HOLY GHOSTS:

ROMANTIC ASCETICISM AND ITS FIGURAL PHANTOMS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation reconsiders sacred tropes in the Romantic poetry of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and John Keats within the context of ascetic performances and written saints' lives. I argue that reading these poets as ascetic figures helps us to better understand Romantic isolation as a deeply social engagement, for an ascetic rejects his social milieu in order to call for the sanctification of a corrupt community. Asceticism redraws the lines of Romantic immanent critique of nineteenth-century England and newly explains the ghostly afterlives of poets whose literary personae transcend their biographical lives. Furthermore, this study takes up the ways in which the foundational ascetic tropes of Romantic poetry bind the major poets together in an impenetrable canon of writers with holy vows to poetry and to each other. My readings examine different kinds of ascetic vocation at play in the work of each poet, and I ultimately argue that this traditional support for the Romantic canon demands that we reconsider our critical attachments to Romanticism as the beginning of a secular literary tradition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ROMANTIC ASCETICISM AND THE SURVIVAL OF SACRED TEXTS

In a 2014 episode of the podcast *Radiolab*, the show's host, Jad Abumrad, interviews Eugene Thacker, the author of *In the Dust of This Planet*, a 2011 book on nihilism. Abumrad and Thacker discuss the curious pop culture after-life of the book. Though the text itself enjoys no great commercial success,[1] the cover image is appropriated and painted by a Norwegian artist, whose art is picked up by a high-end fashion label. This label then outfits the titanic American rapper-producer Jay-Z for a video featuring his widely consumed music and his just-as-widely consumed celebrity persona. As such, *In the Dust of This Planet* becomes visible in one of the most recognizable cultural projects of our time. Thacker is utterly bemused by the accidental ubiquity of his work, but the episode is dedicated to finding out whether the appearance of this trace of nihilist philosophy in the work of one of the most famous pop artists in the world is pure coincidence, or an unconscious manifestation of the spirit of the age. By way of making this inquiry, the episode describes the context in which Jay-Z carries this nihilist message: a fake movie trailer for his *On the Run* worldwide tour with Beyonce. The trailer pitches the Bonnie-and-Clyde tale of Jay-Z and Beyonce as they flee from the criminal city (presumably Vegas) to the Nevada desert. Having escaped all the seedy characters who try to entangle them in a web of corruption, the couple makes it to the

[1] The actual text of *In the Dust of This Planet* is, however, source material for the writers of the *True Detective* character, pessimist Louisiana detective Rust Cohle. Abumrad brings up the influence of nihilist philosophy on the HBO phenomenon to point to a superlative surge in nihilist tendencies at our contemporary moment of pop culture.

desert, and thus to the scene in which Jay-Z sports *In the Dust of This Planet* on the back of his motorcycle jacket as he points a gun toward the sky. *Radiolab* asks two related questions of this odd moment in mainstream art: why is Thacker's book appearing in this moment of contemporary history? And why does this happen in the desert?

The correspondents for this episode of *Radiolab* question why nihilism should be at the heart of this generation's aesthetic expressions, and they trace similar surges in nihilist sensibility through history, explaining that these outbursts all follow violent upheavals in geopolitics. After the confusion and disgust that follow WWI, Dadaism is born; after the threat of mutually assured destruction during the Cold War, punk emerges. For the episode's contributors, the present moment of pop culture is responding to the ambient threat of global terrorism, ecological disaster, and deadly epidemics. Yet, when Abumrad interviews Simon Critchley, a philosopher who teaches, among other subjects, early Christian mysticism at The New School for Social Research, Critchley explains that nihilism's utter repudiation of corrupt society is only one part of a process that has much deeper roots in early ascetic practice. At times of crisis, culture turns to the desert, the symbolic province of ascetics. Asceticism is an aesthetic first responder to the emergency state of a socio-political system that is moving toward its own self-destruction. When Jay-Z escapes to the desert, then, he participates in a long aesthetic tradition of carrying art into the wilderness, where the artist can be cleansed, his art sanctified, and his textual offering made worthy of dissemination among the masses, who are in desperate need of an alternative to dying culture. Jay-Z takes the ambient nihilism of contemporary culture into the wild, and this act symbolizes his rejection of a pessimistic approach to the state

of world affairs. This is not a symbolic act of resignation, but the beginning of an aesthetic pursuit of something else, something more.

