Victorians," 89).

Remember, also, that the medium through which, in poetry, the heart is to be affected is language; a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations. The genius of the poet melts these down for his purpose...¹⁸⁷

— Wordsworth, “Essay, Supplementary to the Preface” (1815)

If this epigraph shows an obvious relation to Coleridge’s deliberate interventions into language change through desynonymy and neologism, we will shortly see how the dissolving act, which the poet here performs by “melting down” arbitrary associations, is performed, in Wordsworth’s poetry, not just by us, but *upon* us, as it were, without our knowing it. In drawing out the moment both he and Coleridge take as *disintegrative*, one could say that Wordsworth is actually truer than his friend to Tooke’s methods, if only in the sense that he spends as much energy modeling the negative stage, the dissolution, of associations, as he spends on their positive reformations. If Coleridge’s “Nightingale” in a sense trivializes nature as a kind of sensory input, Wordsworth frames the sphere of arbitrary linguistic “fluctuations” within a common indebtedness to the impersonal temporalities of nature, a framing seen perhaps most clearly in “Hart-Leap Well.”

One way, in fact, to understand Wordsworth’s “nature,” is to think of it as the name of a relationship to time’s passage. Setting in motion what Coleridge called the “influxes” from the “shifting elements” of nature, Wordsworth dwelt on its “low breathings” and “indisputable shapes,” allowing the receptivity celebrated by both poets to leave a much deeper impression of the grey language of nature always *already* in motion, until we almost begin to hum physically with that “ghostly language of the ancient earth” (1799 *Prelude*). If Coleridge emphasizes the “growth” of language in its temporal progression by way of actively reformed distinctions, Wordsworth’s defense of the “common” seems to pause on the idea of reformation, not only as growth, but as a passive procedure of imaginative disintegration. Perhaps what is called, in the Preface, the signature human pleasure in “recognizing similitude in dissimilitude” expresses differently the thought that imagination’s animating force, to find what is held in common, breaks down distinctions (before inevitably constituting new ones).¹⁸⁸ Instead of deriving the legitimacy of words from their true roots in natural landscapes or authentic relations between rural dwellers, Wordsworth suggests that words are little more than efficient pressure points in complex ecologies of absent, invisible, or unknown forces in motion — impersonal but patterned effects which find expression within his picture of “felt” language.¹⁸⁹ This is not meant to diminish the power of words, but rather to extend the reach of language to include this newly pictured idiom of the passions.

¹⁸⁷ Wordsworth, *Prose* 411.

¹⁸⁸ Should this not make us think of Tooke, for whom the recognition of similitude in dissimilitude among word-forms provided such pleasure? From the chapter on conjunctions: “Where we now employ SINCE, was formerly (according to its respective signification) used, Sometimes: 1. Seoththan, sioththan, seththan, siththan, siththen, sithen, sithence, sithens, sithnes, sithns: Sometimes: 2. Syne, sine, sene, sen, syn, sin: Sometimes: 3. Seand, seeing, seeing that, seeing as, sens, sense, sence: Sometimes: 4. Siththe, sith, sithe, sith, seen that, seen as, sense, sense, sence” (219). (Tooke writes that “since” is a “very corrupt abbreviation” [218], and was formerly four different words.)

¹⁸⁹ The notion that words are “*things*, active and efficient” perhaps harkens back to Locke’s discussion of the name as a knot, effecting an efficient contraction of idea-threads: “For, the connexion between the loose parts of those complex ideas being made by the mind, this union, which has no particular foundation in nature, would cease again, were there not something that did, as it were, hold it together, and keep the parts from scattering. Though therefore it be the mind that makes the collection, it is the name which is as it were the knot that ties them fast together” (*Essay*, Book III, 49-50). Here, Locke too allots a certain impersonal

A “common” human nature, in Wordsworth’s scheme, is fundamentally built out of language’s elements, but these elements themselves do not belong to syntax or grammar. Reminding us that the Preface’s object lies less in *rendering* a “lower-class idiom” than in making a “clean break with those literary values...considered most pernicious,” that is with “prefabricated” phrases and imitation in general (45), Richard Turley hints at an affinity with Tooke’s retaliatory or negative purpose, and leaves us to reconsider, again, the scope of that “real language of men” (or elsewhere in the Preface, “real language of nature”) gleaned from rural landscapes. Writing in 1977, Frances Ferguson suggested that “What Wordsworth describes in rustic language is not a specific diction or syntactic ordonnance of words” (18), but rather something more vague, which uses “commonness” not only to mean “low,” but also “shared.” Similarly, I am arguing that this is not a new *vocabulary* being introduced, but a new spectrum of linguistic values, a new picture of language; in order to reform pernicious ways of speech, a poetic melting-down must take place. I am not questioning whether the Preface’s “real” language tried to limit itself to certain select words, but whether it was limited to words at all. The reception-anxiety running through the framing texts of *Lyrical Ballads* focuses on preparing the reader for “low” language, experiments in conversational “expressions”; but this “selection” aspires to reach, if only inarticulately, beyond dialect or the units of words to non-lexicalizable dimensions of a felt language far more difficult to play master over. Indeed, the inarticulacy of this reaching is its great virtue, since it surrenders the illusion of mastery, in order the better to understand what “commonness” might mean. This is where language’s narrative histories and its unfathomable temporalities overlap. The “reality” of such a language depends not (or not only) on its empirically derivable or natural sources, but more emphatically on its mobility and tendency.

When in the Preface Wordsworth writes that the poet, “from practice,” learns a method of expression to utter “those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, *or from the structure of his own mind*, arise in him without immediate external excitement” (300, emphasis added), this “structure” describes not an unchanging, static nature but a pattern of culture less clear, less visible, further submerged within the forgetful reflexes of the body and its impacted habitus. Indeed, these “passions and thoughts and feelings” are what “men” are made of, the knowledge which “all men carry about with them” (301):

And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sun-shine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow.¹⁹⁰

All this, then, must be considered as contributing to what surfaces as arbitrary language. These heterogeneous, interwoven factors represent Wordsworth’s distant translation of Tooke’s “conjunctions” and “particles”: they too are too easily seen as supplementary or insignificant resources, they are the “parts of speech” most easily imagined inessential, despite being indispensable elements of ecosystems of enculturation, within each

force to words themselves, independent of minds. Acknowledging that words and names pull tight and solidify, as hardened tangles of association, Wordsworth experiments additionally with different ways of *loosening* such knots.

¹⁹⁰ *Lyrical Ballads* 303.

temporality that can be invoked through myth and poetry.¹⁹¹ Such a broad philosophy of poetry makes the “etymology” necessary to trace meaning’s changing associations almost unthinkably ecological, composed of elements whose effects we do not control or even sense, requiring “words that are unknown to man” (1799 Prelude); yet Wordsworth calls up this ecosystem to widen and extend language, not to make its “users” feel small.¹⁹²

I have followed suggestions that Wordsworth’s conception of “nature” articulates a relationship to time, and gives physical changes different timescales in order to illustrate the flux of things. What Tooke showed, almost accidentally, of language — its tendency to shift forms willy-nilly, and to conceal its own past — is figured in terms of slow “natural” processes, like disintegration, with indeterminate agents. The diversion of etymology that Wordsworth and Coleridge refined, from different angles, takes language as also subject to physical changes, admitting the complexity of the temporal effects taking place in its formation and reformation. Language is first “a thing subject to endless fluctuations” (see epigraph above). Small wonder, with the category of nature imagined in such broad terms, that its naturalness is not necessarily impeded by a certain simultaneous “arbitrariness” in the domain of language; arbitrariness may then be affirmed not as its opposite, but as a feature of unstable nature.¹⁹³ Words and signs, or the less lexically segmentable “associations,” may be arbitrary, and at the same time belong to narratives offered as natural history. This attitude is particularly clear when the temporality within which our linguistic faculties operate is envisioned as multiple, active simultaneously within different scales. Between Tooke’s illustrations of abbreviation, Coleridge’s proposal of a language community’s law of growth, and Wordsworth’s poetic accounts of meaning’s changing shape, there are important transitions in what is taken for granted of language. Yet each — the radical reformer, the neologizing critic, the poet of “tendency” — latches onto the fact that language changes, and sees this fact as explaining something important and overlooked.

In Wordsworth’s writing, the substitution of a dynamically temporalized for a static nature too easily solidified as a separable world, existing prior to the senses, has far-reaching implications for language. We have to understand the appeal to nature as an ecological one, in the sense that its hunt for commonness (though it may be compatible with Smith’s class analysis) is also a hunt for the inhuman “temporalities” lodging in,

¹⁹¹ We may note in passing the “conjunctions” between the Imagination and its objects raised by Wordsworth in the passage from the 1815 Preface alluded to above (*Prose* 379-80).

¹⁹² On the subject of Wordsworth and the appearance of “arbitrary signs” in his language theory, particularly as it stems from Enlightenment precursors, see McKusick, 110-118, and Aarsleff, “Wordsworth, Language and Romanticism” 372-381. Neither entertains the thought that Wordsworth’s picture of language extended further than *words*, nor do they look specifically at the importance of temporality to his work.

¹⁹³ This marks, for me, another chapter in the history of the counter-intuitive notion that the *arbitrary* features of language may help reveal what makes it *natural*, and vice versa, another intellectual “reform” to which the *Lyrical Ballads* contributes. (This dialectic could perhaps be related to Adorno’s understanding of the reciprocal intelligibility of nature and history, in his early essay “The Idea of Natural History.”) This tradition of alternative etymological thought is described well in a remarkable article on Leibniz and Vico, two more accomplished etymologists, in which the author suggests that their use of the word “natural” shows that these thinkers “depriv[e] [‘naturalistic’ theories of language] of the matter of essence” (Gensini, 8), and that “the biological basis of men (their bodies, their psychophysical reactions) is deeply integrated into their linguistic activity” (7). They thus represent a philosophical undercurrent in which, despite an apparent constancy, “nature is not a static entity,” and human and linguistic histories are also simultaneously natural histories.

passing through, written over the human frame. This notion of the “common” recalls Paul de Man’s suggestion, in “Time and History in Wordsworth,” that the human “bond” is a “common temporal predicament” — so that *nature* would once again imply a particular relationship to time. Wordsworth’s etymology plots linguistic courses in inhuman timescales, at macro- and microlevels, making clearer the ways in which a world extends off the edge of the picture our minds can supply, yet a world not for that reason any less shared. This spin on etymology turns “ecological” where it becomes clear that language and its capacities extend beyond the control, not just of the individual language user, but also of human agency at the mythic time of language’s origin or invention. Its ecology can be sensed where “priority,” chronological or causal, is dispersed between nature and language or thought. In the process, Wordsworth promotes a hazier notion of causation or governance between these forces, picturing the ways that meaning is not dictated, not begun, but managed or accommodated by the linguistic mind. Small wonder, at this remove, that his linguistic theories have not often been associated with etymology; they rewrite language history so completely that it becomes a wholly different fact. Yet to hear “the murmur and the murmuring sound” (“Nutting”) first as a boy in “sweet mood,” and then again later as a poet pained at his former lack of reverence for that “spirit in the woods,” is to see how associations with a natural world’s “voice” change, presenting a short history within a greater linguistic sweep. And in “Simplon Pass,” when a young Wordsworth hears “the rocks that muttered close upon our ears,/ Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside/ As if a voice were in them,” the inkling felt is of an archaic yet familiar language, to which the poet feels, albeit dimly, some belonging. Far from merely humanizing this strange language, however, the recognition estranges him from his own.

The passage from the 1799 *Prelude* targeting simplistic origins, with which I began the Introduction above, declares its aim of “analyzing” the soul, yet dismisses as cant the easily traced “births” of any of its parts: “Not only general habits and desires, / But each most obvious and particular thought... Hath no beginning” (II.263-7). Yet this rejection of easy origins is immediately softened, as Wordsworth continues, “Blessed the infant babe — / For my best conjectures I would trace / The progress of our being” (II.267-9). The origin myth here (note how “the progress of *our being*” calls up a speculative anthropological timescale) reveals how the world’s influxes are accommodated and sought by the mind, entailing the dispersal of agency within passivity, allowing the self to shape as it is shaped by its world. Wordsworth elevates the formative blur of infancy by pairing the child’s poised “poetic spirit” with its inclination to “gather passion,” that receptive state in which feelings “pass into” its life, so that it is “creator and receiver both.” This shared work is far more than a linguistic faculty — yet it conveys an unarticulated language, broadly speaking; and where “in most” this “infant sensibility” is “abated and suppressed,” others dwell within it until they die, “through every change of growth or of decay.” These happy others are those whose genius “melts” habitual associations; yet matching joy with dreariness, Wordsworth communicates an ominous corollary to the “ineffable” bliss of feeling “the sentiment of being spread / O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still” (II.449-51): the body, recognizing itself in a transient nature, understands that it will come apart.

We have seen that versions of temporal layering, language acquisition overlaid against language origin, can be found in both poets’ productions. But where Coleridge tends to orient himself toward the progressive or positive poetic model for meaning change, through *growth*, Wordsworth gives equal weight, in *Lyrical Ballads*, to

dismantling.¹⁹⁴ “Hart-Leap Well” offers a slower, denser and more complicated view of the deterioration or decomposition that is enacted as a corrective to linguistic misprision. In addition to their formation, Wordsworth dwells on the gradual and even painful process of dissolving associations; in this dissolution, he also moves to condemn a false version of linguistic thought. What he shows dissolving is not only language, but a false orientation *toward* language. “Hart-Leap Well” thus embodies the qualities I want to draw out in Wordsworth’s poetic practice: the poem exemplifies what happens to etymology in Wordsworth’s poetry, or more precisely what becomes of the cues borrowed from a body of etymological thought that figured as a crucial reference point to the *Lyrical Ballads*’ inception.

The note at the poem’s head offers us an etymology, which is explained by way of an origin myth: “Hart-Leap Well is a small spring of water...Its name is derived from a remarkable chace [sic], the memory of which is preserved by the monuments spoken of in the second Part of the following Poem, which monuments do now exist as I have there described them” (171). These monuments, as we’ll see, are timeworn. Not unlike Tooke, Wordsworth describes the lingering and obscure significance of forms half worn away, and this headnote is perhaps the most compact expression of an analogy between reading the meaningful changes in a physical environment and tracking the shape-shifting forms of words, as in Tooke’s etymologies. The name of this spot, “Hart-Leap Well,” condenses or abbreviates the well’s myth, and remains its monument, but the poem doesn’t stop there. It also narrates the circumstances surrounding the *telling* of this myth, and its transformation from a tale of valor to one of cruelty. If the poem is in some sense an etymology of its own name, it reveals not only the truth of its significance, as etymology is supposed to, but also a falsity folded into that truth, or a falsification of a true association. The naturalness of the “slow decay” at work predicts that, given enough time, even the name may change: “These monuments shall *all* be overgrown,” including the place-name. If there is a law of growth proposed, as there is in Coleridge, it is not only additive; it is also a law of dismantling, biodegrading, and transformation, in short a law of *overgrowth*.

The first half of the poem tells the story of a Knight who hunts a hart to exhaustion, until at length it is brought down. Taking three final leaps down a steep cliff, it breathes its last into a spring at the hill’s base. The hunter, exultant from the immensity of this “remarkable chace,” promises to raise a “Pleasure-house” at that spot, to name the spring “Hart-leap Well” after his victim, and to memorialize the hart’s fall by building three columns, one for each of its last leaps, and by building a basin in which to catch the spring (these are the monuments spoken of above). The second half of the poem recounts how the poet-traveler happened upon what was left of this memorial splendor, now a strangely vacant ruin charged with supernatural gloom, and how he learned the story just recounted from a local shepherd. The shepherd ponders what is ‘off’ about the spot, and speculates on the hart’s reasons for choosing to die there; the poet offers the final word, declaring that they should share the lesson of the story, learned both from “what [Nature] shews, and what conceals” (l. 178). From the vantage of Part One, then, the poem unfolds

¹⁹⁴ An intermediate point of reference might be Wordsworth’s “Poems on the Naming of Places,” each of which narrates the process of association between locations and events by accounting for its christening. Such cases illustrate the inevitable building of associations, but with names chosen according to values Wordsworth considered well suited to their purpose: names commemorating feeling, as love, sorrow, chastening.

as a tale of origins, full of the tones of nostalgic English myth: the knight asserting his seigneurial rights, the fabled hunt, the ruin, the shepherd who renders the legend. But as Part Two sinks in, it starts to pull this version of things apart. Not only do the poem's final images dwell on the decomposing ruins, and predict the relief of their future disintegration, they render the etymological origin story retold by Part One little more than a folk tale. Beginning with this reconstructed origin is a ruse; it represents an amalgam of traditions, social, moral and linguistic, in desperate need of reconfiguration, waiting to be dissolved.

The poem is one of many versions, in the *Lyrical Ballads*, of what it means to ignore or misunderstand the language of the heart. In the narrative of the poem's first half, the hunted creature's final acts, recognized and memorialized by his hunter, are the stuff of language origin myths: for the memorials are built on the sites of primitive forms of both writing and speech, that is, three columns are raised where the hart leaves its hoof-marks "imprinted on the verdant ground," and the well's basin is installed where it utters its final, suffering cry: "with the last deep groan his breath had fetch'd/ The waters of the spring were trembling still" (ll. 43-4). With this attentive specificity, the poem seems keen to allow the imagination to reconstruct how language origin might imitate animal tracks and animal cries. Indeed it is as though these non-linguistic expressions serve as analogues to some ancestral hunter's written and spoken language, since the poem's encounters hinge on the *hunter's* prototypical enactment of language origin, the insistently agentive act of naming. The well's name then cements the memorialization: the effort to fix the hart's leap in place with columns, and to contain the spring's running water in stone, is completed in the act of conferring the name "Hart-leap Well."

The story retells an original empirical encounter, then, and imagines it artificially solidified by "hand of man" into constructed forms, architectural and linguistic — rather as a putatively empiricist language theory like Tooke's might. Then again if we wanted further evidence that "Hart-leap Well" is dabbling in etymology, surely the resonance between wells, sources, springs and origins should be heard as clearly as any *root* metaphor (and, glancing back to Herder's move from roots to their "sap," this figure lends itself the more readily to a basis in liquidity). This origin is clearly enough not a stabilizing one: Wordsworth's corruption of any simple temporal origin point is suggestively indicated by the derivation of a name composed of competing "spring" synonyms, *leap* and *well*. Which "spring" springs from which: is the leap made significant by the well, or vice versa? The knight's building project, and the notion of naming that seems to provide its grounds, consists of a love of monuments seeming to stand against time: "Till the foundations of the mountains fail/ My mansion with its arbor shall endure" (ll. 73-4), he declares, with Ozymandias-like short-sightedness. (Later on, the poem's most memorable phrase resounds, as if in answer, like thunder against the knight's hubris: "The Pleasure-house is dust" [l. 169]). If a certain grip on language is expressed here through the urge to transform a spring into a well, to trap or contain mobility, it is quite apt that upon first surveying the spot, the poet notes a blocked relation to time — and specifically to what he calls "spring-time": "It seem'd as if the spring-time came not here." The sense that temporality is always reasserting itself is immediate, however, in the next line: "And Nature here were willing to decay" (l. 116). Releasing that will to permanence, that grip on language, requires the anticipation of an impersonal "willing," a *different* spring, the millenarian prospect, previewed in the final stanzas, of a

“milder day,” when “Nature, in due course of time, once more/ Shall here put on her beauty and her bloom” (ll. 171-2).

To release this grip on a certain kind of language, and to divert etymological thought toward his own purpose, Wordsworth exploits the poetic effects of overlapping temporalities. Coleridge’s account of language change in “The Nightingale,” with its crossing of association psychology and anthropological language origins, finds its echoes here, but in “Hart-leap Well” it is as if the imagined phases of dissolution and reattachment are happening in slow motion, outside those anthropocentric universes. Still, “we” are caught in the midst of the change. Nature’s inevitable “slow decay” applies not just to the landscape, but to us as well: “She leaves these objects to a slow decay/ That what we are, and have been, may be known” (ll. 173-4). From the traces of those memorial objects, from what is gone and what is left, we piece together a historical time, in which the transitions in forms of life have left their marks. But the specter of the knight’s miscalculation — the speed with which his mansion, so swiftly built, is then reduced once more to dust — haunts the poem. There is an uncomfortable feeling that, within the scope of the line “these monuments shall all be overgrown,” fall not only the knight’s constructions, not only his coined name, but the poem, the *Lyrical Ballads*, its readers, and so on, as if pulled in over the edge of an eroding slope, before the earth can “grow” back over the damage. This is as much as to restate the contrast between theories of language change — Coleridge’s law of growth with Wordsworth’s law of overgrowth.

Such faith in Nature’s tendency might remind us that the turns the story takes frame its empirical encounter not only as a linguistic origin, but as a creature’s death; and not just any death, but a slaying. It may seem crude to turn the poem, if only as an experiment, into the allegory of a pun — heart/hart — but such an experiment illustrates the difficulty of interpreting all that is, in turn, represented in and through the heart, using our meager linguistic means. The Knight, a biased (not to say bad) reader, is distracted by joy in the accomplishment of death, and immediately attaches himself to the apparently accidental location. The Shepherd, meanwhile, a more subtle reader, turns the tables, imagining that the hart chose to go just here, to “make his death-bed near the well.” But through what motive? Was he accustomed to return here out of some obscure attachment? We cannot know for sure, of course; yet we can see that the association named by the knight was first made physically by the hart, in the marked earth and in the trembling water.