I argue that in the nineteenth century Romanticism initiates this practice of imagining the impending doom of culture and extoling the power of purified art to undo the effects of modernization. If it is indeed the case that a mass sensibility resembling nihilism always follows heightened fear and disgust at the social milieu, we see that Romantic poets have plenty to repudiate, from the horrifying fallout of the French Revolution, to the governmental infractions of civil rights that follow that event, to the increasing commercialization and dispossession of English life. Romantic writing often employs the rhetorical, formal, and thematic devices of ascetic practice to register the magnitude of the threat of the modern, which, for the Romantics, is nothing short of cataclysmic. Because it bears witness to such rapid changes in social life, Romanticism is at the beginning of a cultural story whose latest chapter is Jay-Z and Beyonce's retreat to the desert. In the Romantics' historical moment, though, the awareness of one's ineffectual place in an expansive world is a new sensation, for industrial nation-building both spurs the reordering of human life into standardized functions within the machine of progress, but also alters, through the rise of mass print culture and information circulation, the way people experience this rapid change.

Several critics have attended to the ways in which the flux of increasingly modern life moves Romantic writers—inspires them to make critiques of how nineteenth-century social systems mobilize bodies into labor for the state, and compel them to wander away from this socio-political milieu. Saree Makdisi's landmark study of the influence of imperialism on Romanticism considers the effects of globalization as the antecedent for

Romantic aesthetic concepts such as the "dark sublime of modernity"; Mary Favret traces the nineteenth-century fear of global warfare and transmission of violence as newly disorienting in the Romantic period; David Simpson, in a study of Wordsworth's poetic ethics, explains how the commodity form and its dissociative effects on the social body are embedded in Wordsworth's own characterization of "a multitude of causes unknown to former times"; Thomas Pfau's work on Romantic poetic vocation describes the threat that a new speculative economy in the early nineteenth century poses for labor of all kinds. Each of these studies maps the cultural history of Romanticism from similar origin points, all anchored to ideas of how information, capital, and bodies are newly mobile—and *mobilized* for the good of the state—in this period. This movement toward standardized socio-economic English life, though, is the impetus for poets to wander beyond the public sphere in search of critical distance.

"Romantic Asceticism" takes up the question of how the tropes of ascetic performance, formalized by the textual distribution of saints' lives as early as the third century, structure Romanticism's critique of the unbearable weight of modern progress. Each chapter is a case study of a different major Romantic poet. I am interested in the socio-cultural afterlife of the poets, but I read their enduring celebrity as the effect of poetry that represents the life of a poet as an ascetic performance. Each reading begins with a consideration of the uses of ascetic structure for the Romantic critique of the modern, but I also read Romantic asceticism for how it turns a contemporary critique, with a particular set of socio-economic tribulations, into something that remains contemporary always, into something lasting and translatable to every post-Romantic generation. In a public sphere wary of religious sensibility as the natural enemy of

enlightenment reason, the poets' collective turn to the devices of sacred texts is worth interrogating again for its anti-modern, counter-hegemonic potential. This study considers the political effects of the religious rites in Romantic poetry, but I also read the effects of traditional ascetic tropes for what they make of the poets who deploy them. I contend that the *poets* I discuss—William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and John Keats—are transfigured into poet figures by their own sacramental devices, and that their transfiguration becomes the basis for the lasting aesthetic and critical power of their poetry.