This embodiment of the language of acts and passions, the language of motion and tendency, is studied by the knight, but fatally misunderstood. He adopts the hart’s attachment to the spot for his own ends, judging the location worthy of celebration, rather than of mourning. Here, in Wordsworth’s etymology, lies the truth of the name, as well as its falseness. The Knight belongs to a social order that feels the landscape can be built up through monumentalized exertions of will: pursuit, conquest, building, naming. He labors under the false assumptions of custom. (It is also important that he is the product of class privilege, since this is part of what “the hunt” signifies in British history: dominion over the low, a feudal aristocracy, the regulative symbolic authority of tradition.) To read the poem this way is to find language “origin” dramatized in its falsely theorized form (built by artifice, by “the hand of man”), against its alternatively theorized form (under the reshaping power of Nature’s “slow decay”). Its narrative is then an elaborate derivation, the rehearsal and rewriting of an origin myth.

Languages of the heart and the sense belong to the tendencies of a temporalized nature and, as the accessibility of the “common things that round us lie” (“Poet’s Epitaph”) suggests, such broad linguistic configurations suggest the insufficiency of a strictly lexical view of language, prone to arresting the currents of meaning that carry us along with them. It is not simply, in the manner of most fuzzy claims to poetic or sentimental inarticulateness, that no words will do; it is, strictly speaking, that communication takes place or fails to take place *around* words, beyond the claims to self-enclosure inhabited by a linguistic subject or agent. As Wordsworth would later put it, in Book III of the 1805 *Prelude*, the “breathings” modeled by his poetic practice mark a meaningful force “far hidden from the reach of words” (III.185) — yet not, I think, for that reason less linguistic. Language in Wordsworth is understood as pervasive, followed or traced outward into its physical surroundings, opening inward to its dissolution and reformation, in a rhythm of influx and utterance. Such a felt language alters and is altered by its participants. This felt language, the poems suggest, is where the common springs of action and passion can be found; its consistency is embodied, vital.¹⁹⁵ To return to the epigraph above, if the “medium” of language is to affect the heart (and there is, in “Tintern Abbey,” a “language of my former heart,” as there are, in “Hart-leap Well,” “thinking hearts”), it must be dissolved or “melted” — which is first of all to say, theorized as somehow solid yet soluble.

Let us conclude by catching Wordsworth in the act of etymology, using its “proof” to make a point, before immediately correcting or qualifying this with a counter-intuitive reversal: “Passion, it must be observed, is derived from a word which signifies *suffering*; but the connection which suffering has with effort, with exertion, and *action*, is immediate and inseparable.”¹⁹⁶ Philology has a place in Wordsworth’s poetics, but a subordinate one. Its capacity to expand our knowledge of language, he implies, should not exclude experience. The balance of passive with active participation in language formation is reiterated throughout the Preface, until it is clear that human bodies themselves are, as it were, plunged at birth (and earlier) into the chemical bath of experience: the Poet, who “considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure” (301), must use this knowledge to trace on a minute scale how “language and the human mind act and react on each other” (288). We are steeped in language. If action is in step with passion, if “our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts” (291), a Wordsworthian poetics of tendency calls upon the poet “to follow the

¹⁹⁵ I am reminded of a phrase from the 1799 *Prelude*: “the earth and common face of nature spake to me rememberable things.” What might it mean, not just for things to speak, but for any agency to speak “*things*”? Those “indisputable shapes,” those “words that are unknown to man” exemplify an obscure talk, words that are not like any words we can articulate, intimate and indistinct, yet indisputable, a language felt rather than known. For a recent discussion of this theme in Wordsworth, see Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*.

¹⁹⁶ *Prose* 409. This recalls a thought recently articulated by Stanley Cavell, suggesting how easy it is to lose sight of “what happens when creatures of a certain species fall into the possession of language and become humans... what happens is that they have become (always already) victims of expression — readable in every sound and gesture — their every word and act apt to betray their meaning” (186). It could be argued that humans are not the only victims of expression. Nevertheless, such a formulation easily moves us closer to the surrender of agentive control over meaning’s stability that characterizes Wordsworth’s view of language.

fluxes and refluxes of the mind” (292). Such *following*, or tracing, practices an etymology adapted to an ecological conception of language, and represents an exemplary instance of Romantic etymology. Instead of Coleridge’s scholarly class, charged with the task of linguistic renewal, the rather special “linguists” in Wordsworth are, not surprisingly, poets (this being, of course, no less exclusive.) The poets work in a language so common, so low, it is suppressed by the majority of fellow-creatures: hence the poet’s greater intimacy with “the fickleness or stability of the relations of particular ideas to each other” and with “the various stages of meaning through which words have passed” (310). Yet Wordsworth’s corrective administers a therapy meant to allow readers to “melt” the “arbitrary” affinities thoughtlessly accepted through linguistic forms (before, of course, forming new ones), something he calls “the shock” given to the reader’s associations (304), in order the better to “extend the domain of sensibility.”¹⁹⁷

In using etymology against itself, such an example of Romantic etymology thus displays aspects of what Voloshinov called Romanticism’s “reaction against the alien word,” and against those “categories of thought” it promoted (83). The diversions of etymology outlined here contest the conventions of standard etymology, confined by insufficiently complex language myths, by introducing new myths of their own. By pointing out the unacknowledged contradictions of an etymological mindset adhering to Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley*, even as they put its illustrations of linguistic temporality to other use, Coleridge and Wordsworth rejected Tooke’s premises — philosophically, empirical reduction; linguistically, semantic stabilization and unification — while accepting and seeking to deepen the temporality of language’s forms which his indefatigable etymologies illustrated. After their interventions, language may be seen more clearly as in different ways a quasi-material thing, with a life of its own, narrated and felt in multiple timescales; yet this materiality has a texture that cannot be fully accounted for by empiricism. The etymology that emerges through Wordsworth’s glimpses of a felt or “ghostly language” attempts to accommodate language’s forms within the temporal processes and impersonal patterns that always exceed these forms’ individual expression. And while reading Wordsworth requires a broader conception of language and etymology, etymology in turn gives us another way of expressing the consequences of Wordsworth’s conception of the mind as “creator and receiver both”; his ecological models of patient action, in the poet’s reconstruction of the growth of his own mind, are finally echoed in the critic’s reconstruction of the poet’s work.

¹⁹⁷ *Prose* 413.

Chapter IV Etymologies of the Woods: Emerson and Thoreau

This is the effect on us of tropes...[We] have really got a new sense...¹⁹⁸
— Emerson, “The Poet”

I. Introduction: The Natural History of Tropes

Moving now from a European to an American Romanticism entails some speculation about what remains and what transforms, what could be said to be inherited from the one to the other. This episode — which, while standing at something of a remove, belongs definitively to the same story — reiterates certain pressing motives of the thinkers already gathered and posed in relation to one another. At the same time, it distinctively reorients these motives, establishing them as part of a new tradition. Rather than imagine this as American exceptionalism, I will emphasize the various continuities with strands of thought examined already in German language theory and British Romanticism. Anchoring these continuities is a preoccupation with different ways in which modes of thought can alienate language from its environments. This preoccupation, and the motive to overcome such alienation, can easily be assimilated to a nostalgic logic that seeks the recovery of origins, and to a naturalism characterizable as naively primitivist. But as in previous figures, though there are elements of this logic at work in Emerson and Thoreau, I will argue that their theories of language more forcefully advocate a linguistic naturalism that elevates language’s characteristic mutability, its ungovernable wildness and motion.

In its American form, this Romantic “reaction against the alien word” urges the recognition that our terms (in the overlapping senses of language and limits) are temporary and in part unconsciously self-imposed. The consequence in Emerson and Thoreau is an ethical imperative to stretch and expand, by cultivating a different relation to nature. According to Emerson, when we “find ourselves” in nature, we open or abandon ourselves to strange communications, as when for instance “the incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them”; so begins a dawning awareness of how we converse with the material world, in order to “make friends with matter” (407). Though generally interpreted as “idealist,” Emerson’s linguistics thus require an assessment of his off-kilter “materialism” as well. As with the earlier Romantics, this, in turn, requires a widened perspective; and geological matter, once again, is exemplary of the necessary move toward adopting various points of view in order to “live with” the natural world:

Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature, and taught us to disuse our dame-school measures, and exchange our Mosaic and Ptolemaic schemes for her large style.

¹⁹⁸ Emerson 334.

We knew nothing rightly, for want of perspective. Now we learn what patient periods must round themselves before the rock is formed.¹⁹⁹

This general expansion of scope, and the metaphors of vision and “perspective” which accompany it, are ever-present in Emerson’s language philosophy. I will suggest below how the “secularity” and “patient periods” of nature become figuratively crucial to comprehending language’s dynamic consistency in both Emerson and Thoreau.²⁰⁰

This fostering of our capacity to understand and in a sense to practice or knowingly participate in language’s mutability marks an optimism toward the simultaneous impressions of concretion and dissolution that have repeatedly emerged from linguistic models in previous chapters. As (most prominently) in Coleridge and Wordsworth, there is an ethical valence to this project: social renewal and health are understood to be contingent upon a right relation to one’s language (though this ‘rightness’ undergoes strong modifications). Emerson and Thoreau envision such renewal through processes of figuration, but these processes are in part also an adaptation of the notion of embodied, species- or community-specific “analogy” traceable to Herder and Humboldt (to whose ideas Emerson had access through Continental sources, among them Goethe, Germaine de Staël, and Victor Cousin).

I will investigate below how this notion of analogy reactivates the sedimented language forms laid down by Emerson’s “fossil poetry,” suggesting that one of the more important effects of Emerson’s active rooting of language in nature is the idea of language’s dynamic objectivity or “reality,” as it is produced and reproduced through the limitless range of relations between humans and the world surrounding them. Drawing on Emerson’s European sources, I show how the “naturalness” of language in his difficult linguistics gives it a material or solid form, and how this very solidity guarantees its reshaping. Out of this intellectual background, but with a wildness Emerson only hints at, emerge the etymological flourishes generated in *Walden* (1854). Thoreau’s etymological practice is one of self-observation, as he assumes the role of a naturalist whose own small acts require description alongside natural events like the growing season of beans or the thaw of mud season; and these etymologies, as we will see, bear a figurative weight belying their philological falsity. For Thoreau, the contingency of figuration, the inevitable defeasibility of language, shows how an apparently lifeless world transforms according to temporal perspective, and how — using a definition of “society” that seeks, in Emersonian fashion, to desegregate nature and culture — “institutions” are “plastic like clay.” In this picture of language, a commitment to the observation of processes (whether viewed as natural or not) reconstitutes form, and origin, once again as an ongoing transformation or formation-in-the-present. Though the linguistic naturalism expressed through these exemplary figures may seem superficially like a “mere” literalist

¹⁹⁹ Emerson, “Nature,” 412.

²⁰⁰ Our elemental yet forgotten kinship to all our surroundings is the basis of the ecological principle expressed through the linguistics in both; and as narrowed vision is responsible for the superficial distinctions between “artificial” and “natural,” an expanded vision will be needed to remember these forgotten relations: “If we had eyes to see it, a bit of stone from the city wall would certify us of the necessity that man must exist, as readily as the city. That identity makes us all one, and reduces to nothing great intervals on our customary scale. We talk of deviations from natural life, as if artificial life were not also natural” (413).

primitivism, this expansive notion of language's mutability can perhaps be better understood as an eccentric linguistic pragmatics.

II. "Held Lightly": Emerson's Terms of Renewal

The half-known obstructs knowledge. Since we only ever know by halves, our knowledge always obstructs knowledge.

— Goethe, "Über Unorganische Prozesse im Allgemeinen: Entstehung Unorganische Formen"²⁰¹

The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.²⁰²

— Emerson, "The Poet"

What was it that nature would say?²⁰³

—Emerson, *Nature*

Any effort to view Emerson's language philosophy in terms as complex or contradictory as his definitions of nature may seem preemptively short-circuited by the presumed primitivism of his most memorable linguistic pronouncements ("Nature is a language"; "Words are signs of natural facts"; "Language is fossil poetry"). This primitivism is especially pronounced when he speaks of the roots of language and the origins of metaphors. The best-known of these passages, in *Nature* and "The Poet," seem therefore exemplary of linguistic naturalisms focused on representational correspondence between word and world, whether falling prey to the empiricist desire for a material basis in the origins of individual signs, or echoing proto-Romantic voices (like Vico or Rousseau) in their mythic retellings of the dawn of human tongues, which appear to be enabled by a figurative language consisting of images or sounds originally inspired by nature.²⁰⁴

In *Nature*, the section titled "Language" tells us that "Words are signs of natural facts... Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance... *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*; *Spirit* primarily means *wind*" (14). We have observed the scheme of tracing language's roots to material appearances or empirical encounters through the work of Horne Tooke, against whose work we also saw Wordsworth's contrary effort to alter our sense of language origin, by pushing language's "roots" outward from the present. Behind Tooke stands Book III of Locke's *Essay* (clearly one inspiration for Emerson — Locke had written, "*Spirit*, in its primary signification, is breath"), which supposes that words are all traceable to "common sensible ideas" (even if Locke resists Tooke's desire to actually perform such derivations).²⁰⁵ Words seem to bear a

²⁰¹ "Das Halbgewußte hindert das Wissen. Weil alles unser Wissen nur halb ist, so hindert unser Wissen immer das Wissen" ("Maximen und Reflexionen").

²⁰² Emerson 320.

²⁰³ Emerson 10.

²⁰⁴ I point less to the actual texts of Vico or Rousseau, and more to the received impression of their theories. A more thorough reading of either would show, I think, how both develop complex theories of language change designed less around representational mimicry or iconicity than phenomenologies of the formation of figures. I mention them here because both tend to be used as ambassadors for the view that language was originally composed of figures or poetic language.

²⁰⁵ David Greenham has recently raised the comparison between these passages in Emerson and Locke, in order thereby to analyze Emerson's critical relation to empiricism (103). Greenham shows how Emerson

direct and somehow imitative relation to “facts” in nature, though we will see how adaptable and versatile “words” become in Emerson’s shifting definitions.

At other moments, Emerson sets out a naturalistic correspondence theory through a notion of the dim linguistic past made present to us in the figurative language of poets and “savages”: “Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry” (16). Though this “radical correspondence” points toward a philosophical genealogy superficially opposed to the empirical relation suggested in the Lockean tradition, the relation between things and thoughts via images, to which tropes stand as testament, also depends, if in a different way, on a “forgotten” direct link between original or “primary” language forms and their referents.²⁰⁶ The sense of a prior correspondence, which may apparently be reacquired by somehow poetically reconvening nature and language, is present in Emerson’s linguistics (and to a lesser extent also in Thoreau’s), and even more so in philologists contemporary with (and influenced by) Emerson, like Charles Kraitsir (who will reappear when we look at Thoreau). In these apparently exemplary instances of naïve Romantic philology, Emerson seems to attempt to capture the poet’s work of “fasten[ing] words again to visible things,” by dwelling on the act of locking empirical-seeming linguistic units to their referents.

Yet if we read around these excerpts in Emerson, we will find that the processes of language formation always outstrip its individual units. Indeed, to “fasten” takes on its shadow sense of *quicken*ing, not matching words to things but perceiving a kindred velocity of mutation in both; or even simply diversifying the speeds at which words, like “visible things,” stretch, reorient, condense and dissipate, depending on perspective. This already becomes evident in Emerson’s etymologist, the poet’s counterpart, rediscovering the tropes laid down by time: “though the origin of most of our words is forgotten... The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (329). Through the fixed ideas we may have about the naiveté of such poetic and pictorial origins, we should recognize the novelty of this vividly extended relation of language to time, accomplished through

extracts a materialism on his own terms from the empirical tradition. The only additions I would make to this keen-eyed comparison are the influence of Goethe’s *zarte Empirie*, “tender” or “gentle empiricism,” on Emerson’s thought; and the likely presence of Horne Tooke, in the etymological context, between Locke and Emerson.

²⁰⁶ Locke’s insistence on linguistic “arbitrariness” is always colored by the necessity of maintaining an original link between, for example, “spirit” and the “breath” from which its name arises; as long as the sensory is assumed to precede the intellectual, a sort of distant but forgotten material origin always conceptually anchors the sign’s subsequent changes. Locke’s sense of “arbitrary,” as I have tried to show in the early sections of this work, is an effect of the “voluntary Imposition” that is supposed to have been its origin, yet the root causes of his ideas, being sensible, remind us of a primitive relation that tends to be expressed referentially (spirit/breath being only one example). Emerson’s adaptation of this empirical link is meant in part to import, within the relations forged through language, a material opacity into the lucidity of linguistic expression, rendering it “partial.” Even more importantly, he notes the way our relation *to* language alters according to a mood: “A man can only speak so long as he does not feel his speech to be partial and inadequate. It is partial, but he does not see it to be so whilst he utters it. As soon as he... sees its partiality, he closes his mouth in disgust” (“Nature,” 417).

natural figures. As with Humboldt's metaphor of language changing like pebbles in a brook, according to gradual, "natural" processes, the transformations of matter undergone during natural process of fossilization metaphorically decelerate and externalize language, seeming to alienate or depersonalize it; even more than this, though, their net effect is to introduce a more gradual, less noticeable temporal process into language change, so that we feel how transient our symbols and speech continue to be, even as we utter them.

Before showing how Emerson's use of "analogy" sets up a continuous and expansively linguistic relation with nature's materials, we should pause over how disparately and strangely he defines what words are. Emerson persistently breaks open the category of what constitutes linguistic units like words and symbols, in order to give a sense of their fluidity. In a pair of sentences from "The Poet," we find that "Every word was once a poem. Every new relation is a new word" (327). The first conjures language's primitive former state, by claiming that words are the hardened mementos or tokens of something once more "poetic," visceral or lively, while the second turns us toward the moving present, suggesting how this view allows us access to language's *current* mobility. Words, as "relation[s]," are no longer the static units they generally seem. This same rhetorical move, turning from the primitive transformation of sensation into language, to a process occurring in the present, is found in *Nature* (with the child as exemplary language-learner): "Most of the process by which this transformation [from sensible things to words] is made, is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency may be daily observed in children" (15). Of course, this attempted reorientation from a backward-looking love of foundation and origin, to our present condition, is one of Emerson's most familiar preoccupations (this condition being emblemized in the "perpetual youth" we glimpse by relocating a mythic primeval forest to the Concord woods). *Nature* opens by diverting its reader's gaze from the static history admired in retrospection, to the moving moment, from an origin in a bygone age (the "foregoing generations," the "dry bones of the past") to something like an origin-in-the-present: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (3). We will later be told that the poet is the persona best equipped to practice this "original relation" in the present age, and so the question becomes linguistic.

This constant liveliness of linguistic awareness, present and formed through "new relations" and "new facts," evidently means that language, like nature, cannot be viewed in a static form prior and external to the observer, but must be recognized as active, if only invisibly, outside the linguistic repositories that privilege referential meaning: "Nature is a language and every new fact we learn is a new word; but it is not a language taken to pieces and dead in the dictionary" ("The Uses of Natural History," 1833). In other words, we inhabit a language that exceeds the lexicon as we know it. Emerson continually redefines what a word or a symbol is and does, by representing it both as a limitation, something that deadens, solidifies, measures, cuts, and reduces language, and yet also as a possible means of expansion, something capable of reanimation. In order to achieve the latter, words must be perceived more broadly but also more viscerally. In the first place, "Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it" (25). Echoing Coleridge's definition of the imagination from *Biographia Literaria*, Emerson gives words an impossible task (to "cover the dimensions of what is in truth"), and declares them inadequate to it. Yet he also implies that if we can imagine how words assist us in

interacting with, and making sense of, the environment around us, we will find that “words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (322). We live within and embody a language that directs our vision, our intellectual capacity: “We are symbols and inhabit symbols” (328).²⁰⁷

These efforts to redefine language as ‘live’ or active, as natural (and in excess of individual human means) show that the distant empirical roots of Locke’s epistemology do not account for what is palpably “natural” in language: in fact, Emerson insists, such long-lost origins are “our least debt to nature” (15). The relation of language and nature is uninterrupted and ongoing, though it requires the figure of the poet (but in fact, the poet like other moods and characters seems to reside at least potentially in us all: this makes for a slightly different interpretation of Emerson’s inability to “find the poet he describe[s]” [338], since if this poet is nowhere, ‘he’ is also everywhere). The poetic figure or faculty can establish new relations to a familiar environment, viewing the world in new forms and renovating language on his way, dissolving the apparent fixity of convention by seeing into nature’s processes with wide eyes. Emerson’s linguistics is predicated on a new relation to nature, which brings about a new picture of language, because of a new faculty of vision (as though new “eyes,” like the widening spires of “Circles,” were able to form around each successive field of vision). In this process we might see, as Greenham suggests, that for Emerson “spirit is nature turning into language” (105) in an uninterrupted process. The “analogy that marries Matter and Mind” (20) is a kind of likening, a relation, but not one of referential correspondence; its most salient feature is restless activity.²⁰⁸

In order to understand this “analogy” more clearly, we must understand something more about nature’s matter, or about Emerson’s materialism. Recent critics have been claiming a new wildness in Emerson.²⁰⁹ This is especially visible in the trend of showing how his transcendentalism is marked by an effort to rescue materialism from empiricism. In practice this means that although in different places, Emerson’s position is angled against one or another form of empiricism or idealism, he thinks of himself treading a middle path through a very real nature — though we may know it better as a nature pervaded by spirit.²¹⁰ The historical forces and intellectual circumstances — the German ideology — that produced Marx and Engels’ “all that is solid melts into air,” produced, in Emerson, one possible corollary: all that is solid is related *already* to air. In “The Poet,” this is expressed (in part) as the conversion of atmosphere into language: “[The poet] forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words, and gives

²⁰⁷ It would be interesting to explore how far this expansion of language’s boundaries resonates with the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, who in one of his summaries of the signifying process famously refers to a key line of Emerson’s poetry: “The symbol may, with Emerson’s sphinx, say ‘of thine eye I am eyebeam’” (“Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs”).

²⁰⁸ In his introduction to Goethe’s *Scientific Studies*, Douglas Miller writes that for Goethe, “the question is never ‘why is the form the way it is?’ but ‘how did the form arise out of the interaction between idea and matter?’” (xv); and this is, I think, a useful way of thinking about the kind of “etymology” we should understand through Emerson’s thought on figuration and analogy. For a useful account of Emerson’s relation to Goethe, see von Cromphout, *Emerson’s Modernity and the Example of Goethe*.

²⁰⁹ Cavell; Cameron; Arsic; the collective contributors to *The Other Emerson*.

²¹⁰ Sometimes Emerson’s orientation seems to depend largely on which Continental figures are viewed as most influential: whether it is Fichte and Schelling, through the lens of Coleridge and Carlyle, or whether it is Bacon, Spinoza, and Diderot via Goethe, mediating a wholly different interpretation of nature.

them wing as angels of persuasion and command” (23).²¹¹ But in his advocated adoption of a philosophy that could mend the perceived gap between spirit and nature, Emerson also hopes to perform an overturning: “A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit” (42). The intruding spirit, its *in-flux*, might seem to belittle the “things”; yet things, being nature’s constituents, remain real for Emerson, and a renewed relation to nature is one of his most pressing philosophical commitments. In *Nature*, he writes, “the solid seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought” (31), but it is not the matter itself which is purged, only the unquestioning acceptance of its immutability. If it is idealism that inspires the airy thoughts of matter’s dispersion, in the dissolved “block of matter,” it is Emerson’s eccentric materialism that suggests the “block” itself is mental. It is not in, or made of, matter; it is in our relation to matter.

The link between Emerson’s notion of “spirit” and linguistic expression, gestured at in Locke’s empiricist etymology, merits close attention. Introducing mobility into matter through the pervasive figure of breath, Emerson expresses the world’s liveliness or animacy, on the one hand, and its voice, on the other. This means that the dissolution of what seems most familiar or “solid” is one way the plasticity of form is indicated in *Nature*; the conversion between the apparently solid and the ethereal is the recurrent signature of Emerson’s adaptation of idealism. In the lexical network built around breath, air, spirit, and even “spires” — beginning with the closing line of *Nature*’s epigraph-poem, “...the worm / Mounts through all the spires of form” — this figure is installed in whatever seems firmest and most permanent. The breath attaches and even surrenders the individual to its surroundings, through wordplay: “I dilate and conspire with the morning wind” (10).

Vacillating as to whether a short-sighted empiricism is a spirit of the times or an effect of the human condition, Emerson declares the inevitability of a kind of disbelief that matter is always in flux: “The wheels and springs of man are all set to the hypothesis of the permanence of nature... we resist with indignation any hint that nature is more short-lived or mutable than spirit” (27). For Emerson, in order to unburden us of these “wheels and springs,” this mechanical faith in permanence (as well as of our indignation at any challenge to its stable integrity), the relation between what is most ethereal (mind, or thought itself) and what is taken for granted as our solid ground (nature) must be a communion of the most thorough-going kind. But note that what thought changes is not matter as such, but minds themselves — thought affects the political system of our sensualist regime: “The first effort of thought tends to relax this despotism of the senses” (27). We have, thereafter, several forms of vision to call upon, the animal eye and the “eye of Reason”; and we can never be sure which one Emerson means in his continual resort to the visual sense.

Through the relationship thus established, even as he mounts a thoughtful defense, Emerson expresses guarded criticism of Idealism. In one critical account of

²¹¹ Such *winged words* are no longer Tooke’s (though if we look for it we will find Tooke’s influence on Emerson, at the very least through Coleridge), since their relation to the material encounter that shapes them. The linguistic materialism of such moments carries us back again to Epicurean “naturalism” (and its own primitivism) cited in Chapter 1, which seems to naturalize as linguistic reality the skill Emerson attributes to poets especially: “Hence even the names of things were not originally due to convention but in the several tribes under the impulse of special feelings and special presentations of sense primitive men uttered special cries. *The air thus emitted was molded by their individual feelings or sense-presentations*” (cited in Formigari, 41; emphasis added).

Emerson, thanks largely to the influence of Goethe, he is read as insisting on a nature made of bodies that can never be left behind through transcendence (Van Cromphout); in another, a right sensuousness is arrived at by a process of passing through skeptical empiricism (Greenham). In accounting for Emerson's difficult naturalism, we are again reminded that his "nature" consists partly of a process of coming to terms with our ability to recognize ourselves *in* nature: "We distrust and deny inwardly our sympathy with nature," he writes; "We own and disown our relation to it, by turns" (39). Declaring his stance against blunt empiricism or the "materialism of the times" (338), and constantly reminding his reader that nature is rife with spirit, Emerson is nevertheless intent on reminding us that matter may not be left behind "like an outcast corpse" (31), for we are in danger in such cases of "denying substantive being to men and women" (35). If a narrow-eyed empiricism alienates its advocates from their natural objects of investigation, an excessively wide-eyed idealism risks a similar loss, in that it "makes nature foreign...and does not account for that consanguinity which we acknowledge to it" (35). Clearing a path toward the language of Thoreau's bean-field, Emerson's materialism identifies him with the natural world at his fingertips and feet: "I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons" (33). In a famous passage, what he elsewhere describes as his "wood-thoughts" similarly open outward onto something grand and shared, like warm weather: "In the woods, we return to reason and faith... Standing on the bare ground — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me." Yet even in this classic moment of transcendence, the Idealist "I," though dissipated and see-through, is rendered an anatomical, almost slimy "eyeball" — that is, curiously embodied.²¹²

As our picture of Emerson's philosophy shifts toward descriptions of his new materialism, it becomes clear that this must strongly affect an interpretation of his language philosophy — particularly as expressed in the early *Nature* (1836), but also in "The Poet" (1841-3). In the section of *Nature* devoted to "Language," though as we have

²¹² David Greenham reminds us that this passage may be read as a rewriting of the romantic trope of dissolution into nature. In the previous chapter, we viewed a similar dissolving act through Coleridge's version of post-Kantian idealism — in which the secondary imagination, "echoing" the primary, "dissolves...in order to recreate" — as well as through the persistent motif in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge of the poet experiencing a kind of permeability with nature. Placing emphasis on the chemical analogy applied to Tooke's etymological "analysis," the *dissolving* action of the poetic imagination sought to merge mind with nature in order to work in an expanded linguistic idiom, the "real language of men" or "real language of nature." The universal consistency of this idiom, figured in Wordsworth's writing as "low," "common," "deep," and "slow," gives it an impersonality which is curiously intimate: though its vision of "nature" in part externalizes and obscures language, as an object never wholly accessible or graspable, it also seems to bring language nearer to us, in another sense internalizing it. This same vocabulary of low, common, or real language makes itself felt throughout *Nature* and "The Poet": "the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low that the common influences should delight him" (333). The "influx of the spirit" can be heard now through these "common influences," as what is material or ideal becomes instead simply *real*, a renovated language rearticulated as an acknowledged linguistic relation to a complexly reimagined nature. Between Coleridge and Emerson, we might ask: How do we imagine the disintegration of an individual that doesn't forget the importance of the body? Indeed, isn't it the flip side of this ambivalence expressed by bodily decomposition, which is imagined poetically through Blake's Thel and Wordsworth's Lucy? The alternative materialism eerily registered in these figures, unencumbered by the skeptical regrets of empiricism, seems to me comparable to one aspect of Emerson's efforts to comprehend nature.

seen it appears to be a *locus classicus* of primitive naturalism, again, his odd empiricism is less concerned to trace and fix terms to originary encounters with natural phenomena, than to foster an abiding attentiveness to our participation in nature's transformations. "What we call nature," he writes in "The Poet," "is a certain self-regulated motion or change," of which we are part.²¹³ The question of how nature depends in part on language is crucial to Emerson's interpretation of idealism; yet language has a kind of ceaseless "dependence" on nature — and in this, Emerson remains in touch with empiricism.²¹⁴ There is clearly a relation between his conflicted desire to be a "naturalist" and his evident dedication to becoming, if not exactly a poet or linguist, at least a theorist of analogy, since for him analogy is what braids history and nature together *as* language. Indeed, recalling Herder, Emerson writes that humans as a species are "analogist[s]": "It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects" (15). Questions of influence aside, this resembles Herder's concept of ecological *Analogie*, as something emergent and distributed throughout the adaptive techniques or ecological relations between the linguistic creature and its environment. Both recast these relations — sensory, intellectual, social — as necessarily "natural": not arbitrary in the sense of imposed and willful, these analogies are built up through individual acts, but according to ongoing processes under the sway of intangible forces.

When Emerson erupts, "how great the perspective!" — that is, when we perceive how much more the world signifies than we thought, how pervasive a language is that defines a species as a whole — his expansiveness is uncannily similar to the Herder who declared, "From this point of view, how great language becomes!" This insight is implicit in the idea of deep time and slow motion, as constituents of language, a notion Emerson believes "liberates" us (335). It is clear that, as with nature, what Emerson believes is required is not a new language, but a new relation to language; not only new words, new metaphors, new meanings, but new appreciation of what we already possess: "we are far from having exhausted the significance of the few symbols we use" (327). He writes of how impoverished are "the dictionary and grammar of [man's] municipal speech" (18); and he renders this speech and thought through images of a restricted mental diet approximating a self-imposed mendicancy of the mind, all the while anticipating a society in which we can see past "peppercorn informations," "the affairs of our pot and kettle," "using the cinders of a volcano to roast [our] eggs."

²¹³ See Arsic.

²¹⁴ A passage on this mutual dependence also shows Emerson's apparent debt to the British Romantics, given the relation of the language he values to that life which in Wordsworth's "Preface" was called "low and rustic," or "common": "This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us. It is this which gives that piquancy to the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or backwoodsman, which all men relish" (16). This should be a signal that in Emerson and Thoreau, we will find help reinterpreting the Preface's earlier primitivism: "such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (290). If the condescension of "piquancy" and the class-blind claim upon what "all men relish" seem to dull its edge, the passage still establishes a link to Wordsworth's "common" speech, alongside which Emerson's farmer and woodsman seem especially audibly to perform the "conversion" of nature through analogy that all speakers practice unknowingly and that the poet consciously pursues.

A utilitarian relation to language is the symptom of a narrow vision, and allows us to forget not only language's vast scope, but also its mobility, and the relation between language and action. Symbols, according to Emerson, "must be held lightly" (336) — a wonderful phrase that communicates not only his belief that the symbols of a language are delicate and evanescent, or require a certain care, but also his recommendation that we not become too attached to any single way of expressing ourselves. This is a pointed embrace of language change, and indeed Emerson seems at times to write *in order* to discover what moves in language, as his own figures tilt and turn: "all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead" (336). In encouraging us not to dwell too securely in the language we feel we possess, Emerson prepares the mind to accommodate itself to motion, imagined here as moving house (ferries and horses play of course upon the literal Greek meaning of "metaphor," transport from one place to another).

In the figure of the poet, this principle of linguistic transportation gives a startling image for the double state of partial guidance and partial surrender that language entails, reaffirming that we have a two-way relation to keep up with our own terms: "in every word [the poet] speaks he rides on them as the horses of thought" (329). (As Stanley Cavell has put it, words as creatures that carry us both "obey our intentions and work beyond our prowess."²¹⁵ This is a curious moment when what has come to be called the metaphor's "vehicle," or the often unexpected image that conveys a "tenor" or meaning, is actually declared — literally? — "vehicular," but in a manner that shows how this dimension of language, which rationalists feel is a thing we *possess*, partly possesses *us*.) When in his best oracular tone Emerson declares that the poet's speech "flows with the flowing of nature" (329), we can now read this "with" as a recognition of affiliation, rather than a claim for intentional imitation; it is the consciousness of activity, inadvertent and constant, that matters to this analogy. It isn't any accident that this "flowing" directly precedes the passage in "The Poet" about "fossil poetry": between a horse's gallop and sedimentation, the only difference is the speed and visibility of flow.²¹⁶ Language has both a lively mobility and a deep temporality. Solidified, fossilized language can be unearthed and recognized by the etymologist; but more importantly, it can be newly animated by the poet.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Cavell (2003), 3.

²¹⁶ See Balaam for a lovely reading of the relation between deep time and mourning in Emerson, citing Emerson's interest in geology, as well as Lyell. Along the way, Balaam acutely recognizes Emerson's writing as "an attempt to represent in language the instability and change at the core of reality" (21). Indeed, because change is sometimes understood explicitly as loss rather than renovation (as in "Experience"), Balaam suggests that we can read his work as an "experiment predicated on the perpetual loss of form and authority" that "makes all of his writing a complex work of mourning" (21).

²¹⁷ Emerson's question, "What was it that nature would say?" seems to aim in several directions at once. The animation he recommends has some of the characteristics of Blake's linguistic geology, or the desire to recognize a relation to a non-human world through language. In Blake's case, I suggested this desire was tempered and slowed by an attentive deference to the chronological distinction in lifespans among creatures, including geological forms. One could argue that some of Blake's self-loss is dropped in Emerson's relentless optimism in the power of ideas to shape matter. In a journal entry of 1822, he writes: "He who wanders in the woods perceives how natural it was to pagan imagination to find gods in every deep grove & by each fountain head. Nature seems to him not to be silent but to be eager & striving to break out into music. Each tree, flower, and stone, he invests with life & character; and it is impossible that the wind which breathes so expressive a sound amid the leaves — should mean nothing" (9 June 1822,

When the poet “resigns himself to his mood” (331) and to “the divine *aura* which breathes through forms” (332), we might suppose that this “abandonment to the nature of things” is not only what Sharon Cameron has called the poet’s impersonal “ravishment,” but also purposely a *resigning* or resignification of the symbol “human,” to reimagine or reconfigure the sensory and intellectual capacities themselves. The contention that “nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design” (3) seems a contradiction of the frequent Emersonian thought that no natural fact has real significance apart from human concerns, or of the apparently anthropocentric teleology of natural forms “aspiring” to human proportions. Yet in the reading above, I have wanted to suggest that the material residue Emerson installs in human language, which makes us half ourselves and half expression (whose?), seems to place us within a nature whose diction is never obedient to a single grammar; hence the poet “speaks adequately...only when he speaks somewhat wildly” (332). Still it remains an open question, for me, where Emerson’s language philosophy leaves us in the balance of this contradiction, between a benevolent governing universality projected out of human will, and a transient, ungovernable wildness. We “need” nature; but in what sense does nature need us? This contradiction may be well taken as a conversation, as when Emerson is more obviously listening: “What was it that nature would say?”²¹⁸ The life-long engagement in Thoreau’s writing with this same question has generally impressed readers as venturing further than Emerson into the wild.

III. *Walden’s Wilds*

cited in Greenham [81]). At this early stage in Emerson’s thought, the primitive, “pagan” past reemerges to an open mind in the primeval forest, hearing a language of nature. In *Nature*, the poet-figure steps forth against a presiding empiricism, and similar thoughts follow, with grand consequences for language: “The sensual man conforms thoughts to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. The one esteems nature as rooted and fast; the other, as fluid, and impresses his being thereon. To him, the refractory world is ductile and flexible; he invests dust and stones with humanity, and makes them the words of the Reason” (29). The stony objects of nature receive “life and character,” “humanity,” and somewhat later still, in “The Poet,” “eyes and a tongue”: “The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception, gives [things] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object” (328). Each of these passages extends older tropes in Romantic or mystical theories of language, and would I think be out of place in Thoreau.

²¹⁸ Emerson’s favored sensory metaphor is the eye, not the ear. A revealing comparison could be made between Emerson’s dream of a “transparent eyeball,” and a strange monstrosity imagined in passing by Herder, in the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*: the “creature [who is] all eye” (see 57-8). Herder conjures this creature to contrast different possible kinds of language, based in different senses, concluding that human linguistic consciousness is clearly guided by the “medium” aural sense. First, he imagines a creature whose primary sense is tactile, with its small, orderly world woven tightly around it; then a creature whose sensorium is dominated by the visual sense, with an “immeasurably wide” and disconnected world, and a mathematically precise language (though “we have no concept of such a language!”). But human language, for Herder, is dominated neither by the bright, sharp distinctions of vision, nor the dark, indistinct cocoon given by touch, but is rather taught to us through the sounds of nature, somewhere *between* these neighboring sensory faculties. According to Herder, then, we “become, so to speak, an ear through all of our other senses”; hearing has the brightness of the one, and the darkness of the other. This sums up, in a way, the Romantic effort to listen to nature until its language may be heard, though this “listening” is frequently a visual observation. Despite my interest in a residual materiality in the “eyeball” figure, it has been suggested that the reason for Emerson’s special attachment to metaphors of vision is that it is the *least* sensuous of the senses. See also Cary Wolfe’s contention that, despite the central place reserved for visuality, Emerson’s philosophy successfully resists representation.

If the name was not derived from that of some English locality, — Saffron Walden, for instance, — one might suppose that it was called originally Walled-In Pond.

— Thoreau, “The Ponds,” *Walden*

Stand outside the wall, and no harm can reach you. The danger is that you be walled in with it.

— Thoreau, *Journal*, June 26, 1840

I am quite glad to hear that you sometimes see the light through me; that I am here and there windows, and not all dead wall.

— Thoreau, Letter to Harrison Blake, January 21, 1854

In turning to the pervasive use of etymology in Thoreau’s *Walden*, perhaps we ought to set off with Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” which begins with a famous(ly false) etymology drawn from an English archbishop and linguist of sorts, Richard Trench, about pilgrims *sauntering* toward *Saint-Terre*. More explicit than *Walden* in its pioneering spirit, “Walking” does the actual footwork of transcending by sinking deeper into the ordinary and the wild, with that strange Thoreauvian physico-spiritual mobility. A more sedentary work, *Walden* — and we should emphasize its literal Germanic sense of in the woods, out-of-doors, owing what it does to Emerson’s “wood-thoughts” — is a book whose house-bound geographical radius of half a day’s walk serves to remind us that Thoreau spent 90-odd percent of his 44 years in and around his native Concord, Massachusetts. In “Walking,” Thoreau writes, “When a traveler asked Wordsworth’s servant to show him her master’s study, she answered, ‘Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.’” The anecdote suggests Thoreau’s affinity for the Lake Poets; but it is safe to assume on his behalf not only a continuity with, but also certain reservations toward European Romanticism. In *Walden*, this feeling is summarized perfectly as a revision of the landscape when he writes, in the chapter “The Ponds,” “This is my lake country,” editing down the sublime vistas of Coleridge and Wordsworth to the ponds of New England, with that self-fashioned modesty which is one of American Transcendentalism’s characteristic conceits.

So what, I would like to ask, is etymology’s role in the context of *Walden* — the book and its title, the pond and its name? How does Thoreau use etymology to draw attention to certain aspects of his thought, to inform and comment on his own linguistic presuppositions and practices? How, in the broadest sense, do these practices allow Thoreau to situate himself with respect to a written tradition, and at the same time to situate his life’s work with respect to nature and to culture — his own, as well as others? In asking these questions, we should remember that Thoreau makes use of etymological works that pose language in originary proximity to natural phenomena, works by thinkers as differently oriented as Horne Tooke, Richard Trench and Charles Kraitsir, each of whom practices a naturalism loosely related to the Cratyllic tradition that uses etymology to root language in a distant past to the phenomenal world. Perhaps more immediately to our purposes, Thoreau stands also in a related tradition alongside Coleridge and Emerson, who see language rooted both in the material *and* spiritual realms, and use this intuition to develop interpretations of German Idealism. Branching off from these lineages, however, I would like to suggest that Thoreau’s etymological rhetoric focuses us on the linguistic capacity for meaning change that reinvests language in diverse and particular contexts, yet avoids reducing etymology to an originary back-tracking that gives access

to a semantic starting point. A frequent misapprehension of the etymological dimension of Thoreau's text is that his is another project intent on "recovering the primeval significance of language."²¹⁹ It is, I argue, more important to Thoreau that language be *another thing that changes*, that is, that it be recognized to have the same inevitable capacity of altering and concealing its past as nature, and by the same token obscuring its futurity, its potential for (and vulnerability to) transformation. Thoreau is not out to recover lost meanings, but rather a lost attentiveness to meaning change and to different ways of meaning, that stray from habitual usage. In his scheme, whatever wildness there is in language and metaphor resists the tendency to domesticate, to house neatly behind walls and closed doors.

In his particular linguistic naturalism, Thoreau's descriptions of changes in linguistic form or meaning, and transformations in nature, are never isomorphic, but share instead a more complex history of interrelation. Thoreau's use of etymology never wholly coheres into the simplistic unifying tracings one might expect from the practice of locating organic roots through Cratylist etymologies. Instead, he is intent on reconstructing or replanting the field of tropes (most famously in "The Bean-Field"). In this endeavor, he focuses in one sense on a shorter time-frame, a primarily social timescale in which human ideas and institutions metamorphose, latching onto and building up particular figurative vocabularies that exclude and suppress others.²²⁰ Yet at the same time, Thoreau opposes this shorter human linguistic time-frame to unthinkably vast natural ones, like the geological scale we have encountered more than once, in which meaning and form move very differently. So that despite his own inclination toward simplistic naturalism within traditions of Romantic-era etymologists, like those mentioned above, Thoreau is attuned enough to the variation of time's effects in nature to know that any attempt through human language to grasp a final truth, or reach a proper "origin" — in nature, or in anything else — is bound to oversimplify. For Thoreau, this recognition of multiple potential temporalities, and the difficulty of containing their disparities, is a way of cautioning against a simplistic relation of human language to natural phenomena; yet it is a strong, process-driven naturalism, and is for instance

²¹⁹ Sattelmeyer, 77. See also the work of Michael West, particularly his early articles on Thoreau and language (most appear in rewritten form within the work I will cite here, *Transcendental Wordplay*), and of Philip Gura. West puts forth a somewhat revised view more congenial to the one I sketch here, crediting Thoreau with an awareness of the oversimplifying tendency of mere playfulness: "While playful philology suggests an original language of nature, a form beneath the flux...[in Thoreau] [w]hat we take to be things are revealed as events" (West, 468). Gura's book *The Wisdom of Words* is in some ways still closer to my object, in its aim of reassessing the relevance of Thoreau's interest in linguistics, and I am in full agreement with the quote he approvingly draws from Channing's early biography of Thoreau: "in much that Mr. Thoreau wrote, there was a philological side, — this needs to be thoughtfully considered" (Gura, 109). Yet, while he indicates promisingly Thoreau's closeness to a Romantic tendency to replace "arbitrary" with "natural" relationships between language and its semantic objects and origins, I believe the conclusions he draws attribute to Thoreau too much credence in unchanging essences: "[Thoreau] demonstrated language was not an arbitrary imposition of sound upon object but stemmed organically from the very core of the empirical objects themselves, thus offering men profound clues to the organization of the universe" (110). In this chapter, I will argue that the lack of arbitrary imposition leads us not to the "core of the empirical objects themselves," but rather to the seasonal processes which language, just as much as those natural objects, undergoes.