This project reads three major Romantic poets as cultural icons who loom larger than life by becoming, in their verse, more than human. I examine how the poets' biographical lives and their respective poetic speakers are absorbed into poet figures; in the poetry, the veil is torn between the poets' real and figural lives. This collapse of a body-soul binary is a thoroughly ascetic technique, and what the breaking down of this barrier allows is a Romantic influence that outlives the Romantics themselves. Ascetic poetry engenders an extended public engagement. The ascetic pursues a holy way of living, removed from the social sphere, but he is returned in the form of his texts to the community who are meant to uphold his sacred model. The poets' bodies fade, but their texts gain new power. Though there are, of course, numerous poets who can claim a long afterlife in the literary establishment,[2] my contention is that the ascetic structure of Romantic poetry explains how explicitly the Romantics are building their afterlife before they are in their graves. The Romantic asceticism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats is echoed in the works of other major Romantic figures—in Byron, whose autobiographical

[2] Shakespeare and Milton being, to the Romantic poets, the most important of that immortal band of English poets.

speaker makes a Romantic pilgrimage, and in Coleridge, whose prose and poetry is preoccupied with clerisy.[3] Of the major canonical Romantic writers, though, I am most interested in the aesthetic affinity between the three poets in question here, for they share the closest allusive bonds within the movement.

A well-established line of Romanticist criticism offers different possible reasons for the deep preoccupation with the sacred in canonical Romantic poetry. Most famously, M.H. Abrams reads the formal and tropological structure of Romanticism as part of a project to make the secular sacred, and to divest the sacred of its irrational content.[4] Recent criticism, though, has attended to the bipartisan split between the sacred and the secular as a discursive problem fortified by years of scholarly work invested in the primacy of academic liberalism. Colin Jager gives a persuasive account of the institutional assumptions that stand on this fault line between the religious and the secular, and argues that some archaeological criticism is necessary for recovering a faithful reading of Romantic discourse as imagined by the major poets of the era.[5] The poets I consider restage ascetic performances as aesthetic battles for the soul of culture, thereby inaugurating an artistic mode that has become such a commonplace of cultural expectations that contemporary readers might easily miss the ethical force of the symbolic act of asceticism. We now read tropes of asceticism as standard within a secular

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[3] Of the so-called "Big Six" canonical Romantic poets, Blake is the least conducive to a reading of Romantic asceticism, not for lack of scriptural allusion and prophetic tone, but because he does not form part of a collaborative coterie of poets who read and comment on one another's verse.

[4] Abrams, Meyer. *Natural Supernaturalism*: *Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature.*

[5] Jager, Colin. "Introduction." *Secularism, Cosmpolitanism, and Romanticism*. Ed. Colin Jager. Romantic Jager Circles Praxis Series. Aug. 2008.

literary imagination, but to assume anachronistically a secular logic in Romanticism's use of sacred tropes overlooks the ritualistic mode of its denunciation of modern political economy.

The tradition of asceticism offers a discourse ready-made to resist the contemporary, for, as Friedrich Nietzsche explains, the figure of the ascetic seeks solace from the contemporary.[6] Geoffrey Harpham in *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* begins his theory of asceticism as a critical methodology, by explaining precisely this transcultural and transhistorical nature of asceticism. "The term asceticism," writes Harpham, "refers not only to a particular set of beliefs and practices that erupted into high visibility during the early Christian era, but also to…features of our own culture…that have survived the ideological and theological structure within which they emerged…[asceticism] may best be considered as sub-ideological, common to all culture" (xi). Though asceticism is most commonly associated with a traditional Christian practice, Harpham's theory shows that the underlying structure of ascetic performance is "sub-ideological," and, as such, exceeds the spirit of any one age or culture. Ascetics are to be found in every social context, and their appearances signify an inherent human need for discipline that comes from organic human nature rather than from the governing minority's will to power. The ascetic seems, by some divine magic, to show up just when the people's need for discipline is at its greatest, when they most crave, consciously or unconsciously, for a way to manage the distance between the capricious desires of the untrained heart and the noble aspirations of the immortal soul.