²²⁰ Perhaps the most obvious for Thoreau are the economic metaphors of property and American capitalism that saturate the values implicit in everyday language, whose evil culminates in their application to the market for slaves: see Cavell 1981.

entirely consistent with the Emersonian view that language may be both a source of harm within a given culture, and a feature of “the harmed environment.”²²¹

Those who have written on Thoreau’s debt to language philosophy tend to omit his disjunction of timescales, no doubt because it is puzzling to try to integrate a “geological” perspective into a human frame. Yet I think this integration of timescales, in line with his Romantic precursors, is vital to Thoreau’s purposes. Nature’s changes loom significantly in the background as he establishes a relationship between minute and tremendous timescales by playing down their difference, and by cryptically suggesting their complicity in shaping “man’s body”: “In the course of ages the rivers wriggle in their beds until it feels comfortable under them. Time is cheap and rather insignificant. It matters not whether it is a river which changes from side to side in a geological period, or an eel that wriggles past in an instant. A man’s body must be rasped down exactly to a shaving.”²²² Ecologist David Foster has suggested that, after reading the natural history of his contemporaries (e.g., Darwin, Agassiz), Thoreau was “eager to integrate geological time scales and long-term processes into his understanding of...the appearance of a landscape.”²²³ My suggestion here is that, by superimposing human and natural timescales, Thoreau assumes that language is included among the characteristics of nature. I would like to inquire, then, how he may also have been integrating what he learned from studying natural history into his linguistic philosophy. The observations he recorded and revised in his writings frequently take in both landscape *and* language. If, as Foster notes, he “seemed to take the magnitude of nature’s dynamics easily in stride” (192), how did Thoreau bring his linguistic speculations in step with nature’s grand movements?

To address this question, we will need to look to the rhetorical dimensions of etymology, and to its “philosophical” side, in the terminology of the earlier Romantics.²²⁴ It seems clear that whatever Thoreau thought of his own language histories, and the derivations he uses, they lose much of their impact when viewed as mere wordplay, and they are entirely misread when submitted to the misleading criteria of truth or falsity. To dismiss the etymological dimension of Thoreau’s thought because it is perceived to adhere to discredited theories of language is to diminish the rhetorical integrity of his style, and the fact that its features build upon and inflect one another. But as a narrative resource, we should attend carefully to Thoreau’s uses of etymology, because they are emphatically not supposed to establish firm origins. If etymology’s narrative intentions often instill the pomp of natural truth as an originary source (if, as Kenneth Burke put it,

²²¹ This remarkably apt phrase is Geoffrey Hartman’s. In a discussion of Raymond Williams’ metaphor of “rephrasing” culture, he notes that the metaphor helps us see Williams’ conviction that language is indeed “part of the harmed environment,” an insight obviously congenial to the Romantic authors in each of my chapters, but particularly I think to the notion of an “ecology of language” developed out of Herder’s terminology (Hartman [1997], 63). It may be that Williams inherits his forceful sense of the history of words from his study of the Romantics; certainly Hartman’s reading gives it a Romantic cast. In any case, the sense of a collusion between language and environment offered by this phrase provides us with another formula for thinking through Thoreau’s sort of etymology.

²²² Cited in William Ellery Channing’s early biography: Channing 314-5.

²²³ Foster 185.

²²⁴ It is worth remembering that etymology, before comparative philology’s rapid development in the early nineteenth century, had historically been used in many ways outside of a true/false dichotomy, though with proof or legitimacy often at stake (e.g., as a trope in classical legal rhetoric, as quasi-definition in medieval encyclopedias, as mnemonic device, as method of establishing genealogical provenance, etc).

the “*narrative way of trying to say how things truly are is to say how they originally were*”²²⁵), this is precisely *not* what etymologies do for Thoreau: rather, his etymologies provide occasions for observing language’s mobility. In order to illustrate this, we will proceed through three well-known passages in *Walden*, examining the ways Thoreau uses etymology to “rephrase” his culture and natural environment. A final section will conclude with some broader observations on Thoreau’s linguistic naturalism.

a) Etymological Excursion: “The Ponds”

As the epigraphs above indicate, “Walden,” the word, already poses the complications of rhetorical or narrative etymology. In the chapter “The Ponds,” we find Thoreau recounting various myths of origin for the names as well as the distinctive features of Walden and its surrounding ponds. He moves through several possible sources for the name: a native “squaw” called Walden who long ago survived the landslide that created the pond, according to local tradition; or perhaps, Thoreau writes rather dismissively, “some English locality” such as Saffron Walden. Finally, explaining the mysteriously regular natural paving along the shore, Thoreau suggests that it is likely the piles of stones gathered by the railroad have slid into the water, thus “one might suppose that it was called originally *Walled-in Pond*.” None of these three sources for the name is explicitly preferred; rather, the origin myths Thoreau tells in this paragraph seem more or less an elaborate set up for a punch-line that apparently amounts to little more than a pun.

As indicated already by the epigraph, I want to suggest a possible origin for the pun itself, tucked in an early journal entry in a list of aphorisms, which adds a certain weight to what might otherwise be read as a throwaway: “Stand outside the wall, and no harm can reach you. The danger is that you be walled in with it.”²²⁶ A fuller reading of this aphorism appears below; for now I am interested primarily in hearing how its phrasing expands Thoreau’s etymology of “Walden.” One thing “The Ponds,” and *Walden* more generally, does is to give shape, and especially shape over time, to the landscape: in the middle of the paragraph described above, Thoreau writes simply, “It is very certain, at any rate, that once there was no pond here, and now there is one.” Here, he suggests through these derivations that part of a landscape’s shape accretes through its name’s past — and in this paragraph we are given three pasts for “Walden”: a native Indian origin (filtered through local folk legend), an English origin (the most rationally respectable theory), and lastly a Thoreauvian origin. Thoreau’s own origin story seems knowingly preposterous, and being pointedly derived from the materials at hand, its accidental word-history matches an accident of land-formation to an accident of speech. “Walden/walled in” invents an empirically legitimated derivation that lingers in the mind as the most speculative, yet the only one that acts out an accidental process, rather than memorializing a name. The word-history is guessed at more for the sake of comparing possible paths of meaning than of arriving at the true one; it is not the application of words to the natural landscape that *Walden* catalogues, but the analogies created in thought. Thoreau’s attachment to established etymologies (rather like his attachment to the British Romantics) is characterized by interest, even a kind of reverence, but also by

²²⁵ Burke (2003), 164; see Introduction.

²²⁶ Thoreau, *Journal*, entry for June 26, 1840.

impatience.²²⁷ The narrative it proposes is both humorous and serious, and whatever it does is done in passing. Nevertheless, if we allow its meaningful reverberations to widen through our reading of *Walden*, the apparently trivial homophone offers a concise statement of paradox: How do we inhabit an apparently free or open country, a natural setting, yet never stop feeling that we live within walls?

Setting aside this paradox for the time being, we may note that Thoreau, with his origin myths, recognizes the appropriative instinct inherent in repeated metaphors that help us apprehend or take possession of nature, whether to explain it or ourselves. Thus, though *Walden* does make use of a kind of etymology that belongs still to a Cratyllic tradition of “natural” language understood as a collection of names anchored to recoverable worldly sources, this use of etymology is unsatisfactory for Thoreau. Language does not have power to search out true or permanent roots. Instead, his use of etymology splits into parts, the poet’s and the naturalist’s: he uses a kind of trope-system that reaches forward and back among literal and figurative senses, in everyday and literary usage, alongside a description of the landscape under the condition of transformation, his own intellectual and perceiving body altering along with it. Upon returning after an absence, he remarks, “[Walden Pond] is itself unchanged. . . all the change is in me” (182). Yet whatever it is about the pond that remains “unchanged” can be neither a material shape nor a word, but is rather its regenerative impulse, a *thought*: “where a forest was cut down last winter another is springing up by its shore as lustily as ever; the same thought is welling up to its surface that was then” (183). This unending process of “welling” is as stable a source as Thoreau will offer.

Over the last several decades, Thoreau scholarship has increasingly taken note of the ambiguity and playfulness in his language. At the same time that intellectual and cultural historians like Michael West and Philip Gura have elaborated on Thoreau’s use of linguistic speculation available through contemporary linguists and literary precursors, a neighboring tradition of Thoreau criticism has emerged, equally invested in taking Thoreau’s linguistic experiments seriously. This rhetorically inclined criticism renews an obvious question, by trying to ask it more nearly in the spirit in which Thoreau begs it: What is the purpose of moving out of town and into the woods? Why make oneself *bewaldet*, why enforest oneself? Three of Thoreau’s great rhetorical critics, who all more or less begin with this question — Stanley Cavell, Sharon Cameron, and Barbara Johnson — give quite different answers, but each begins with the same conviction, that Thoreau was a *writer* before all else. Each then shows how this conviction requires that we see Thoreau’s deciding to live in the woods as a rhetorical decision, or a linguistic act — part language, part action. Cavell suggests that Thoreau’s move serves as material to gather knowledge in isolation, for the sake of returning this knowledge to his “neighbors” (American, but more broadly, human) as the book *Walden*. Cameron argues to the contrary that his move is an attempt not to renovate society, but to register the wildness as best he can, not to force an integral relationship between society and nature but rather

²²⁷ With respect to Thoreau’s attachment to Romanticism, in addition to Thoreau’s revision of lake country into pond country, it is interesting to note that in “The Ponds” Lake School motifs seem always on the tip of Thoreau’s pen — as when the writer “rambled still farther westward” (*Walden* 164), drifts in a boat as a youth “dreaming awake” (166, 181), speaks of idleness as “the most attractive and productive industry” and refuses to regret his avoidance of “the workshop or the teacher’s desk,” goes “a-chestnutting,” or discovers “the mouldering wreck of a boat” (184). One can almost convince oneself there is a glance at Coleridge’s “Ancient Mariner” when Thoreau observes that the tree-trunks underwater resemble “huge water snakes.”

to put himself in nature's place (hence her preference for the methodical yet digressive, undomesticated note-taking of the *Journal*).²²⁸ Johnson proposes simply that Thoreau's moving to the woods inserts him bodily into the symbolic process language makes use of, literalizing and adapting "dead metaphors" by inhabiting them.²²⁹ Through these critics, a *Walden* has reemerged in which dead metaphors are seen as the dead wood of society, making the author's 'move' an attempt to convey the urgent need to stimulate new growth. For Thoreau, withdrawing into the woods is an act not of closing off but of opening outward, becoming permeable. To hear the rhetorical resonances of *Walden* means recognizing that Thoreau's renovation of language is accomplished through means simultaneously linguistic and physical. If Cavell's, Cameron's and Johnson's readings seem superficially at odds, at least in tandem they provide a means to show how the subject of philology infiltrates the natural and social worlds in Thoreau's writing. What I would like to add here is the etymological impetus Thoreau gives this interest in philology, without thereby insisting on firm roots. When Thoreau writes, "most words in the English language do not mean for me what they do for my neighbors,"²³⁰ he is hinting that his linguistic, and etymological, project is partly interventionist: that is, an effort to reawaken or forge anew lost or possible meanings, activating language change.

b) Etymological Excursion: "The Bean-Field"

Having placed Emerson to some degree in relation to Wordsworth and Coleridge, I will not dwell on Thoreau's absorption of the etymological substratum in the language theory of Coleridge, and the adaptation of this theory in the landscapes of Wordsworth's poetry. (Thoreau read Wordsworth's *Prelude*, shortly after it was first published, in 1850, as he was revising *Walden*.) Yet we cannot pass it by without pausing; for though commentators on Thoreau's linguistic theory and use of etymology rightly note Coleridge's pervasive influence within the American education system during the era of Thoreau's attendance at Harvard, in making this link, they sometimes miss what makes Thoreau distinctive. As we have seen, to the extent that Coleridge's etymological thought was borrowed from Tooke, it excited a sense that a deeper knowledge of language could reveal direct, forgotten relationships between material phenomena and abstract terms. Coleridge wished to reverse Tooke's materialist trajectory, that temporal tracing back from the abstract concept to the literal or sensuously material roots, and wanted instead to trace words forward, or outward, exploring their evolving meaning as outgrowths of language viewed as a unified organism.²³¹ For Coleridge, etymology was also a topic of fascination because of the thought that language's adaptability implies a potential for transformative change (in distinction from more traditional etymological uses, where etymology establishes proof of a particular pedigree or ratifies a unified, legitimating ground of meaning). This mobility made a notable impact on Emerson and Thoreau

²²⁸ Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*.

²²⁹ Johnson, "A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle Dove: Obscurity in *Walden*," in *A World of Difference*.

²³⁰ Cited in Channing 68-9.

²³¹ McKusick refers to what was perhaps Coleridge's favorite Tookean etymology, the derivation of "think" from "thing." For Tooke, this relationship collapsed the immaterial verb to a material noun, but for Coleridge it implied precisely the reverse: "... Coleridge's application of this particular etymology is for purposes diametrically opposed to Tooke's; Coleridge seeks to support the idealist position that things are generated by thought" (106).

directly, and Thoreau is furthermore Coleridge's heir in that at Harvard and afterward, he read Coleridge's own primary sources on philosophical linguistics.

Yet Thoreau's Romanticism is wilder, in part because his concept of nature is more particularized, messier. The chapter titled "The Bean-Field" is a perennial resource for the rhetorical critical literature on Thoreau, because of the suggestion that his bean-farming is "only for the sake of tropes and expressions, to serve a parable maker some day." It also offers a Thoreauvian version of Coleridge's etymology:

These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? The ear of wheat (in Latin *spica*, obsoletely *specca*, from *spe*, hope) should not be the only hope of the husbandman; its kernel or grain (*granum*, from *gerendo*, bearing) is not all that it bears. How, then, can our harvest fail?²³²

Rather like Coleridge's Idealist appropriation of Horne Tooke's materialist etymological methods, Thoreau's etymology here (re)generates the abstract terms "hope" and "bearing" from the organic materials of the ear and kernel of wheat, tracing them back in reverse order. These etymologies linking organic matter to abstract qualities, both of them optimistic or future-oriented, offer an example of Thoreau's version of the figurative mobility of language, infusing it with an alterability and futurity even as it receives what should be a root, an origin, a more fundamental meaning. This is not a tracing back to some material, perceivable object from which has sprung some abstract or metaphorically transposed idea, but the direct inverse, an opening out of hardened symbols, as received ideas, into both past and potential meaning. The robust question "How, then, can our harvest fail?" (and it is still possible to take it literally) suggests that a metaphysical labor is being performed alongside the physical, and that a semantic harvest can make the most of both. And yet — the addition of a partial allowance toward the woodchucks' "harvest," though on the one hand it simply contributes to semantic abundance, seems un-Coleridgean in its generosity to the non-human.

These etymologies are drawn, as we learn from the *Journal*, from the first century BC Roman scholar and philologist Marcus Terentius Varro, whose works Thoreau was apparently reading closely the winter he was revising *Walden* (Varro passages excerpted during these weeks also wound up in the essay "Walking"). Varro, known both as a source on etymology and on agriculture, probably left a stronger mark on this chapter than is generally recognized. The explicit etymologies for "spica" and "granum" deserve some special notice, not because there aren't more etymologies in the course of *Walden*, but because there is so much etymological play in *Walden* that lies, in the Emersonian style, just below the surface.²³³ Here, etymology is revealed and made accessible to the

²³² *Walden* 137.

²³³ This is a fact which Michael West has never ceased to demonstrate, through individual articles detailing what Thoreau absorbed from the French linguists of the Enlightenment, from Walter Whiter, and from Charles Kraitsir. All of these articles have been rewritten for West's recent, enormous *Transcendental Wordplay*, with much else besides. I'll add here as examples of this submerged wordplay two more puns Thoreau makes on his own name, both jokes on pronunciation. The first supports the claim by Philip Van Doren Stern, in the first annotated *Walden* (1970), that "Thoreau" ought to be pronounced with emphasis on the first syllable: rowing home in the rain, Thoreau gets what he calls "a thorough soaking" (*Walden* 180). (In *Howard's End* [1910], E. M. Forster rhymes "Thoreau" with "Borrow" and "sorrow".) The second occurs in "Spring" (*Walden* 290): "Thaw with his gentle persuasion is more powerful than Thor with his hammer. The one melts, the other but breaks in pieces." 'Thaw' and 'Thor' respectively melt or

reader, as though its presence either will not interrupt the text's surface or the surface has, at this point precisely, required an interruption, rather as if the terms "ear of wheat" and "grain," even as they are uttered, cannot contain themselves but must burst open to display their internal mechanism of growth.

We seem, in other words, to be given here a telling glimpse into the linguistic philosophy behind Thoreau's punning tendency to reclaim disregarded uses of ordinary words in alternative contexts. The passage, acknowledging its reach toward parable, challenges the sower of wheat as grower of *hope* and *bearing* not to count on failure, since the benefits of cultivation accrue outside the market, indeed outside the human sphere, or as Thoreau says, "[t]hese beans have results which are not harvested by me." Yet there is simultaneously also the sense of a wall built by this cultivation, so that the plot of *Walden* is walled in by human terms, partly determined by language: Thoreau seems especially conscious of the artificiality and arbitrary imposition of weeding when he "mak[es] the earth say beans instead of grass." He is aware that he is correcting his plot's diction. This is, once again, to take the thought of "rephrasing" and metaphorically, with vivid consciousness of its effects, apply it to an environment, in this case a rather amateur agricultural landscape placed under provisional human custody.

c) Etymological Excursion: "Spring"

The residual linguistic element, which separates Thoreau's plot from the nature that surrounds him, is emphatically present in the last etymological passage I want to dwell on. The most dramatic example from *Walden* of Thoreau's reading in etymology comes without a doubt from the chapter "Spring," embedded in a famous sequence, the lengthy passage describing the thawing sandbank by the railroad track near Thoreau's cabin. Written late in the composition of the whole, the passage is an intense and prolonged extreme of the typical imaginative leaps that carry Thoreau into raptures over the odd and alien.²³⁴ It introduces an explicitly linguistic dimension into the landscape, one which appears to fall under the spell of a desire to find an anchoring root for a network of terms drawn from variations on the attractively simple, suggestively literary word "leaf."²³⁵ Moreover, it enables what seems to be an elaborate exposition of the inner workings, the viscera, of *Walden*, merging human and natural domains, through an extended observation of what Thoreau calls "this sand foliage," "the forms which thawing sand and clay assume" as they begin to melt. The leaf-shapes accommodate human symbolism, as they are likened to primitive human ornamentation ("imitated in bronze"), but they are more abundantly akin to creaturely body parts, vegetation, lichen and coral (not to mention "excrements of all kinds"). The foliage is testament to the "living earth": it becomes the *vitals* or internal organs of humans and animals, the lungs,

break, but each does so both transitively and intransitively: the unspoken joke is that Thoreau himself has been broken in pieces to get Thor and *eau*, a laboring Thor with the liquid finish of European extraction (Thoreau being well aware of his continental genealogy).

²³⁴ The *Journal* entry of Feb 8, 1854, may be used as a reference point: "On the 2d I saw the sand foliage in the Cut; pretty good. This is the frost coming out of the ground; this is spring."

²³⁵ See Christina Root's excellent article on scientific observation and writing in Thoreau and Goethe, in which she discusses the influence on Thoreau of Goethe's morphological writings, and of Goethe's own belief in the prototypical form of the leaf.

brains, bowels, liver, fat and so on, in a series of ingenious transpositions through means figurative, imagistic, and etymological in the narrow sense. I'll cite only a short excerpt, from the leaf's-eye-view, beginning, "[t]he overhanging leaf sees here its prototype":

Internally, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat (*leibo*, *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; *lobos*, *globos*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words); *externally*, a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of *lobe* are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single-lobed, or B, double-lobed), with the liquid *l* behind it and pressing forward... The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils.²³⁶

Here Thoreau tests the limits of what analogy can achieve, in the understanding of nature, and by intriguing extension, society. The leaf, shape-shifting metaphorically through a series of unlike objects (lungs, tree, rivers), seems to dominate any imaginable form in its path. Yet to read them in context, it is hard to think that Thoreau believes in these analogies in any very permanent sense; he writes and observes, as one critic puts it, by "wearing his metaphors lightly."²³⁷ In this passage, it is as though the analogies themselves are thawing and changing shape, "lapsing" from one to the next. Thoreau's faith in words, and his attachment of language to the world around him, is no more than a provisional solution in the search for bonds allying language and its formal resources with the world's surrounding organic and inorganic processes. This is everywhere evident in "Springs," where he so thoroughly pictures nature as shifting ground and decaying roots. Thoreau gives us a reminder of our bodily co-institution with what we do not understand; his use of etymological "data" is one among other techniques of registering a paradoxical refusal of any absolute grounding for human knowledge, a refusal even of a positive grounding against an unknown fundament. Thoreau uses roots and rooting, but refuses what in this rooting leads to the illusion of dogmatic invariance or simple objectivity.