[6] See Chapter IV for a fuller account of Nietzsche's theory of the contemporary-phobic ascetic.

The need for a communal practice that protects humanity from the forces that threaten to eradicate sympathetic bonds is clearly evident in Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which is the foundational text for Romanticism. In his Romantic manifesto, Wordsworth writes,

> Emphatically may it be said of the Poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, 'that he looks before and after.' He is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. (606)

Wordsworth's charge to poets is an ascetic imperative that attaches his poetry, and the poetry of two of his most important Romantic successors,[7] to a truly universal trope for the interplay of the aesthetic and the social. The language Wordsworth uses here to describe poetic vocation coincides with many ascetic devices: the poet must "uphold" and "preserve" and "carry" the message of communal sympathy with him to every corner of "the whole earth," for "all time." He is responsible for bringing humanity into the fold of a community governed by "love and relationship" that withstand the flux of history.[8]

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[7] Drawing on Foucault's idea of initiators of discursive practice in "What is an Author?" I consider Wordsworth as the Marx of Romanticism—the founder of a discourse that other writers acknowledge and then adapt.

[8] Mary Fairclough and Nancy Yousef, among other critics, study sympathy, intimacy, and other interpersonal feeling in Romantic writing as social forces that resist alienation and keep the crowd from becoming the mob.

Wordsworth's own definition of a poet's calling demonstrates how deeply the burden of the social is felt in the Romantic project, regardless of how often this movement's poets seem to be called to withdraw from the society. Asceticism is often aligned in the cultural imaginary with the solitude of the wilderness, with bearded men in burlap who deprive themselves of food and water. But wandering in the wilderness is one point on a spectrum of ascetic performance, one that covers the priest, the hermit, and the cloistered monk. Benedict describes, for example, a hierarchy of the different ascetic functions, ranging from the cenobite, who dwells in the monastery, to the anchorite, who wanders in barren regions. That spectrum, though, always describes the relationship between the ascetic figure and his people, for whom he means his life to be an example. Romantic asceticism is a way of understanding a traditional, communal structure of Romantic verse that codes the poets' relationships to the public as sacred. In other words, in considering Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats as canonized figures, as saints whose written lives are part of a sacred "Book of Romanticism," we might read their works as models of spiritual pursuit in the face of a world in a state of decay, a world in the process of giving way to something else. These three poets—"pantheist," "atheist," and "agnostic"— construct themselves, regardless of their theological and religious positions, as holy men in order to give weight, in the eyes of the people, to their urgent poetic messages.

The rhetorical power of the ascetic, as someone with authority over the flock and one who disseminates texts that model discipline, begins with Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, which is the earliest record of its kind to have been so highly circulated and which created an early version of celebrity status. Robert Gregg, a scholar of

Athanasius's narrative and of the practices of the Desert Fathers, explains the paradox at the heart of the anchoritic celebrity trope initiated by Antony's written life, in which the desert-dwelling monk draws "a constant stream of visitors." Gregg argues that the desert father's isolation is "more geographical than social reality…by the fourth century the holy man is emerging as a figure of real importance to the economic and political equilibrium of the culture from which he has separated himself; his role as mediator and arbiter…depends on and is legitimated by his disinterest and independence, but particularly by his demonstrated power" (9). This "demonstrated power" refers to the witnessed acts of self-discipline and ecstatic experience on the part of the monk, but what is unique about Athanasius's record is that witness begins to be textual in an unprecedented way. The ascetic figure can retreat from society and, at the same time, be made into the prophet that redeems society, specifically through the circulation of the printed text.