Channing refers, in his chapter on Thoreau's final years and declining health, to a dream of Thoreau's that throws some light on the visceral intensity of the sandbank passage's metaphorical transformations: Thoreau had dreamed "of being a railroad cut, where they were digging through and laying down the rails, — the place being in his lungs" (Channing, 322). Without reading this dream too closely, it is easy to imagine that in composing and expanding the "leaf" metaphor, confronted by a wall of shifting ground, a cross-section of flowing primeval ooze, Thoreau allows himself to get carried away, in feeling that permeability or "consanguinity" with nature that Emerson had described. He runs this analogy — "fancifully," as he puts it — into the human form, showing how "[t]he lip *labium*, from *labor* (?)—laps or lapses from the sides of the cavernous mouth" (*Walden* 289), and projects his own lungs onto the earth. He then moves further into the social world, from "[w]hat is man but a mass of thawing clay?" (289) to "not only [this molten earth], but the institutions upon it are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter" (290). The world's leafiness merges with its susceptibility to change, faintly echoed or paralleled in the changes of language itself.

²³⁶ *Walden* 288.

²³⁷ Root 245.

This is not quite the etymological lesson of what has been recognized as Thoreau's most direct source for the passage.²³⁸ Charles Kraitsir, a European-born philologist who lectured in Boston in the 1840s, supposed that there was a residual semantic content encoded in the “germs” and radicals of all languages that could be rediscovered through philological study. Influenced by Transcendentalism, Kraitsir's wide knowledge of European languages also offered philological support for naive interpretations of Emerson's *Nature*, particularly in his work *Glossology: Being a Treatise on the Nature of Language and on the Language of Nature*. To get a proper sense of his linguistic methods, we can compare part of an entry from *Glossology* with Thoreau's passage above:

Field belongs, as participle, to *flow*, L. plu-o; pla-n-us, fla-t...A field is a plain, over which water can flood or flow. Water...is the image of fullness, because it flows and fills; L. plen-us, plus, etc. Again; *p* or *f*, *b*, as labials denote horizontality; so do the linguals *l* and *r* mark the horizontality (level) that is perpendicular to the former. Hence *pl*, *pr*, *fl*, *fr*, *bl*, *br*, *vl*, mark at one and the same time, just those phenomena which are connected in nature, viz: movement, flow, plenty, flat-ness, level, etc...It will suffice to throw together such words of several languages, as denote objects with one, or two, or several of the said qualities; fly, volo, will, vellus, fleece, fall, fallo, folium, leaf (inverted), free, liber, libella, libro, partum, prairy, volvo, pull, pli-co, fol-d, flam-ma, flag, fla-ke, flo-g, fla-il, etc. Inverted they mean the same phenomena.²³⁹

Fascinating as this profusion is, what in Thoreau moves and changes, in Kraitsir is meant to reach a point of rest. Whereas Thoreau's labials take on lives of their own — “b” is a sodden version of “f” or “v,” and has in turn lobes that it seems to grow before our eyes — Kraitsir's labials merely “denote horizontality.” He obeys the dictionary impulse to gather instances under a single semantic umbrella, even in discussing a collection of terms relating semantically to what *flows*; indeed (as with Tooke) while simultaneously modeling a kind of formal plasticity or mobility, he winds up pressing flat or leveling this welter of activity into a static sameness: even when they are “inverted,” the words “mean the same phenomena.”

In fact it has been relatively easy for critics to read Thoreau's passage above as a similar Cratylic ecstasy, a fantasy of organic correspondence between word and thing rendered discoverable through his etymological enthusiasm. It is easy to imagine that Philip Gura has this passage in mind when he writes, “in *Walden* [Thoreau] often wrung from words the primal meaning that burned at their very core” (131). But though this aptly captures something of Thoreau's thoroughness, it caricatures his picture of language, which (as in his Romantic precursors) is not restricted to words, much less their cores; similarly, his broader goal in performing an ethically-minded regeneration of his own linguistic resources does not consist of retrieving primal meanings. Even Kraitsir's broader premises were in keeping at least this far with Thoreau's, since he took up Emerson's Romantic dissatisfaction with the sterility of rational grammars. Kraitsir wrote, “[w]e are strange beings, we, in whom harmony is not a mere fact, but a faculty also of perceiving harmony out of us; we wonder that there is order in creation! Is this not in contradiction with our being?” (170). But for Thoreau, to find “order” or its equivalent need not be to find unity; order, too, is wild. Kraitsir wrote against an accumulation of

²³⁸ See, among others, West 183-9.

²³⁹ Kraitsir 153.

atomizing grammars, a tradition that reified categorical divisions in language, particularly parts of speech. With this project Thoreau was surely in general agreement, but he was not writing, like Kraitsir, with the goal of changing how the science of language was taught; he was writing with the goal of teaching how the world, and language as one of its creations, changes.

To return to the thought of etymology's broader redefinition in the context of such Romantic writing, then, we might say that there is an etymological aspect to Thoreau's reshaped landscape, since it bears the marks of the provisional or fleeting, the mobility of all that appears solid. It also insists upon the variable frames — of time and temper, intellectual and physiological composition — through which the world makes different kinds of sense. This is after all the lesson of "Spring," that anything that goes by the name of "nature," or that seems hard and solid, is not only prone to adjustments, but defined at its presumable "core" by a wild life, by impermanence and variability. The sense of formation-in-the-present is expressed more viscerally by Thoreau, perhaps, than any other writer surveyed here: "What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence thus suddenly" (287), he writes. It is a legible foliage without doubt akin to Emerson's fossil poetry, but expressed as an ongoing process. "Foliage" connotes not just greenery, some number of leaves, but a continuous Latinate *leaving*, imaginable in a deep time this time of the *future*: "As it flows," the foliage, iterated in Thoreau's innumerable comparisons, is "destined perhaps, under some circumstances, to become a puzzle to future geologists" (286). Currently dissolved, it is a future stone whose formation will have produced more obscured etymologies. To call this fossil's (future) past a "puzzle" is not to despair of feeling a kinship with it; Thoreau likes a puzzle. It is only to feel that, though there may be a strong collusion between the vicissitudes of the shapes, sounds, and imprints of words (right down to the shape of the letter B) and the forms found in nature, neither the one nor the other, nor even the string of associations that attaches them, remains immobile or invariant. Is it the words, or the natural world, that is meant to anchor each stretched relationship of similarity? For Thoreau, this analogical process of metaphorical comparison itself is under scrutiny. These apparent derivations are stories of encounters. He is staging what we might call rituals of "naturalization," rather than actually proposing a universal master or root metaphor for creation.

I would suggest that this staging is analogous to the "cultivation" ritual that occurs in "The Bean Field," so that the text establishes an inarticulate relation between the human and the natural. The challenge is that this relation must be analyzed *with* language, a tool which can only "break in pieces." Thoreau's language is always paradoxically at odds with its objects, though it may strain against this difference by ostentatiously cultivating nature or naturalizing itself. Simpler naturalisms, in looking for bonds to ground language in nature, tend to find too firm a fixture. These naturalisms are transformed in Thoreau's hands into expressions of paradox.

IV. First and Last Words

No sentence will hold the whole truth, and the only way in which we can be just, is by giving ourselves the lie...²⁴⁰

— Emerson, "Nominalist and Realist"

²⁴⁰ Emerson 446.

The same list of journal aphorisms where we find Thoreau's comment on the dangers of being enclosed within walls also reads, "Truth is always paradoxical." Several months earlier he had written, "The most positive life that history notices has been a constant retiring out of life": the paradox of a seclusion that would turn him out all the more into the world, a published display of withdrawal to the woods, is clearly taking shape. Thoreau's throw-away pun on *Walden* helps explain his relationship to nature, and gives, despite the organicism that has been attributed to his Romantic etymologies, a sense of the necessary complexity in the ways humans and nature are differentiated. While we emphatically bear a fundamental relationship to our environment, Thoreau suggests that some part of language is also complicit with the elements of humanity that divorce us from nature. Calling Walden "originally" "walled-in" — or imagining that it was originally so called — expresses the contradiction of being simultaneously internal and external to one's experience. (We are back to Emerson's enigma: "The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.") Thoreau proposes — practices — a return to the wilderness, wishing to stretch his own terms or outsides, addressing the "need to witness our own limits transgressed" (*Walden* 298). The paradox Thoreau gives shape to when he writes, "I have a room all to myself; it is nature," what he calls in *Walden* his "withdrawing room," captures the same expansion accomplished in the oscillation between homophone and title in the playful etymology of *Walden*.

Thoreau leaves many hints to help us understand his notion of the interplay between outsides and insides. According to Thoreau, "we" (Americans) have to beware of that sort of "breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility."²⁴¹ We must beware of that cultivation that insulates us from the wild, where we have long ago come from, an origin so old that the barrier is a part of our being. Nevertheless, this barrier can and must be relaxed, and perhaps the "New English" are best equipped to pursue this goal (or in another sense, perhaps "we" are most in danger of failing at it). Otherwise, we are headed for the "speedy limit" toward which the English are racing: hence his directive to "[o]pen all your pores and bathe in all the tides of nature, in all her streams and oceans, at all seasons. Miasma and infection are from within, not without... Why nature is but another name for health."²⁴² This bodily health through emphasis on permeability, on venturing outside one's established walls, bounds, or terms, is clearly reiterated in the distinction between town and surrounding woodland: "Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness" ("Walking," *Essays* 234).

Language itself is a determination comparable with those human institutions that intrude on nature, and requires a kind of stretching. "I love Nature partly because she is not man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails... If this world were all man, I could not stretch myself, I should lose all hope. He is constraint, she is freedom to me..."²⁴³ Writing of Thoreau's unorthodox religious beliefs, Channing proposes that "*out-of-doors*, which can serve for the title of much of his writing, is his creed" (77). This reminds us — again — that "Walden" itself means "forested" or "out-of-doors," where these doors are, as

²⁴¹ "Wild Apples," *Essays* 248.

²⁴² "Huckleberries," *Essays* 501.

²⁴³ *Journal* Jan 3, 1853.

rhetorically-minded readers have shown, somewhere between literal and figurative. (In this regard they are not unlike the sensory openings Blake called “doors of perception,” also awaiting expansion.) There is no doubt that Thoreau is taking up some of Emerson’s wilder claims, when we remember that Emerson’s poet, “speak[ing] adequately only when he speaks somewhat wildly,” contributes to society (where “society” is meant in the ecological sense that refuses to distinguish finally between human and natural) by recognizing his personality as simultaneously impersonal: “beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him” (332). However, instead of his words becoming “universally intelligible as the plants and animals,” as Emerson exuberantly puts it — instead of declaring that this figure’s “speech is thunder” — Thoreau’s poet is quiet and particular: he is listening and observing. Even in the note-taking of the naturalist, Thoreau’s poet opens outward, externalizing himself as nature both cultivated and wild: “A writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing.”²⁴⁴

For Thoreau, there is a risk inherent in winding up behind closed doors, a danger that cut off from the wilderness you may forget the ability to recalibrate your view and alter your determining timescale in order to see the clayey consistency of things. He frames this health risk in terms of a body, a culture, a nation, or a species, and suggests ways that language may form part of the structure of doors and walls. To meet this dilemma, one may use etymology to see that language, like any institution, may feel solid like rock, but will also act like thawing clay in spring. Etymology is a practice that elucidates the flexibility of our terms, and exposes the exchanges between knower and known, not necessarily through the roots it uncovers, but through the notion of alterability it instills. Looking at etymology in this way, we are rewarded with a view of a non-simplistic nature, one that continues to see language as composite with its environment, but in complex ways. Language has a history and in that sense is “rooted,” like all other aspects of a “humanized landscape,” to a position with contingent features that share alterability as a common premise.²⁴⁵ Thoreau’s Romantic tradition in language theory finds in etymology a way to describe how we are rooted and root ourselves, and the ways the impermanence and uncertainty of these roots can be recognized, even by the rooted body. *Walden* contains and creates these Romantic etymologies as lineages verbal and material, personal and public; he allows us to imagine etymologies operating with respect to words and landscapes, to symbols, facts, actions and relations.

One wonders, to return to the dream in which Thoreau’s own body became the site of a railroad cut, whether that excavation of his lungs felt more like an incursion or an excursion. In one sense, it seems to have been a way to let the air in; he does not seem to have feared dying. Channing reports that on his deathbed, when asked to make his peace with God, Thoreau replied to the effect that he was not aware they had been quarreling. In the grip of the tuberculosis that put an end to his life, the mysterious (and

²⁴⁴ Cited in Channing, 72-3.

²⁴⁵ Foster 13. As Foster demonstrates, Thoreau’s techniques of reading the landscape, and his historical reconstructions — many of the insights of which remain at least accurate enough to be “interesting to a modern ecologist” — show a balance of attention to the wilderness and to this “humanized landscape,” so that along with a sharp sense of loss, Thoreau also felt as keenly an “exhilaration” at “living in a cultural landscape in which people and the environment together generated diverse patterns in nature that changed with every walk and each succeeding day” (13).

as with the *Journal*, undomesticated) terms on which Thoreau at last withdrew from society for good, according to Channing, were “moose” and “Indians” (Channing 319). Groping around for a way to tidy up his mentor’s last words, Channing writes oddly that the pairing merely suggests “how fixed in his mind was that relation.” Yet the space left around them seems at least as suggestive, and leaves open the possibility that Thoreau’s meaning is related to his differentiation of ways of accommodating to nature’s wilds. Elsewhere, when describing his own wildness, Thoreau says — in contrast, perhaps, to moose and Indians — that along with certain wild apples of the northeast, he has “strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock” and there, in his transient way, taken root.²⁴⁶

From Thoreau’s last words we take a final, extravagant detour via Herder’s first word, or the *innerliches Merkwort*, in order to make some summary observations on Thoreau’s linguistic theory. Herder’s language origin myth, we recall, described a scene between a sheep and a sort of proto-human consciousness; “language is discovered” when, out of the sheep’s bleat, the mind recognizes a repeated sound, and associates the sound with an object by more or less involuntarily fashioning a sign or *Merkmal*. “The sheep bleats, and the soul recognizes it. And it feels inside, ‘Yes, you are the one who bleats’” (117).²⁴⁷ Though the choice of a sheep seems arbitrary, the sound it makes takes on a memorable symbolic burden. By chance, this semiotic encounter has an eccentric philological footnote in a journal entry written after the publication of *Walden*, where Thoreau casually hints at another diversification of language-times via a phonological detail drawn from Varro:

I am amused to see that Varro tells us that the Latin *e* represents the vowel sound in the bleat of a sheep (*Bee*). If he had said in any word pronounced by the Romans we should be not the wiser, but we do not doubt that sheep bleat to-day as they did then.²⁴⁸

If we take the sheep to be nature’s representative, then this instance of the language of nature has a reliability or consistency that stands the test of time — and the “soul” still “recognizes it”; being recorded through artificial media, that is, converted into writing (the alphabetic symbol “e”), is an analogue for this seeming permanence. Varro’s attaching a Latin sound to a noise heard in nature has a grounding or rooting effect, so that it is comprehensible well beyond the period he might have anticipated.

For Thoreau, the humor of the passage springs not from the relative invariance of sheep-language, but the accident of history that preserved this philological detail, almost as though it were captured in a recording. (Thoreau might also be “amused” at the thought of Varro experimentally practicing his bleat.) He does not doubt that the “sound laws” of sheep-language are very different from those of human language, because human language ought to change at a different rate from inarticulate natural ‘voices’ (though perhaps Thoreau would have considered herd-sheep semi-civilized? And wouldn’t he have considered that not all sheep sound alike?). But this is not to say that the sheep’s bleat is permanent, only that it doesn’t change with the rapidity of human

²⁴⁶ “Wild Apples,” *Essays* 452.

²⁴⁷ Herder’s ideas on language origin are, as we have seen, also more complex than they are generally given credit for, in part because rather than an explicit focus on individual linguistic elements (on words), his philosophy pans out to contextually defined ecologies of meaning.

²⁴⁸ *Journal* Oct 25, 1857.

language.²⁴⁹ The superposition of several timescales is reminiscent of Thoreau's comparison of the river-bed and the wriggling eel (in order to offer the enigmatic claim that "A man's body must be rasped down exactly to a shaving"). Yet, in spite of his pronouncement that "time is cheap and rather insignificant," the effects of temporality are never lost on us while reading Thoreau. In complicating any simplistic sense of sequential or historical chronology, he makes us feel again that we might benefit from learning (as Emerson put it) to "disuse our dame-school measures," and recollect the "patient periods" that have shaped us along with the rest of nature.

This serves to give us a multiform conception of how time passes, to remind us of the many 'times' that lie outside our awareness or our thresholds of perception. Another passage of Thoreau's shows how such external 'times' nevertheless accumulate in our actions, linguistic or otherwise:

Consent to be wise through your race... The memorable thought, the happy expression, the admirable deed are only partly ours. The thought came to us because we were in a fit mood, also we were unconscious and did not know that we had said or done a good thing... What we do best or most perfectly is what we most thoroughly learned by the longest practice, and at length it fell from us without our notice as a leaf from a tree."²⁵⁰

In its attachment to perfection, the passage bears out Herder's or Humboldt's faith in the collective wisdom of a 'people' or race, but also Emerson's optimistic philosophy of impersonal participation in natural tendencies, when they run *against* the grain of society. Despite problems with this thinking, "nature" emerges curiously enough as a way of theorizing individual acts as first *social*, taking place under the auspices of invisible patterns of relation (again, disputing a final distinction between culture and nature). In a similar vein, Thoreau's phrase "learned by the longest practice" blurs temporal scope in the same way as the notion of a body's being "rasped down to a shaving": *to rasp* or *to practice* are verbs that may strike us as present acts, elongated by Thoreau to suit cultural or evolutionary histories. We then proceed "unconscious[ly]," behaving according to a "fit mood," making sense despite ourselves or "without our notice": our language is one of these long practices, a shared work and a product made and eventually spontaneously deposited like a "leaf from a tree." Thoreau's narrative etymologies, idiosyncratic, speculative, opportunistic (in a word, arbitrary!) as they are, seem to contradict the notion of 'dynamic consistency' figured by what I have characterized as the Humboldtian 'solidity and solubility' of language, its 'natural' or independent, self-sustaining reality, and hence its suggestive comparability to natural phenomena. But Thoreau is not so distant from Humboldt's language philosophy as his careless etymologizing might make him seem: through the self-conscious stimulation of analogy-formation, in the specialized semantic realm of tropes, Thoreau's writing puts into practice a theory of spontaneous origins constantly issuing from current usage. The "naturalness" of this language has nothing to do with the willful recovery and re-attachment of long-lost etymological roots

²⁴⁹ Thoreau's journals, logs, and notes on his natural surroundings track the subtle changes in the environmental conditions in New England, year after year, so meticulously that his "numbers" have been used by contemporary climate scientists to gauge long-term ecological variation. Is it safe to imagine he might have ideas about how something even so seemingly immutably "natural" as the sound made by a sheep might change over time?

²⁵⁰ Cited in Channing, 314-15.

to current terms; it has everything to do with following threads that reveal coherent patterns, before unraveling again into wild notions.

To give language a natural analogue may make it appear organic, giving an aesthetic or perhaps spiritual comfort; or it may also make it appear solid, separate and changeless, and because of its inhumanness, in a sense alien or inaccessible. Yet Thoreau's passing comment on Varro makes no claims for an organic originary relation, nor is it oppressed by the fact that language escapes rational control by changing on its own. He only seems tickled that a certain inhumanness may render a linguistic fact, to the contrary, peculiarly, accidentally *accessible*. Because the sound in the Latin of Varro's era was described with a natural correlate, we can "hear" it today anytime we hear a sheep bleating. Varro's analogy allows Thoreau to hear a fragment of a dead language by visiting a Massachusetts pasture. This may differently illuminate a remark of Thoreau's cited by Philip Gura, who reminds us that Thoreau "wanted sentences constructed so truly that they were 'as free and natural as a lamb's bleat'" (123). Thoreau could also have said, "as free and natural as a leaf from a tree"; he wanted his sentences to detach themselves involuntarily, for the patterned changes that mark different consistencies in nature are also found in the dynamic properties of language.

Coda

Nature and Philology: Proust and the Etymology of Error

To read the great works of Bopp or Schleicher is to have at times the impression of reading a description of a fourth natural realm.

— Bréal, “On the Form and Function of Words” (1866)

The first mistake of the comparative philologists was also the source of all their other mistakes... Language was considered a specific sphere, a fourth natural kingdom.²⁵¹

— Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*

I. Introduction: “Geology of the Grammatical World”

As we have repeatedly seen in Humboldt’s “pebble” analogy, and its various echoes, the figural properties of stone made it an apt metaphorical carrier for the solidity and slow solubility of language: “language is sculpted and refined by each speaker for ease of comprehension, and like the pebbles thrown back and forth by the river’s currents, polished and ground down for ever better use.”²⁵² Though he could not have read Humboldt’s unpublished text, Hensleigh Wedgwood, writing of Grimm’s recently published 1833 *Grammatik*, echoes the metaphor soon after he compares pronouns to “organic remains of the material world,” whose lost correspondence to some original referent is a marker of their incalculably great age (the influence of Tooke is clear). For Wedgwood, instead of this palpable linguistic mutability being a testament to language’s gradual refinement through cultural adjustment, as it was in Humboldt, the loss it marks becomes a vague source of anxiety: “from their everyday and universal use,” he writes, “[these words] have been worn, until, like pebbles on the beach, they have lost every corner and distinctive mark, and hardly a vestige remains to indicate their original form.”²⁵³

This begins to indicate the range of reactions language can inspire, when it is given natural form, stony objectivity, an attenuated temporality: what Humboldt regards as language’s advantageous capacity to naturalize itself through habituation, Wedgwood regrets as the loss of originary authenticity. As Richard Turley has argued, in conjunction with a secularizing materialism appreciable around 1800, something like (what Linda Dowling, drawing on Foucault, has called) the “specter of autonomous language” seems to threaten Wedgwood with its indifference, and with the potential decline and decay of civilized culture. Undergoing its changes without any special regard for its speakers, language comes to look like a thing entirely external to the very creatures who produce it, becoming a looming presence to whose vicissitudes they have no privileged access. What was envisioned by the Romantics as a natural dissolution of language that might have proved regenerative, if we knew how best to participate in it (through, e.g., Coleridge’s

²⁵¹ Saussure 3-4.