Here the demonstrated power of an ascetic through acts of intense self-discipline—including the familiar practices of deprivation, flagellation, and meditation—is only a part of the equation of the ascetic's rhetorical influence. These superficial, bodily acts, in fact, are nothing remarkable in a communal context, where such demonstrations read as spectacle driven more by the individual's desire for praise and material compensation than by any pursuit of spiritual discipline. The desert—or, more generically, the wilderness—is essential to the process whereby the anchorite becomes, as Antony does, "a figure of real importance to the economic and political equilibrium of the culture from which he has separated himself." The inhospitality of the wilderness is the agent of individual transformation that becomes legend over time and through

circulation, but this is only possible because the wilderness is so wholly hostile to human culture, to being cultivated. The key to the ascetic's success with his flock is that he, like the desert in which he makes his anti-home, is hostile to his followers. His deep commitment to the people, therefore, often reads as disdain. Harpham explains the phenomenon whereby ascetic hostility and altruism are symbiotically related:

> Take for example the early Christian approach to culture, which often took radically anticultural forms, such as the retreat by the early monastic heroes to isolated caves in the desert. The often morbid or flamboyant deprivations and tortures they inflicted on themselves displayed a violence and self-loathing entirely incompatible with communal life or the family structure. But this apparent anticulturalism should not eclipse the fact that the Desert Fathers brought the Book to the Desert, and served as apostles of a textual culture in the domain of the natural. (xii)

Here we see the familiar binary, famously theorized by Raymond Williams, of the city and the country. Read in ascetic terms, the city-country split is a divide between culture and wilderness; this mutually defining relationship is sustained by books, specifically by the Book that records and extols the domain of the natural. Part of Abrams' argument in *Natural Supernaturalism* is that, with the nineteenth-century turn toward the secular, the Book of Nature supplants the Book of the Desert, or the Book of God, and therefore Romanticism supplants religion. By rethinking such narratives of secularization in the context of asceticism, we can see that this performance of spiritual authority is ultimately the means by which books are rescued from the clutches of corrupt society. This practice

allows the poets to participate fully in the workings of culture and appear to cleanse culture at the same time.

Harpham's account of ascetic practice exposes the ascetic's sleight of hand, his smuggling of the fragment of culture into an "anti-cultural zone." A complete rejection of culture ought to involve a rejection of the book, but the book is still essential for the ascetic because it will tell his people the good news that there is a purer and more natural way of living. The book is the instrument of the people's healing, and their well-being is the ascetic figure's calling. In the Arab Dream episode of Wordsworth's epic *The Prelude*, a passage of ascetic poetry interrupts Book V, on "Books," and this moment, this turn to the wilderness, gives a clear sense of how the figure of the Book functions in the Romantic poet's sacred practice. Book V begins with the poet figure's grieving that "palms atchieved" (books) are "shrines so frail" (48) of a "A soul divine which we participate, / A deathless spirit (16-17). For the poet figure, books are but a pale shadow of "the speaking face of earth and heaven" (12), the purest manifestation in this mortal world of "a soul divine" that is common to all organic life. The poet reads into books a sacrilege against the immortality of the human soul, and he craves unmediated access to nature, lamenting the fact that we have no better method of record-keeping than objects subject to decay and destruction. This is a common rhetorical move in ascetic practice, to note the frailty of the vessel before submitting the body—textual or human—to God in humility. But after this disquisition, the speaker recounts a dream that gives books a new frame of reference.[9]

[9] Stephen Gill's note to the poem explains that this passage describes a dream Descartes had in 1619, and that scholars generally agree Wordsworth got the idea from Coleridge (730). In the context of Book V, the poet figure is describing a friend's dream, but I

He saw before him an Arabian Waste,

A Desart, and he fancied that himself

Was sitting there in the wide wilderness,

Alone, upon the sands… (71-74)

In these lines, the poet figure is transported to a wilderness in which he is utterly alone. He "fancie[s]" himself alone, at any rate, and that verb highlights the appeal this trope of solitude has for Romantic consciousness. The desert and solitude go hand in hand, here, as they do in anchoritic practice, but solitude only lasts the length of these four lines before

…behold! At once

To his great joy a Man was at his side,

Upon a dromedary mounted high.

He seemed an Arab of the Bedouin Tribes;

A Lance he bore, and underneath one arm

A stone, and in the opposite hand, a Shell

Of a surpassing brightness. Much rejoiced

The dreaming Man that he should have a Guide

To lead him through the Desart…

While questioning himself what this strange freight

Which the Newcomer carried through the Waste

Could mean…" (75-86).

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suggest that the persona of the dreamer and the poet figure are synonymous here, as the poet figure is the one who gives this vision life in verse. This is the poet figure's trip to the wilderness as much as anyone's.

The Arab Guide answers the speaker, telling him that the Stone and the Shell are books: the Stone is "Euclid's Elements," and the Shell is a "Book…of more worth" (87-90). The appearance here of a guide carrying books, in figural disguise, is bizarre, for a dream that begins under such straightforwardly ascetic conditions as being alone and in the desert immediately conjures up a fellow human whose purpose is the transport of texts. This shift seems to fly in the face of ascetic purpose, but the guide and his books are what lends purpose to this scene. If we read this meeting as an analog for the kind of spiritual encounter an ascetic might have in the wilderness, the Arab Guide appears at this moment to charge the poet figure with his own spiritual task. The Wordsworthian speaker says,

> 'The Stranger…
> Stretched forth the Shell towards me, with command
> That I should hold it to my ear. I did so,
> And heard in that instant in an unknown Tongue,
> Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,
> A loud blast of prophetic harmony,
> An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold
> Destruction to the Children of the Earth
> By deluge now at hand… (91-99)

A sympathetic bond between the Guide and the speaker is born in this act of sharing the message of the Shell, for no sooner does the Guide appear than the speaker eyes the Stone and the Shell with concern, which suggests that he believes these things somehow involve him. When the Guide stretches out the Shell and lets the speaker listen to

cacophonous, yet clear sounds of a prophecy of "Destruction to the Children of the Earth," the poet figure feels the urgent need to take up Guide's task. He says, "A wish was now ingendered in my fear / To cleave unto this Man, and I begged leave / To share his errand with him" (115-117). Here fellowship is constructed by the figure of the book. Once the Wordsworthian speaker encounters another human, he necessarily encounters books, for books are the agent of sympathetic culture. The book that is the Shell is the written record of what the Arab Guide has seen in the desert, what he has understood about the doom threatening mankind. The book here is both the foundation of understanding between these two men, and the agent binding them to the entire human race. This is why the tools in the Arab Quixote's emergency supply kit are a "Stone" and a "Shell" that are metaphorically books; he carries with him what is elemental to humanity. The wilderness space transmutes books into something natural, the indelible rock-steady mark of a natural spiritual power that brings us closer to our own organic nature and aid in the fight the modern.

The wandering guide is on his way to bury the books, the first of which has some supernatural power to create a community that is uncorrupted by power structures: "The one that held acquaintance with the stars, / And wedded man to man by purest bond / Of nature, undisturbed by space or time…" (104-106). This passage suggests that the first book (the Stone) contains some sublime spiritual power that allows for pure sympathetic bonds among human subjects, for the construction of an organic community that cannot be destroyed by any tidal wave of modern force. The poet figure describes the second book (the Shell, and the one which contains the sound of "Destruction to the Children of the Earth) as "[t]he other that was a God, yea many Gods, / Had voices more than all the

winds, and was / A joy, a consolation, and a hope" (107-109). This tome represents the synthesis, in ascetic practice, of the disaster that recalls to the poet figure his love and care for humanity, and an underlying divine will that provides "[a] joy, a consolation, and a hope." Books in this passage of *The Prelude* are converted, in the imaginary space of the wilderness, into Romantic poetic texts that bear witness to all that is wrong with the public sphere and all that the people could be if they had the right materials for instruction. An ascetic performance of poetry extracts books, in which verse is housed, from their nineteenth-century economic context and makes them organic agents for propagating a Romantic gospel.