²⁵² “...die Sprache wird von jedem feiner zum bequemeren Verstehen gemodelt, und so wie die Steinchen, welche die Uferwellen sich wechselseitig zu- und zurückwerfen, zum immer besseren Gebrauch geglättet und abgeschliffen” (“Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken,” 15). See Chapter I for a brief discussion of the problem of “use” in this image.

²⁵³ Quoted in Turley, *The Politics of Language in Romantic Literature*, 161-2. I am indebted to the research and insights of this work, which follows but greatly deepens in specificity aspects of Linda Dowling’s narrative of nineteenth-century language theories preceding the Decadent movement at the century’s end.

and Wordsworth's etymological diversions, or through attention to the natural history of figures, in Emerson and Thoreau), looks to Wedgwood and others newly and obscurely monstrous, something at once untamed, invisible, and potentially harmful. Indeed, if we read quickly, it may even seem to resemble what Wordsworth himself, in the third of the *Essays upon Epitaphs* (1810; first published 1877), feared from language when it became a source of social alienation, rather than of social integrity: namely, that it would become a "counter-spirit," ceaselessly "at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve."²⁵⁴ For Wordsworth, however, the problem is not that "autonomous" language might work reciprocally upon its "users," nor is he afraid of losing *control* of a word's reference or origin. Rather, the problem is a falsely artificial conception of language, complicit with alienating modes of livelihood, a picture of language that threatens to eat away and hollow out the integrity of human life from within.²⁵⁵ What Wordsworth warns of is habituation to human misuse, not some supposed threat from Nature's wild outside.

For Wordsworth, as for Herder and Humboldt before him, the challenge was to understand how language change and origin, so often reductively conceptualized through metaphors of artifice — of naming, invention, and the social contract — could be rearticulated through *natural* forms and processes. To discover the stakes of their recourse to nature, as we saw in the Introduction, we must remember that for these Romantics, "nature" acquires or accentuates a range of senses more or less directly opposed to the privileged semantic cluster of order, stability, externality and universality — until it becomes reliably and irreducibly wild, changeable, intimate and diverse.²⁵⁶ Yet the resulting familiar yet "impersonal" forces, to which humans are consequently and unavoidably subject, are enjoyed rather than regretted: "In any attempt to understand what 'Nature' meant to Wordsworth," writes Basil Willey, "due weight should be given...to the healing power of the impersonal over a sick mind" (271). Our language, as our mode of living, should undergo a kind of therapy via the "bent of Nature" (*Prelude*) — that is, the "calm oblivious tendencies of Nature" (*Excursion*).

As we see already in Wedgwood, Humboldt's organic metaphors for language, used pervasively in the first half of the nineteenth century to characterize the "laws" described by the comparative grammarians, subsequently assume a monolithic, sometimes threatening countenance, that "oblivious" impersonality marking the other side of what we are trained to think of as human finitude, and betraying an anxiety over cultural decay or dissolution. The "organicism" so strongly felt in the German tradition

²⁵⁴ Wordsworth, *Selected Prose*, 361.

²⁵⁵ These figures have the effect of reminding us that the process of "dissolving," despite its revolutionary potential of reforming structures that seem fixed, may just as easily weaken what is sound. Perhaps the fear of a tendency to "dissolution" in this excerpt, with its moralistic valence, signals a shift in Wordsworth's system of values.

²⁵⁶ Such a claim for the fortunes and uses of a word like "nature" over a given historical episode is inevitably open endless exceptions and to justifiable objections, and a far more nuanced account of its semantic history would be of great use — both for a history of the concept's use during the Romantic era, and for the ongoing negotiations over how to understand Romantic "natures" in relation to their contemporary offspring. I can only add here again that there exist already tremendously illuminating works in this line already, from which my study has drawn liberally: these include several essays in A. O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas*, as well as the classic studies of R. G. Collingwood (*The Idea of Nature*), Basil Willey (*The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period*), and Raymond Williams ("Ideas of Nature").

(via Herder and Humboldt, and somewhat differently via early German Romanticism) was diffuse and took many forms; but its solidification — its *literalization* — in the works of the first generation of comparative grammarians like Franz Bopp, August Pott, and Jakob Grimm, made it possible to view language itself as a sort of separate world with a history, deserving of study on scientific principles, and on its own terms: “as all organic objects,” wrote Pott, language “has times of progress and arrest, of growth, of flowering, of fading and of gradual death, in one word it *has its own history*” (1833-6; emphasis added).²⁵⁷ This use of nature to characterize language, despite its nominal effect of temporalizing linguistic forms, is far removed from Wordsworth’s; it has no evident relation to an origin-in-the-present, as evolving utterances; it may invoke the organic, but its “nature” is in some sense already a dead specimen. If “the organic metaphor offers a justification for a study of language *per se*,”²⁵⁸ and thus in some sense enables a science of language, the “nature” on which it relies is a world of objects prior to the sensing creature, and is scarcely consistent with the complex ecologies of overlapping subjects and objects in the pictures of language envisioned, and felt, by the Romantics I have looked at here.

As this organicism spread through the nineteenth century discourse of linguistics, it paradoxically rendered language totally external to its living speakers; and it is the critique of this reification of language (in Bréal, Saussure, and others) as a world of natural phenomena divorced from human agency — a “fourth natural realm” — that should lead us to question different assumptions about the uses of “nature” in language theories of the nineteenth century.²⁵⁹ On the one hand, externalizing language as a (seemingly alien) natural phenomenon in this way gave it the objectivity that allowed the great philologists of the nineteenth century to develop the scientific methods Humboldt had predicted, and to “ma[ke] its discoveries” at all; on the other, the theoretical dimension of Humboldt’s works was, in the recognized founders of comparative linguistics, impoverished by too fixed a notion of its scientific object: the empirical traces of a law-bound language divorced from its speakers. Its literalizing organicism eclipsed the role of the utterance in language production, and neglected the notion of origin as formation-in-the-present. Though the subsequent critique of this position is perhaps best known through Saussure, in his consolidation of linguistics as a *social* rather than a natural science, his voice was only one — and by no means the earliest one — in a greater movement away from these methods and the views they appeared to justify. Michel Bréal wrote much earlier of Bopp and Schleicher’s work that “one might indeed at times think that one was reading a treatise on the *geology of the grammatical world*, or that one was witnessing a series of crystallizations of speech” (53, emphasis added).

²⁵⁷ Cited in Morpurgo-Davies, 87. I am indebted to her careful account of the intellectual trends in the philology of this period.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁵⁹ Bréal, whose studies of meaning change and inauguration of “semantics” as a discourse in its own right contributed to a turn away from this alienation of language from the individual speaker, articulates this critique very clearly: “It is by observing language laws without consulting any authority but language itself; it is by noting the peculiar habits of each language in the same way the physiologist studies the structure of organisms; in a word, it is via the purely external study of grammatical phenomena that comparative philology has established itself and made its discoveries” (Bréal, 52). See Nerlich, who positions several early efforts to combat the “external” tendency of linguistics (i.e., the efforts of Whitney, Bréal, and Wegener) as early glimmers of the study of linguistic pragmatics.

Invoking inorganic (but no less natural) mineral metaphors, he dramatizes the distance of this cold, external world of language from that of human speech (as we saw in the Introduction, Bréal also uses the metaphor of stone in a manner more nearly akin to Humboldt, when it signals not only language's objective linear history, but its invisibly slow temporality). The methodological problems that ensued were the same ones Saussure would later attribute to the same scholars, errors resulting "whenever the comparative philologists looked upon the development of two languages as a naturalist might look upon the growth of two plants" (4). As we see from the epigraphs above, Saussure was clearly drawing from criticisms used earlier by Bréal, as well as from another lesser-known figure among the previous generation of mid-century linguists: the American William Dwight Whitney, whom we will meet below.

Though brief, this sketch serves to emphasize both how different the varied moods can be that react to the habit of comparing language's vicissitudes to natural forms and processes, and how different the "natures" themselves can be that underlie these comparisons. Despite their invocations of "history," for the comparative philologists, language as a natural entity is nevertheless no longer imbued with the dynamic temporality Humboldt, for example, sought to give it; instead, the concept of "nature" merely guaranteed that language was a stable and legitimate object of scientific inquiry. For the Romantics examined in the chapters preceding, however, the concept of "nature" set language constantly in motion, in a continual process of loss and formation, ecologically distributed in strange ways across the rift between "cultural" and "natural," but belonging necessarily both to speakers and to encompassing patterns exceeding their awareness and control. This ecological form of linguistic naturalism has often been obscured or distorted by the move to eradicate from language study the kind of literalizing organicism described above (well-justified as this move often was), an eradication which histories tend to attribute to Saussure. I have wanted with this project to make visible this obscured dimension of the natural forms of language in the literature of Romanticism.

Rather than simply end the story here, I offer a final episode in the literary fortunes of etymology, and its commentary, as retrospective coda: the etymological passages toward the end of Proust's *Recherche*. The ecological linguistic models in my preceding chapters, which tinkered with language's timelines and repurposed features of etymology to account for language's inherent mutability, hinged on reconceptions of nature that disallowed firm linguistic origins; Proust's often overlooked (and generally deprecated) novelistic commentary on etymology, no less ecological in its own way, adopts in parallel an urbane distance from that naive naturalism which desires linguistic correspondence with a phenomenal world. This rejection of linguistic naturalism, which emerges as one facet of the narrator's progress of error and disillusionment, can be read alongside the disciplinary expulsion of organicism from the science of linguistics. Yet, I will suggest, Proust's sociologically inflected text also acts out a critical naturalism, one that repudiates the Cratyllic rooting of natural etymologies *as well as* any pedantically oversimplified corrective. For Proust, the corrective to this error lies not in the corrections themselves, but in cataloguing the successive adjustments to reality that they bring about, and the transformations such revelations effect upon consciousness. The subtle paths by which signification makes itself felt to the narrator are "natural" precisely in their errancy, in language's accidental and incessant motion. Rather than distinguishing him from the Romantic etymologists of my dissertation, Proust's

passionate pragmatics — his project of explicating the comic and hazardous vulnerability of sociolinguistic interaction and the trails of error that constitute social and psychic forms of discourse (“this perpetual error, which is precisely ‘life’”) — rather proves him to be their distant kin.

II. A Botanico-Philological Problem

...natural data have no place in linguistics.²⁶⁰
— Saussure, *Course*

Each time it is told, the story of how a scientific discourse of linguistics took institutional shape toward the end of the nineteenth century depends fundamentally on disengaging language from nature — or better put, on disabusing linguists of the error of trying to root it, one way or another, in the natural world, usually by appealing to its origins. Let us take up one particular example of this dis-abuse. In 1877, presaging Saussure’s criticism of the philologist who could look at languages “as a naturalist might look upon the growth of two plants,” William Dwight Whitney wrote a caustic article called “A Botanico-Philological Problem,” in order to dismantle an ingenious proposal by his professional rival, the German-born Oxford Sanskritist F. Max Müller.²⁶¹ The substance of this proposal lay in an analogy between a sequence of tree growth alternation, attested in prehistoric Denmark (i.e., fir, oak, beech²⁶²), and a sequence of changes in the phonology and meaning of the names of these trees in some Indo-European languages. In Whitney’s account, Müller argues that the application of tree-names has changed as a direct result of historical cycles of reforestation, the words’ new meaningful uses bearing testimony to their physical correlates “‘as the shadows cast on language by passing events’,” in what Whitney pungently calls a “poetical and somewhat ambiguous phrase” (337). Müller’s clever notion becomes Whitney’s critical playground: he devotes fourteen pages to a vigorous, at times hilarious, refutation.²⁶³ Müller is portrayed as succumbing to the temptation to close the gap between word and world through etymological speculation.²⁶⁴ Over the course of the article we become gradually

²⁶⁰ Saussure 80.

²⁶¹ The article was reissued in 1971 as the capstone to the only anthology of Whitney’s writings available in English; the volume is edited by Michael Silverstein, and also includes prefatory material by Roman Jakobson.

²⁶² Müller’s source is, as Whitney mentions, “Lyell’s *Antiquity of Man*” (*The Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* [1863]). This fact alone, as Alter points out, directs our attention to a probable source of Whitney’s palpable animosity: Whitney was an admirer of Lyell’s work, but Lyell had a closer professional relation to Müller (for example, an epigraph from the work above is actually drawn from Müller’s writings).

²⁶³ Pointing out the obvious coexistence of all three trees in present-day Europe, and referring to Müller’s reluctance to relinquish his theory until further evidence is in, Whitney is merciless: “How can we sit down and fold our hands over a question that affects the weal and woe of so large and respectable a part of mankind? If Central Europe and Italy are really covered, exclusively or prevailingly, with ‘magnificent beech-forests,’ then there are a great many millions of people, there and elsewhere, whose mental delusions render it unsafe to trust them any longer outside of an insane asylum” (342).

²⁶⁴ From this perspective, this episode might have provided another chapter in Cratylist thought for Genette’s *Mimologics*. Although I don’t have the space to develop this further, or even to defend Müller, who tends to come off poorly against the rationally presentable, more level-headed and consistent Whitney, it is important to note 1) that there are certainly those who *would* defend him up to a point, and 2) his

aware that behind this trivial disagreement or “problem” lies a long-standing professional animus, which is in turn symptomatic of a broader clash of theoretical programs.

Indeed, the highly publicized conflict between Whitney and Müller of the 1870s was one of the more dramatic of the skirmishes on the battleground of a potential “science of language,” and it is crucial to see that the emphasis on problems of “naturalness” in language origin and formation is at its heart. The nineteenth century saw the institutional organization of comparative philology (alongside a constellation of related disciplines), with university professorships established, chairs named, journals and societies founded, and an international dialogue sustained on how best to frame its scientific ambit.²⁶⁵ Alongside Bréal, Whitney is remembered today as one of the preeminent figures to recognize and emphasize the essential distinction between the studies of natural history and language history. His was perhaps the firmest voice of ‘common sense’ against those like Müller who sought to establish linguistic science as a *Naturwissenschaft* rather than a *Geisteswissenschaft*.²⁶⁶ For Whitney, this cause was still a pressing matter in the professional struggle to establish and maintain the autonomy and scientific repute of the still sketchily bounded field of linguistic study. Yet the eminently rational Whitney, in excising any residue of natural complication in his construction of what was proper to linguistic science, had forced himself to use a very narrow notion of “nature.”

In the course of his article, and distantly recalling the stone-derived analogies above, Whitney writes that Müller’s botanical argument is no less laughable than “if he were to put forward . . . the theory that the gradual contraction of the earth’s crust had something to do with the universal abbreviation of the vocabular elements of speech” (345). The relocation into a geological landscape seems intended to heighten the absurdity of such natural analogies. Whitney’s dig deepens his parody of the mystifying influence of German philosophy on Müller’s thought, and his perhaps misguided efforts to fix language to nature; but this way of formulating the relationship between word and

position against arbitrariness in language is interesting, from the standpoint of a Romanticist, in some of the same ways that Coleridge’s and Emerson’s are. As Alter puts it, Müller “presented the philologist as the ‘scientific’ counterpart of the Romantic poet” (64), much the way Emerson’s “etymologist” discovers the fossilized tropes in language, even as his “Poet” produces new ones.

²⁶⁵ See, for example, Aarsleff 1982; Alter; Morpurgo-Davies; Sampson; and more narrowly, Jakobson 1971, “World Response to Whitney.” The challenges of disentangling what “nature” represents in this historical narrative are acute, and cannot be explored in depth here. In some respects, the false choice between divine and animal language origin models that Herder had tried to renegotiate in the mid-eighteenth century, by claiming the linguistic field as specifically human, reemerges or persists in the early nineteenth century as the choice between the theological adoption of ‘linguistic idealism,’ as argument for (intelligent) design, vs. a linguistic ‘materialism’ developed from skeptical empiricism — *both* of which maintained a kind of originary naturalism. Alter explains these two trends as both indebted to Locke’s passing “insight into word origins” (59), which as we have seen in the case of Emerson could lead not only to Tooke’s blunt materialism, but to various idealisms (Alter reduces these to what he calls “linguistic natural theology,” citing Emerson as a prime example). For a wealth of background information, see Alter, “Victorian Language Debates,” 53-65; Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*; and Beer, “Darwin and the Growth of Language Theory.”

²⁶⁶ See Silverstein 1971, “Whitney on Language” (x-xxiii). A defense of Müller might well point out here that his attachment to calling linguistics a natural science did not prevent him from an apparent wariness about the ardently organicist position of contemporary August Schleicher, who argued language should be regarded as a living organism. Unlike Humboldt — who had made the same claim — Schleicher did not qualify the statement by showing how it was “fashioned” by its individual speakers.

world, as a direct iconic replication of geological “contraction” in linguistic “abbreviation,” is a reductive slight to the very linguistic analogies to natural forms (erosion, sedimentation, crystallization, fossilization) that helped enable comparative grammar (and the philologists who trained Whitney) in the first place. In fact, Whitney’s colorful dismissal of any continuity between transformations in “the earth’s crust” and the “elements of speech” ironically disregards the influence of geological analogy on his own linguistic thought: for Whitney is credited with importing into linguistics the concept of uniformitarianism from Lyell’s geological writings, an important theoretical innovation which contributed to the abandonment of the pursuit of fixed primitive “roots.”²⁶⁷ Even leaving the manner of the relationship as open as possible — supposing the world’s forms and linguistic history “had *something* to do with” one another — is, Whitney declares, ridiculous. The mocking ‘linguistic geology’ of this jab at Müller perfectly exemplifies the suspicion with which claims for language’s ‘naturalness’ from the Romantic era have often been viewed since.

The unceremonious dismissal of the influence of *Naturwissenschaften* is useful when we know that Saussure claims Whitney as the great innovator in establishing language as an interactional social product, as an accumulation of voluntary individual expressions,²⁶⁸ and as a collection of essentially arbitrary signs.²⁶⁹ Saussure gave Whitney a privileged place in the short history of linguistics that begins the *Cours*, and in fact it seems to have been in writing a never-completed memorial tribute to Whitney in 1894 that he first began to envision a systematic theory of language (until then his work had been in Sanskrit and Indo-European philology). For example, it was out of this text on Whitney, and not the lecture notes, that the students who edited Saussure’s *Cours* for publication lifted the infamous chess analogy illustrating Saussure’s outline of the paradoxical collaboration, yet necessary separation, of synchronic and diachronic studies of language.²⁷⁰ This distinction grounded the necessity of limiting the science of language

²⁶⁷ Uniformitarianism, or the doctrine that the laws of change operating today are the only way to interpret the changes of the past, is discussed above in Chapter II, in the context of Hutton’s earlier version of this principle. A reader and admirer of Lyell, Whitney sometimes accompanied his older brother Josiah Whitney, a professional geologist (for whom Mt. Whitney is named) on surveying trips; the notion of applying uniformitarianism in the practice of philological history was an innovation that effectively — eventually — rid language change of the assumption of decay or deterioration, and made any firm discovery of original linguistic forms (retroactively presupposed *roots*) scientifically impracticable (see Alter 17; Silverstein [1971] xi-xii). (We might also note the surprisingly organic-sounding title of Whitney’s best-known work, *The Life and Growth of Language*; was he repurposing the metaphor, to draw attention to its artificiality? Was it simply impossible for anyone attempting to build a science of language in the nineteenth century to avoid such metaphors?) As I have tried to show, there is an important sense in which Herder and Humboldt’s shift from origins to formation (and a comparable gesture in the poetic theories of figures like Blake, Wordsworth, and Thoreau) predicts the notion of this equivalent of uniformitarianism in the emergent science of language.

²⁶⁸ It is certainly worth noting, however, that the nature of this voluntarism is complicated, and develops over the course of Whitney’s writings to become at certain points explicitly *unconscious*. Indeed, Charles Darwin quotes a relevant passage in the chapter from *Descent of Man* which deals with language: “[Whitney] observes that the desire of communication between man is the living force, which, in the development of language, ‘works both consciously and unconsciously; consciously as regards the immediate end to be attained; unconsciously as regards the further consequences of the act’” (108).

²⁶⁹ Whitney was equally insistent on this arbitrariness, though its precise meaning has been differently interpreted; for example, compare Coseriu 23-4; and Silverstein (1971), 12.

²⁷⁰ Jakobson, xxxviii. For a textually precise account of Whitney’s influence on Saussure, see Jakobson xxvi-xl.

— *langue* — methodologically to a static synchronic system, which perfectly crystallized the arbitrariness of signs suspended in their difference from one another. As with the Romantic etymologies and their solvent naturalism, Saussure works to dispel any residual attachment to the voluntarism or authentic fitness of natural *or* conventional language origin; yet in order to emphasize the essentially unmotivated structure of signification, he characterizes language’s system not as “natural,” but as arbitrary, in its relations. (The drift of this entire project might be summed up by pointing out that this unmotivated or accidental progress of language — whether called natural or arbitrary — expresses a kinship between Herder’s notion of language emerging “in accordance with the cosmogony of Epicurus” — that is, through complex relations of chance and convenience — and Whitney’s picture of language as primarily “adventitious” in its changes.)

Saussure, like those who followed him, credited Whitney in large measure with eradicating the tenacious organicist paradigm in comparative philology, or the overeager naturalism which stood in the way of scientific progress in linguistics. This was — as becomes clear in the case of Müller — understood to be a German, metaphysical, and frankly Romantic distraction. The positivist Whitney saw this naturalist tendency as vitiating the sociological dimension of the science of language, and neglecting the fact that language is a historical product of particular human utterances, which individually and collectively modify speech.²⁷¹ At its best, it stood in the way of enlightened scientific progress, as dilettantism, sentimentalism, mysticism; at its worst, it espoused a biological determinism easily adaptable to racist ideologies.²⁷² Thus nature, presented as one pole in the “physei-thesei” binary, was stamped out of language, to be replaced in Whitney’s writing with a corrective prescription of language’s “arbitrariness,” subsequently adopted by Saussure.²⁷³

In fact, Saussure arrives rather late — though with distinctive contributions — in a long line of language philosophy conceiving of “arbitrary” and “natural” as opposed, and emphasizing the former in place of the latter. Despite this historical lineage, it has proved simplest to credit Saussure himself with the dogmatic insistence on the arbitrariness of signs, and it is this principle for which he is generally either praised or

²⁷¹ The German school known as the *Junggrammatiker*, or Neo-grammarians, a younger generation of linguists also avowedly in Whitney’s debt, held a similar view; yet in their most programmatic statements about exceptionless laws of sound change, they seemed to maintain the divorce between individual speaker-creativity and language change.

²⁷² This is well summarized by Joseph 2004: “It was partly in order to distance himself from the language-race link that Whitney characterized languages as human ‘institutions’. But as Saussure wrote in his notes of 1894, Whitney’s conception, although basically right, produced a further problem by seeming to suggest that languages are rational inventions. . . . Although Whitney believed that languages are *accidentally produced* institutions, his wording did not always make this clear, probably because the view he was contesting was the powerful racist one, not the almost forgotten Enlightenment notion of languages as deliberate logical creations” (69). Yet despite its seeming to be “almost forgotten,” I think it is reasonable to accept Saussure’s earlier-cited claim that the latter notion persists in various modified forms, for example as an unexamined belief in willful or rational control over one’s own language: “For the distinguishing characteristic of the sign — but the one that is *least apparent at first sight* — is that in some way it always eludes the individual or social will” (17, emphasis added).

²⁷³ Jakobson, xxxviii. This binary is most concisely presented in his reviews of contemporary work, particularly that of Steinthal (“Phusei or Thesei — Natural or Conventional?” and “Steinthal on the Origin of Language”).

blamed.²⁷⁴ Rather than attempt to give an exhaustive account of Saussure’s use of the term, I want to emphasize here that the backlash against a literalism as to language’s “organic” functioning informs Saussure’s insistence on the axiomatic “principle of arbitrariness,” which, as Friedrich has argued, can easily become a reductive byword. Linguist Eve Sweetser has characterized the principle as an overcorrection: “it was probably necessary [for Saussure] to firmly establish the arbitrary nature of linguistic convention, in order to liberate linguistics from futile attempts to see onomatopoeia at the root of all linguistic usage.”²⁷⁵ I would add that onomatopoeia is only one naturalism against which Saussure posed this first principle — organicism itself being another — while agreeing that in characterizing the bond that constitutes a linguistic sign as arbitrary rather than natural, Saussure may be interpreted to sanction the reflexive dismissal of any preceding theory ascribing “natural” properties to language.

For, in a certain sense, to try to imagine language frozen in a synchronic “state” is to think of language as stilled or signs as dead, to suppress the influence of time (however provisionally) so as to suppress presumptions of language’s “growth” or “decay.” From this point of view, Saussure’s method seems to constitute a radical attempt to neutralize the temporal complications that, for the Romantics I have looked at, fall under the rubric of “nature” (I think again here of Wordsworth’s “calm oblivious tendencies of nature,” or Emerson’s calling nature “a certain self-regulated motion or change”). If as I have argued the Romantic figures in the previous chapters reorient primeval origins to an ongoing formation in the present, and its future “revolutions,” Saussure tries to think of language change not in terms of origin or formation, but in terms of comparison between individual successive states. His conception of *langue*, to which theoretical linguistics must restrict itself, is a system arrested in a motionless state. This arrest actually helps us see how particular temporalities, once imputed to language, may make a linguistic object look more or less arbitrary: depending on whether an element is viewed within the impossibly expansive timescale of the question of origins, the somewhat humbler scales of phonological ‘deterioration’ or change, or yet shorter capsule histories of usage (all tantalizingly accessible to etymology), the relative salience of a language element’s cultural context or history may cause its alterations to look natural. But a system putatively separated from temporal conditions, like Saussure’s *langue*, has no “life” in its signs, so to speak, and its sign-relations can consequently be thought of as “pure” and arbitrary. Saussure teaches us to abandon the desire for “natural” relations in the sign’s internal structure, where “natural” means, at base, a relation in some manner fitly, rationally, or voluntarily designed, offering a true, good, or univocal link. In making this case, however, he provides a remarkably influential model for alienating language from its contexts.

²⁷⁴ See especially Coseriu, “L’arbitraire du signe: Zur Spätgeschichte eines aristotelischen Begriffes,” 1-35; but also Aarsleff 1982; Bourdieu; Joseph 2000; and Keach.

²⁷⁵ Sweetser, *From Etymology to Pragmatics*, 5. See Saussure, on the lack of any evidence for some “act by which, at a given moment, names were assigned to things”: “That is why the question of the origin of speech is not so important as it is generally assumed to be. The question is not even worth asking; the only real object of linguistics is the normal, regular life of an existing idiom. A particular language-state is always the product of historical forces, and these forces explain why the sign is unchangeable, i.e. why it resists any arbitrary substitution” (71-2). Note that “unchangeable” here simply means not capable of deliberate (or, used here atypically, “arbitrary”) manipulation; for Saussure, the sign’s immutability is always balanced by an “apparently contradictory...more or less rapid change of linguistic signs” (74).

To broaden outward once more to the century as a whole, though the concentration on language history by the comparative philologists and their precursors of the early nineteenth century provided a discursive ground of exchange with anthropological, geological, and natural history, still (as has often been noted) the fruits of all this *historical* research led to the potential exclusion of *temporality*, and with it the contextual embeddedness of experience, as factors in attending to language at a local level. (Of course, we need only cite Bréal or Whitney again in order to scuttle this generalization.) One need not call this ascendance of language's encompassing historicity over its local temporalities ironic to find it interesting:²⁷⁶ in this retrospective coda, my attitude toward the history of linguistics in the nineteenth century is not to bemoan the ironic loss of complex pictures of language's temporality in nineteenth-century linguistic science (with the adoption of a simplified "nature"), but to argue that in some of its literary contexts, the curious paradoxes that structure language's activity in time have been more capably represented. Giving language time through natural analogy, thereby giving it a life or mobility of its own, actually hardened its history into an alien world for the philologists, a world whose naturalism seemed no longer to credit fully its source in social interaction; bringing language back into the fold of social life, as Saussure did, entailed provisionally representing it in a state without any temporal reality. In Romantic naturalisms, we sometimes find descriptions of language that more carefully balance language's alien historical forms with its intimate, dynamic mobility.

Saussure, however, was forced to strip 'natural history' from language, in order to prepare its embalmed body as a scientific object; along with natural 'facts', he lost the messy contexts of time's passage. Thereafter, he called "arbitrary" the relations that gave this systematic body of signs their structure.²⁷⁷ But here we may as well recall that for Herder and Humboldt, in the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century, to call language "natural" — as specifically distinct from arbitrary — was what gave it patterns, self-regulating (natural) laws or social conventions through which it could be analyzed. The presumption of arbitrariness, in Humboldt's view, implied a voluntarism in individuals or groups (like the voluntarism Saussure himself cast aside) and a neglect of conditions of formation that cheated linguistics of any scientific feasibility. Thus Humboldt's resistance to using the word "arbitrary," and his substitution of a vocabulary derived from natural processes of growth, was simultaneously a) an insistence on language's social, interactional character; b) a way of picturing the systematicity present at all levels in language, necessary for its empirical study; and c) a claim for the mutual influence between the experiencing linguistic subject and its environment. This view of linguistic nature adapted Herder's suggestive but unwieldy idea of an "analogy" framing and defining the mental and physical attention of a given species. At the level of a

²⁷⁶ For the "irony" of nineteenth-century philology's unconcern with language's temporality, in favor of a monolithic historicity, see Morpurgo-Davies; Sampson.

²⁷⁷ Voloshinov uses the metaphor of language in the form of a dead body to characterize the rationalist tradition and classically-trained cultural formations responsible for producing nineteenth century philology; such "philologism" thus gives rise, for Voloshinov, even to the "stable," "self-equivalent" structures imagined by Saussure, unaffected by individual utterances. "European linguistic thought formed and matured over concern with the cadavers of written languages; almost all its basic categories, its basic approaches and techniques were worked out in the process of reviving these cadavers" (71). (It is not entirely clear what this 'revival' entailed.) For Voloshinov, the importance of the "alien word" to this genealogy of linguistics cannot be underestimated (74).

community of speakers, Humboldt proposed, an equally consistent complexity organized language, which operated according to systems of analogy emergent from processes of evening-out through use. Nothing could be further from Humboldt's view, and its Herderian basis, than that language be viewed as an organism external to the individual subject's experience of cognition, expression, and conversation; metaphors of the natural, so pervasive in Humboldt's linguistics, were always inseparable from their grounding in *human* nature.²⁷⁸ Yet much of the nuance and complexity of the ecologies of meaning that might have emerged from this linguistic naturalism are lost to the nineteenth-century philologists.

In clarifying how this complexity gets lost amid the disciplinary battles that followed the early linguistic anthropologies of Herder and Humboldt, we find an instructive successor in the metalinguistic attitudes — the theories of language — active in Proust's writing. Proust has, I think, much in common with the special form of Romanticism I am most interested in. More than once in these pages I have gestured toward Voloshinov's 1929 summary of the linguistics emergent from Romanticism, in their "reaction against the alien word," expressed with different preoccupations in the work of writers like Herder, Wordsworth, and Thoreau.²⁷⁹ Since the Introduction, I have not dwelt on the fact that Voloshinov's work intends to perform a dialectical synthesis of the linguistic trend into which he fits Romanticism, "individualistic subjectivism," and its antithesis, "abstract objectivism" (63; 82). Saussure is located as exemplary of the latter trend, extending back to the Enlightenment (and beyond) and further differentiated from Romanticism in its characterization as "rationalist." By contrast, "the Romanticists," wrote Voloshinov, "were the first philologists of native language, the first to attempt a radical restructuring of linguistic thought. Their restructuring was based on experience with native language as the medium through which consciousness and ideas are generated" (83). While I have implicitly relied throughout on Voloshinov's richly theorized historical narrative, the distinction he draws tends toward polemical summary rather than exhaustive disentangling.²⁸⁰ As noted in the Introduction, the errors of the two trends he opposes follow from the same first false step ("*proton pseudos*") of assuming the psychic privacy, rather than sociality, of the individual utterance (82; where objectivism jettisons the utterance for this reason, subjectivism celebrates it). Yet a gesture characteristic of Romantic etymology has been that individual utterances can be interpreted as instances of socially objective patterns, for which natural metaphors come to stand (Herder's "webs" being an early example). Rather than follow Voloshinov's distinction, then, I have wanted to show that there are actually certain similarities between, for example, Humboldt's refusal of arbitrariness, and Saussure's refusal of naturalness, in that both dispute design or voluntarism. Proust's work provides an apt addendum: he gives us, it seems to me, a fascinating picture of language that reinterprets language's "natural" temporality in terms that avoid narratives of linear progress or decay

²⁷⁸ "In Humboldt we find all possible uses of the organic metaphor but also the awareness that the metaphor is just that, a metaphor, and cannot be pushed too far" (Morpurgo-Davies, 88).

²⁷⁹ One could find this motive in the language philosophy of Stanley Cavell as well, some of whose writings have helped prompt the central theses of this dissertation: for instance, the position most extensively outlined in *The Claim of Reason*, the "claim" of which refers to the tendency inherent in philosophy (as in everyday speech) to imagine one's propositions, one's words, as alienable from their context(s).

²⁸⁰ Even by his own admission: see 61-2.

(as Saussure sought to do), but that represent language's arbitrariness in the form of a continual revelation of *error*, as a ceaseless and dynamic compromise between psychic and social, internal and external, accidental and systematic shifts in meaning.

III. Proust's Corrective

Don't worry about all those dreadful etymologies I had to ask you about. I'll get along on my own as well as I can, or rather as poorly. Whatever is fanciful or incorrect about them will simply be chalked up to my ignorant characters.²⁸¹

— Proust (letter to Louis Martin-Chauffier, 1922)

Proust's use of etymology is something of a ruse, for though his "fanciful" etymologies call attention to themselves by their very flatness, this flatness amounts to little more than a screen for language's comic timing, at its user's expense. In his short book on Proust, Deleuze describes the narrator's continual progressive disillusioning, declaring that this narrative mode orients the work not toward the past (as a work of memory, or recapturing) but toward the future (as an apprenticeship in how to read the world around him): "What is essential is not to remember, but to learn" (91); "Necessarily, then, he suffers disappointments...the world vacillates in the course of apprenticeship" (26). But what are his "disappointments"? They are recounted as the comic discovery of habitual error, and the new shape the world takes following such discoveries. In his bizarre detours through etymology, which plays a significant if somewhat baffling narrative role in the second volume of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Proust is playing out this obsession with error and its accidental "betrayal" or visibility, through a discredited discourse of language rooted in nature (more precisely, place-names that resemble or describe the essence of the place). This idea of direct attachment is recognizable as a Cratyllic naturalism (and Proust's etymologies have been analyzed as Cratylism), or in Deleuze's term, "objectivism" ("to attribute to the object the signs it bears," 27). If etymology as a discourse is prone to manipulations that justify our linguistic desires, Proust shows again how its habitual resort to "nature" seems ever poised to fix these desires too hastily to their object. The partial account above of nature's disrepute in turn-of-the-twentieth-century linguistic science suggests that the revealed error of the narrator's Cratyllic naturalism has an analogy in the historical development of linguistics preceding Proust's novel. As a final viewpoint from which to assess Romantic etymology, I argue that the *Recherche* carries out another "naturalism," and another "restructuring" of language theory, according to which accidental revelations of error continuously make visible different worlds.

Proust, as we shall see, actually presents us with a scheme not unlike Plato's *Cratylus*, provided we remember that the dialogue's heuristic extremes represent two opposing, equally untenable positions regarding language history and its reclamation through etymology, which are then mediated by Socrates.²⁸² Though his irony is self-

²⁸¹“Soyez rassuré pour les terribles étymologies que je devais vous demander. Je m'en suis tiré tout seul de mon mieux, ou plutôt fort mal. On mettra ce qu'elles ont de fantaisiste ou d'erronné sur le compte de mes ignorants personnages.” Cited by Antoine Compagnon, in his notes to the 1988 *Gallimard* edition of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (588).

²⁸² See Gensini on the inherited caricatures of Plato's dialogue, which by the eighteenth century had come to stand simply for naïve views of linguistic naturalism.

directed rather than Socratic, the series of error and corrective, leading toward a kind of realization, remains intact in Proust; the correctives lead us toward a consciousness of the vulnerability of institutions presumed natural (in the sense of permanent), yet they place no special faith in the teacherly voice of wisdom, preferring instead the momentary sensation of a transition from ignorance to insight. Romantic etymology used natural figures to show language moving and changing, beholden to time. The “nature” on which Proust focuses his (and our) attention really consists of the settled habits of social interaction, in communities ranging from his narrator’s several voices, to his many overlapping social circles, to the European intellectual climate at large; what we thought was nature is the mutable product of fallible interpretations, the manner in which (as Goethe put it) “life corrects us at every step.”²⁸³ Tracing these steps is the other etymology that overtakes his individual etymologies; this tracing is similarly designed to reveal language, when observed with a minute attentiveness, carrying us along in this active, unsteady nature, inhabiting the temporary institutions thus conjointly produced.

Proust, like Thoreau, is a writer whose investment in etymology has never really been satisfactorily accounted for. (Interestingly, he also briefly considered translating *Walden*.) The interest has baffled or thwarted Proust’s critics: variously summed up as “une faute de goût” (Vendryès) and a “tumeur du roman” (Compagnon), Proust’s etymological discourse can perhaps best be understood in what Roland Barthes has called an “emblematic” capacity. Yet neither Barthes nor Gérard Genette — perhaps the nimblest critics sidelined by these questions — moves very far, in their discussions, beyond the issues of Cratylism and sign motivation; both are constrained in a sense by the terms of a by-now dated structuralist semiotic vocabulary.

Proust, of course, wrote precisely during the period when the study of language was undergoing what is retrospectively evaluated as its definitive phase of scientific founding: Saussure’s epochal lectures were published posthumously in 1916, between the first two volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. While making no thorough claims for Proust’s knowledgeable investment in the solidifying discipline of linguistics, it is of more than passing interest to note a family link between Proust and Michel Bréal, his cousin, who was professor of comparative grammar at the Collège de France for nearly forty years until 1905, as well as a contemporary of Whitney’s (and like Whitney, a one-time student of Bopp’s in Berlin), as well as a colleague and friend of Max Müller’s, and the man who secured Saussure’s position at the *École pratique des hautes études*.²⁸⁴ His

²⁸³ There are, in fact, passages in Goethe’s science writings that read as though they helped define the notion of scientificity that informs Proust’s novel: “We may look at an object in its own context and the context of other objects, while refraining from any immediate response of desire or dislike. The calm exercise of our powers of attention will quickly lead us to a rather clear concept of the object, its parts, and its relationships; the more we pursue this study, discovering further relations among things, the more we will exercise our innate gift of observation. *Those who understand how to apply this knowledge to their own affairs in a practical way* are rightly deemed clever. It is not hard for any well-organized person, moderate by nature or force of circumstance, to be clever, for *life corrects us at every step*” (“The Experiment as Mediator between Object and Subject,” 11-12, emphasis added).

²⁸⁴ See Kawashima, from “Philology and Forgetting: du côté de la grammaire comparée,” unpublished ms. from a talk given at the conference “Products of Slow Thought and the Love of Language: A Conference in Honor of Ann Banfield,” May 7, 2011, at UC Berkeley. Kawashima’s thought-provoking presentation draws attention to the isomorphic behavior of the various processes Proust evokes beside a ‘self’ built up of memories, and in addition to the example of language’s successive states, he notably includes geological formation: e.g., “All these memories added to one another now formed a single mass, but one could still

criticisms of certain kinds of naturalism in linguistics have been cited above, and in the Introduction; and while his focus on psychology set him apart from Whitney, his publications on semantics (a term and field for which he is considered the founder) helped reorient the study of language from the ambitious timescales of comparative philology, which allowed some linguists to preserve the fantasy of recovering primitive roots, to more modest histories framed by sociological and psychological timescales of meaningful usage. If Proust was aware of his work, there is no doubt he would have found it of interest, and it is with reference to Bréal that one critic remarks, “The significance of linguistics for Proust has not received sufficient attention.”²⁸⁵

Whatever the precise nature of Proust’s relationship to the philological field of his period, it seems to me that, due in part to his interest in the preserved, residual or obsolete meanings of linguistic forms (including particularly those less tangible forms that easily escape the general notice of linguistic science), there is a strong sense in Proust’s novel that the study of language has much to learn from the social and psychological exploration made possible by literary experiment. The narrow views of language that pass for academic linguistics, as voiced in the character of the academic Brichot, are ridiculed (even as he himself complains of the “German-style notions of scientific accuracy” invading the Parisian academy); but even Brichot’s views, through their juxtaposition with the narrator’s interest in onomastics, are given new meaning, rather than dismissed. It’s not the narrator, but the tyrannous Verdurin couple who rule the salon repeatedly visited in the pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, that find Brichot’s arcane explanations of the origins of place-names and idioms too tedious for words.

Because of its ‘emblematic’ status in the narrative, one need not retell the entire sequence in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in order to get a feel for its oddness: in brief, etymology becomes an unexpectedly persistent preoccupation before, during, and after the Verdurin dinner party, a train ride from the seaside resort town of Balbec at a rented summer home, La Raspelière. Etymological passages consume whole pages of conversations on the train, at the party, and again hundreds of pages further on, as other train rides around Balbec are later recalled. These passages seem by and large to illustrate the corrective capacity of etymology, and they tend to reveal an unexpected historical past (as when the Germans’ geographical presence is attested in the derivation Aumenancourt — Alemanicurtis — Alemanni) or an obscured feature of the landscape (that the “boeuf” of Bricqueboeuf means not “ox” but comes from *budh*, “hut,” or that the “homme” of Thorpehomme means not “man” but comes from *holm*, “small island”).²⁸⁶

distinguish between them ... if not fissures, if not true faults, at least that veining, that variegation of coloring, which in certain rocks, in certain marbles, reveal differences in origin, in age, in ‘formation’ (1.190)”; “Our selves are composed of our successive states, superimposed. But this superimposition is not immutable like the stratification of a mountain. A tremor is liable at any moment to throw older layers back up to the surface (5.509).” To integrate these meaningful correlations into my discussion would test the limit of what a “Coda” can bear, but I’m most grateful for the opportunity to have read Kawashima’s work, which dovetails so well with my own.

²⁸⁵ Kawashima 6.

²⁸⁶ It is telling that the etymologies in the *Recherche* refer almost exclusively to place-names or “toponymy”: an excessively broad reading might allow us to construe this as illustrating a crux in the narrator’s turn from spatial to temporal relations of meaning-creation (in the terms of the novel’s final page, where “*Time*” is invoked as the revelatory dimension through which the narrator’s written product will be realized). A more nuanced reading that tends closer to my themes here would run in terms of a

This includes, notably, revelations regarding the landscape of language itself, since the derivations frequently show a Germanic or “Saxon” substratum to their French reflexes.

“And how charming the name is,” the narrator remarks of La Raspelière, long before the day of the dinner party. “...One would like to know the origin of all those names” (282; F204). Though his passion for deeper knowledge about the toponymy of the area around his childhood destination remains to some extent obscure (like nearly everything about the narrator’s emotional state), this enthusiastic desire, as well as the sense of sublimity or mystery felt in general by the young narrator in the presence of both dramatic landscapes and evocative place names, is a constant theme and the essential prompt for Brichot’s etymological digressions.

Thus when the same desire is reiterated several times in the presence of Brichot, the learned academic does not hesitate to satisfy it: “I’m interested in that priest,” the narrator tells him on the train, shortly after they are introduced (referring to the Combray curate who had “lapsed from neurasthenia into philology” [393; F284] while writing a short book about the place names around Balbec), “and also in etymologies.” “Don’t put too much faith in the ones he gives,” replied Brichot, “there’s a copy of the book at La Raspelière...it’s riddled with errors. Let me give you an example...” (387-8).²⁸⁷ Some *five pages* of examples follow. Shortly thereafter, his attention caught by the name of a train stop, the narrator again declares, “How I should like to know what all these names mean” (397; F287), as though to demonstrate the insatiability of this fixation, as though the sum total of Brichot’s momentarily intriguing but ultimately aimless (indeed emblematically endless) erudite derivations cannot possibly answer the longing the narrator feels. They are not, somehow, quite speaking in the same language; yet for all that the narrator later affirms that it was “precisely the things Brichot had taught me that interested me” amidst the Verdurin “clan” (475).

Brichot holds forth for long stretches at the party where this clan gathers, as well, to the great interest of the narrator, the exasperation of his hosts, and the amusement of the patient reader: at one point, after a lapse following the cheerful rehearsal of several tree-related root-words preserved in contemporaries’ names, and upon being entreated by another enthusiast at the party, Brichot, the narrator records, “was only too delighted to be able to furnish other vegetable etymologies [d’autres etymologies végétales]” (448; F322). Madame Verdurin complains after the meal to the narrator privately that Brichot “hurls chunks of dictionary at our heads during dinner” (472; F339); blissfully unaware of the general boredom induced in the clan of faithfuls, it is not until then that the narrator realizes he “had been alone, as I thought of my strip of green luster and of a scent of wood, in failing to notice that, while he enumerated these etymological derivations, Brichot had been provoking derision” (473; F339).

This in itself, however, does not spoil the narrator’s pleasure. But what of that “green luster,” that “scent of wood”? Brichot’s etymologies, preserving at least the possibility of satisfaction the narrator finds in imagining the meaningful origins of place

renegotiation in the meaning of ‘natural surroundings’, from reference to the phenomena of location to far more oblique ‘reference’ or invocation of complex social hierarchies, roles and practices.

²⁸⁷ “Je m’intéresse à ce prêtre et aussi aux etymologies. — Ne vous fiez pas trop à celles qu’il indique, me répondit Brichot; l’ouvrage qui est à La Raspelière...fourmille d’erreurs. Je vais vous donner un exemple...” (280). All citations from the English translation are from “Sodome and Gomorrah,” Volume IV of *In Search of Lost Time* (2003, Modern Library), unless otherwise noted. Subsequent page references for citations from the French text are given following the English page numbers (and marked “F”).

names, ultimately contribute to a gradual disenchantment:

I had been charmed by the “flower” that ended certain names, such as Fiquefleur, Honfleur, Flers, Barfleur, Harfleur, etc, and amused by the “beef” that comes at the end of Bricqueboeuf. But the flower vanished, and also the beef, when Brichot...informed us that *fleur* means a harbor (like *fiord*), and that *boeuf*, in Norman *budh*, means a hut. As he cited a number of examples, what had seemed to me a particular instance became general. (679; F484)

“General,” here, implies a leveling off of interest, so that the narrator is disappointed by the *consistency* or systematicity of language change, that is, the fact that it belongs or refers not so much to the landscape as to further aspects and instances of itself. A magic apparently generated by the relationship of word to world has dissipated, as the linguistic realm consolidates, becoming apparently less natural and more orderly, rational, and conventional (in several senses) to such an extent that the train stations and landscape themselves have become “humanized,” habitual and mundane: “. . .it was not merely the place-names of this district that had lost their initial mystery, but the places themselves. The names, already half-stripped of a mystery which etymology had replaced by reasoning, had now come down a stage further still” (693; F494). Brichot, administering a corrective, seems to have disillusioned a mystified, romanticized notion of the linguistic landscape, dulling the excitement of the journey by train itself.²⁸⁸

If the narrator’s disillusionment is made lovely by that vanishing flower, it is to the credit of Proust’s subtle crudity that it is equally made ridiculous by the simultaneously vanishing ox (or “beef”) in the quotation above. In fact it isn’t much of a leap to say that at this moment Proust is — in his crude, yet subtle way — de-flowering not only the words, but also his narrator’s vision, as the scales fall from his eyes, or if you like deflowering his narrator’s picture of language. Proust lampoons, but also humors, the ambivalence present in the romance of etymology, between a desire to plant language in a literal, original, natural soil of meaning (so that, for example, place names reflect qualities of location) and the mournful realization that while refusing to rest with an alienating or simplistic arbitrariness, language’s “natural” relationships seem only to be made visible through a process of change or loss.

²⁸⁸ I am especially grateful here for the comments of Tom McEnaney, who first pointed out to me the importance of train travel in contributing to Proust’s narrator’s sheltered appreciation of the landscape from behind the windows of a railway carriage, through place-names. His mode of conveyance contributes to his linguistic illusions, and then to his disillusionment. I would like to think further about this aspect of how etymologies are built and dismantled in the narrator’s world. Following the preceding chapter, we might think of Emerson’s apparently naïve claim that the poet “re-attaches things to nature,” and the ways both Emerson and Proust make this seemingly simple process of linkage come alive: “Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these...the poet finds place for the railway” (328), wrote Emerson, and this is precisely what Thoreau then does when examining the thawing foundations of the train-tracks, or the railway “cut,” in spring. These are all ways of recognizing artifice, culture, and technological progress as fellow-travelers with the “nature” they seem to master, with forces beyond their control. The narrative function of “error” in Proust is to dramatize the failure of simplistic “re-attachment”; yet he does find a “place for the railway” in the process of meaning-making. Alongside Kenneth Burke’s “dissolving act” (see Chapter III), we might think of Proust’s natural landscape of semiotic accidents as revealed not when things are re-attached to nature, but when they are *detached from* nature.

We glanced briefly above at some of the more sophisticated attempts to comprehend Proust's etymological game, in the work of Barthes and Genette. Paul de Man has noted the contrasting approaches to Proust of these two great practitioners of structuralist textual criticism: where Barthes, in an evocative tour-de-force, claims the narrator's desire for some organic link between a place and its name is emblematic of the necessary provisional faith of the literary writer in the Cratylid iconicity of literary language, Genette points out that this desire is systematically cheated by Proust's narrative (as Brichot has shown us above), and that the end result is of a disillusionment regarding the special relationship of peculiar place-names to the local worlds they delineate.²⁸⁹ De Man approves of Genette's corrective, before correcting it, in turn, himself: not only does Proust's text not embrace Cratylism, he tells us, it also does not rest content with momentary or redeemable disillusionment, but compounds it by showing that reference has no endpoint in phenomena: "The phenomenality of the signifier, as sound" de Man concludes, "is unquestionably involved in the correspondence between the name and the thing named, but the link, the relationship between word and thing, is not phenomenal but conventional" (10). But this, too, cannot comprise the whole substance of the corrective Proust plays out. How do we tell stories about conventional relationships, without running into nature? Another way of putting this would be to say that as long as our linguistic framework is reflexively limited to an opposition between words and things, their "link" or involvement is likely to be overdramatized or misinterpreted as referential, and their "correspondence" taken for granted. If this opposition between "word and world" were blurred, if the operative boundaries and relations were dissolved and reformed, how might the involvement of different parties in conventional relationships be reimagined in processes of transformation? These, I think, are questions Proust allows us to ask with more confident curiosity.

Convention, in its capacity as social and cultural reality, is just what Proust's narrator reveals as the motor behind what emerge as psychological and social etymologies. It would of course be perfectly legitimate to think of the cultural conventions that systematically govern language use as "natural," provided we hold our metaphors lightly. (Again, this is more or less what Humboldt, in his interpretations of Herder, wanted from his organic metaphors — to imply that human linguistic activity proceeds according to 'natural', i.e. more or less inaccessibly systematic, rules of use, or processes of change.) But our metaphors hold us as well, and we may become too attached to this one, allowing it to be literalized in dubious ways; and the narrator's interest in place-names, rather like Max Müller's interest in tree growth, may seduce rather than edify. In the course of his narrator's apprenticeship, Proust, we might say, *refines* a simplistic recourse to nature to find language's systematicity, plunging rather into the pragmatic world of socially layered meaning that comes about both through the coded conventions of cultural contact and through social and psychological processes of 'naturalization' or forgetting. In this way, naïve naturalism matures, not into pedantic academicism, but into a new Romantic etymology, whose 'natural' environments this time are more explicitly culturally structured, mediated through social and psychological

²⁸⁹ For this critical "conversation," see Roland Barthes, "Proust and Names," in *New Critical Essays*, 55-68; Gérard Genette, "The Age of Names," in *Mimologies*, 249-260; Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," in *The Resistance to Theory*, 3-20.

lenses. So that the involuntariness of Proust's eye-opening jog of memory, marking a dramatic change in perspective or frame, already predicts the novel's pragmatic reorientation of etymology as a natural error or accident.

IV. "An Original Mistake in Our Premises"

If Perceptive Organs vary: Objects of Perception seem to vary:
If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also²⁹⁰
— Blake, *Jerusalem*

The ruin or the blank that we see in nature is in our own eye.²⁹¹
— Emerson, *Nature*

It is the explanation [la raison] that opens our eyes: an error cleared up gives us an additional sense.
— Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*

This aphoristic line from Proust is, perhaps, his own version of one Emerson translated (unattributed) from Goethe: where Goethe wrote, "Jeder neue Gegenstand, wohl beschaut, schließt ein neues Organ in uns auf,"²⁹² Emerson freely translates, "Every object rightly seen unlocks a new faculty of the soul," and Proust paraphrases, "C'est la raison qui ouvre les yeux; une erreur dissipée nous donne un sens de plus."²⁹³ In each case, a phenomenological encounter works a change in the perceiving subject, in accordance with its environment. That *organ*, that *faculty*, that *sense* is the indeterminate yield of somehow becoming temporarily attuned with the surrounding world, an attunement that shows how the gap between language and world is imagined closed, or how this breach — this "ruin" or "blank" — is partly redefined as a problem of vision.²⁹⁴

In Proust's aphorism, however, there are several interesting changes: first, it adds a layer to the process of adjusting one's vision to find the 'right' or proper setting, namely that a negative act rather than a positive one is invoked — that is, instead of

²⁹⁰ Blake, E177.

²⁹¹ Emerson 40.

²⁹² "Bedeutende Fördernis durch ein einziges, geistreiches Wort," Goethe writes elsewhere of an "organ of perception" gained through absorbing the influence of another author critically (see Douglas Miller's "Introduction" to *Scientific Studies*, xvi).

²⁹³ This string of citations is remarkable in itself, though of course there is no need to find, for Proust, a 'source' behind his striking phrase. In Emerson's case, the citation appears in quotes but not attributed; the notes to his *Collected Works* trace it to Coleridge, and the relation this reference implies is raised in several recent works (McKusick 128, Walls 102). Yet the phrase in Coleridge, from *Aids to Reflection*, bears only passing resemblance to Emerson's quotation, and its context in Coleridge's argument seems irrelevant to Emerson's purposes: "every new truth discovered by [scientific men] has either added to [Christianity's] evidence, or prepared the mind for its reception" (150). There are to my knowledge two other notices in print of the more direct source in Goethe (Krusche, Van Cromphout). Van Cromphout notes that the passage is "based on a journal entry" from 12 Aug 1836, four days after a letter in which Emerson informs his brother William "he had bought fifteen volumes of Goethe's posthumously published collected works" (32).

²⁹⁴ It is interesting to place Proust's adaptation of this Emersonian idea alongside its more direct emergence in a different pragmatic context — the aesthetic theory of John Dewey. "In every experience we touch the world through some particular tentacle; we carry on our intercourse with it, it comes home to us, through a specialized organ" (195); "Every critic, like every artist, has a bias, a predilection, that is bound up with the very existence of individuality. It is his task to *convert it into an organ of sensitive perception* and of intelligent insight" (32, emphasis added).

persistence being rewarded with insight, ignorance is stripped away (like those word-final flowers), until what is left is a new sense, a change of state. Second, where the “new object” in Goethe and Emerson marks an encounter with a world or nature in some broad sense, Proust’s “error” consists in a mistaken relationship more or less confined to the social sphere (though this changes the world’s shape no less definitively). Finally, the use of the word “sense” makes explicit the gain in semantic, even quasi-linguistic, awareness that accompanies sensory reorientation; and for this reason, the phrase permits that the *extra sense* may be attributed both to the observer and to the observed (as though something as material as a *person* also accretes and appropriates meaning, much as both Emerson and later Peirce claimed that things and people themselves function as symbols or signs). Proust makes manifest how meaning change need not be sought out by an intending subject: it ‘simply’ happens, like the involuntary trigger that reveals ‘error,’ out of which suddenly emerges a formerly unavailable, invisible or forgotten meaning. The naturalness of this model is visible if one adopts an ecological awareness of the overlapping influences, and the messy or accidental outcomes, involved.

Goethe had used his phrase in the midst of a short text redefining his own twist on ‘objectivity,’ described as a sort of observation that finds the observer always overlapping with the observed world, the two in effect defining one another through their continuous encounters. Such a porous notion of objectivity, that is, a dynamic objectivity that stresses negotiable relationships over authoritative definitions, already suggests a possible philosophical sanction for Proust’s pragmatics: the visibility of alternative (yet coexisting, and therefore not precisely competing) worlds emerges from the narrator’s elastic temporalities. Proust explores a kind of meaning change that accompanies the transition from ignorance to awareness, that turns on the threshold of invisible/overt. His narrator marks this position of transition in suspense by emphasizing the disjunction of his own multiple subjective points of view, yet assimilating the temporal dispersion of these I’s along a spectrum of identity that makes it impossible for the reader to positively distinguish them. We cannot hold the narrated and narrating characters apart, and indeed the urge to isolate them from one another as, say, naïve and knowing, as stable differentiable states of the same consciousness with respectively less and more insight, is a desire the novel consistently frustrates. Yet the novel nevertheless specifically dramatizes moments of revelation, ‘meaning change’ that shows how a new awareness changes the world’s appearance, and vice versa.

It is just such an example of this process of ‘transition in suspense’ which unfolds narratively as the narrator’s “naïve” desire for a natural continuity between names and their places. Their physical emplotment or ‘real-world’ locality is undercut or discouraged by Brichot’s academic authority and knowledge of etymology (which itself stands in uncertain relation to the nineteenth century’s positivist new science of philology). The narrator’s longingly wide-eyed attachment to an organic linguistic aesthetics, at first fades with these reductive revelations. But as philological correctives, besides *being* correctives, they don’t bear any special resemblance to the book’s linguistic ingenuity; rather, the narrator’s ethical consciousness finally subjects itself to the recognition of error as a continuous or constitutive element of his position. This movement is meant to be both anxiety-producing and reassuring, in short, “all quite natural”:

We guess as we read, we create; everything starts from an initial error; those that follow (and this applies not only to the reading of letters and telegrams, not only to all reading), extraordinary as they may appear to a person who has not begun at the same place, are all quite natural. A large part of what we believe to be true (and this applies even to our final conclusions) with an obstinacy equaled only by our good faith, springs from an original mistake in our premises.²⁹⁵

Just like the comparative philologists, whose “first mistake,” as Saussure wrote, “was also the source of all their other mistakes,” our errors are compounded as reality is assembled around us according to our original “premises.” Yet such mistakenness seems to be correlated, in Proust, not to a failure of accuracy, but to the promise of renegotiation — an idea, as we have seen, that is deeply Romantic. We might ask: what sort of semiotic indeterminacy is being invoked in such a model of reading? How far, exactly, does that universe-expanding pattern of error, which applies “not only to all reading,” pull our horizon? Somewhat earlier, Proust offers another version of this reading model, as the partial or “lop-sided fashion” in which we absorb information (and again, there is a possible Emersonian: “the axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things”²⁹⁶):

Our mistake lies in supposing that things present themselves as they really are, names as they are written, people as photography and psychology give an unalterable notion of them. But in reality this is not at all what we ordinarily perceive. We see, we hear, we conceive the world *in a lopsided fashion*. We repeat a name as we have heard it spoken until experience has corrected our mistake — something that does not always happen... This perpetual error, which is precisely ‘life’, does not bestow its countless forms merely upon the visible and the audible universe, but upon the social universe, the sentimental universe, the historical universe, and so forth. (F, 774-5)

Such are the causes of the “more or less rapid change of linguistic signs” (74) alluded to by Saussure, but too often forgotten. Precisely that “perpetual error” of speech — the heedless repetition of a ‘wrong’ pronunciation, say — which experience does or does not correct, is a vivid evocation in miniature of incremental, interpersonal shifts in language (as might be figured, for example, by stones worn slowly away). They are natural in their apparently self-regulated systematicity, when observed over long periods, but also natural in their temporally distinct pattern of slip, correction, and shift: their historicity, and our overweening faith in their “nature” or reliability, become visible together over time. On a smaller scale, the world’s “lop-sidedness” marks a shift from problems of reference (desperately reaching to cross the imagined gap between word and world) to the indexically mediated structure of the meaning maintained and created in everyday interaction with human surroundings. Furthermore, the “universes” in which this process takes place explicitly multiply: these include the social and historical worlds that exceed a private or psychological temporality, hence are structured by systems of signification that we can scarcely pretend to have complete access to, much less exert individual control over. Despite this, we are the ones who fashion or “create” these systems through our individual acts.

In this manner, Proust’s well-known literary experiments with representations of the passage of time bolster his less heralded attentiveness to pragmatic transformations of

²⁹⁵ *In Search*, Vol. V, 890.

²⁹⁶ Emerson 41 (*Nature*).

meaning, and to the indexical component of language in use.²⁹⁷ The continual frame-pulling of his narration allows him not just to spin narratives of how conventions come into being by forgetting their contexts, but also to tell comedies of the critical rediscovery of context in reviewing the past. Etymology is just one model used in this effort, but it is an exemplary and revealing one: building from a stereotypically ‘Romantic’ desire for what etymology ought to achieve, and what natural origins ought to mean (recall again that mystical “green luster,” a rather Wordsworthian phrase), the narrator’s etymological imagination converts its objects of curiosity into the structures of convention that can be observed to change over time (indeed, that change over time *because* of how they are observed). It is almost as though, in Proust’s sociological vision, it is *through* the structured discipline of philological correctives that a practice of Romantic etymology can come into its own.

By the novel’s close, the involuntary corrective of recognition has merged with the expansion of ideas of language or meaning change from, for example, the origin and fate of individual words and place-names, to the minutely articulated reconstitution of meaning within the pervasiveness of semiosis in everyday experience. As the narrator looks around and identifies his cast of characters at the ball he is attending in the final scene, he writes, “I needed a fortuitous lighting-flash of attention before I could re-attach this latter-day acquaintance, like a word to its etymology, to the original significance which he or she had possessed for me.”²⁹⁸ If we did not see before how the long lists of earlier etymologies have been conscripted and redeployed in the narrator’s imagination within a more flexible and semiotically diverse set of strategies of attention for tracing the migration of meaning, this passing analogy gives us the needed additional sense.

In each of the preceding chapters, I have attempted to show a tendency echoed in this episode out of Proust: that linguistic and etymological impulses appearing suspiciously organicist, primitivist, Cratylist, or otherwise naturalist in stabilizing ways, may become less simple and more interesting when viewed with an appreciation of the temporal consciousness that helps define Romantic etymology. Proceeding by reformulating etymology’s existing capacities, these eccentric linguistic histories attempt to redraw the boundaries of what counts as language, and thereby as a science of language, by reimagining the life of the sign (reactivated, for example, in Herder’s “Merkmal,” Blake’s “Visionary forms,” or Wordsworth’s “felt” language). The resulting minute or deep linguistic histories envision language taking place outside the places we usually look for it — outside and among discrete words, voices or written artifacts, beyond the utility of communication, beyond the direct immediacy and transparency of reference, and especially in excess of the individual intentions of autonomous human agents or social contracts. Language is conjured up in the inarticulate realm of these exteriors, in these peri-linguistic wilds: in non-verbal signs and expressions of passion, through oblique, indexical or non-referential mediation, by inefficient accidents and errors, in *between* individuals and their natural and cultural environments. In searching for meaning *around* the obvious focuses of attention, these Romantic linguists feel their way into contextual elements; in looking at the grey zone between recognized linguistic agents or units, they attempt to represent language in temporal processes of change that

²⁹⁷ Michael Lucey greatly clarifies this dimension of Proust’s work in the forthcoming “Proust and Literature as Language-in-Use” (but see also his earlier *Never Say “I”*).

²⁹⁸ *In Search*, Vol. VI, 413.

can be imagined only with great difficulty. They refer to these processes as in accord with “nature,” conceived as impervious and enveloping patterns of motion, a nature one never grasps, but only senses in passing. Despite linguistics’ proscription of nature — Saussure proclaimed that “natural data have no place in linguistics” — the data in question stand to be reevaluated as rhetorical procedures: for even Saussure conceded of such natural figures that “certain metaphors are indispensable.”²⁹⁹

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²⁹⁹ Saussure 5.

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