What I am calling the "Book of Romanticism" is the collection of Romantic poems in which the gap is closed between the poets' need for disciplined, solitary pursuit of unmediated nature, and their care for the brotherhood of mankind. In the communal construction of the text, the poet figures I read in this study are bonded together in ways that ensure their mutual survival in English literary history. The intensity of their poetic discipline is in their commitment to giving their lives over to the holier plane of pure verse, which no single ascetic poet figure can attain on his own. Yet, as with all ascetic performances of intense discipline, these ascetic poet figures only have so much control over the visions their regimens induce. These Romantic poets avail themselves of ascetic tropes in order to build up an indestructible critique of the circumscribing forces of modernity, but in this highly intentional process, the poet figures tip the ascetic scale from discipline to ecstasy. The disciplinary rule that sets itself up as the way of righteous reading and living for the English public inevitably invites the spiritual power upon which the ascetic's demonstrated power is dependent, the power that humbles the ascetic

by reminding him what will he truly serves. In the process of subjugating their real bodies so that their glorified poetic bodies may live, these poets incite an ecstatic experience that lets in figures of spirit they do not intend.

The Romantic air is thick with ghostly figures—figures of life-in-death—that compel the poets to consider what lies beyond their human consciousness. In my readings of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, I argue that the most aesthetically powerful and memorable spectres in their poems are specifically female phantoms. These phantasms of the feminine appear suddenly, surprising the poet figure and the reader from meditations on the ascetic precepts of Romantic verse. In Wordsworth's poetry, after repeated praise to the power of nature that the poet will ultimately try to contain by the force of his own genius, the female figures of Wordsworth's sister Dorothy and the ambiguous Lucy crop up as if from nature itself as a reminder of an uncontainable eternal force. In Shelley's long narrative poem *Alastor*, the poet figure wanders all over the globe, but is surprised by the apparition of a "veiled maid" who forces the poet figure to confront the tragic lack of sympathy in his ascetic practice. In Keats's odes and in *The Fall of Hyperion*, goddess figures are always lurking in the temples of imagination that Keats's poetry builds, and these women assist the Keatsian poet figure in his self-sacrifice. These phantom figures are all the ecstatic effects of Romantic ascetic poetry once it reaches its disciplinary limits. Where the speakers of ascetic verse begin to flounder in their rites, other forces emerge to keep the poetry from sliding into a self-interest that makes the ascetic poet tyrant over his flock. Ghostly spirits appear to prevent or rebuke the poet figures' reactionary lapses.

My second chapter, "Holy Hinterlands: Wordsworth's Rural Sacred Ground as Critique of the Modern," explores what kind of aesthetic project is built on the holy

ground of the English countryside, the site of *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth's poetics, as he describes it in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, is invested in the language of real men, which he sees as the purest form of discourse because it is developed in such close proximity to nature. For Wordsworth, more explicitly than for the other major Romantic poets, nature is the source of a spiritual power that can reclaim the best parts of human nature and burn away the chaff of modern political constraints on spiritual health. I read "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" and Book XII of *The Prelude* for Wordsworthian verse that is patterned on monastic time and liturgy. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's sense of monastic form-of-life as a kind of natural poetry and way of ordering human life, and a way of opposing secular forms of time (as in factories, barracks, and schools), I contend that the lyrical ballad operates by the same recuperative, organic rhythm in which Agamben finds such critical potential.

Wordsworth's practice is dedicated to the tropes of ascetic performance and writing and ministers to readers through this anti-modern rhythm, hopes to persuade his readers to take up his conservationist religion. The simplicity and consistency of his arguments for nature's power to cure the ails of industrialism and speculative capital represent his discipline—his intense meditation on what is, for him, righteous living. In *Essays on Epitaphs*, though, this discipline cracks under the force of the poet figure's hubris, for nature, wherein the true power of poetry resides, is jettisoned in favor of a symbol for human control: the grave-marker. This move of Wordsworth's ascetic performance marks the point at which he loses his intercessory powers, his role as the mouthpiece of a divine spirit in nature. He tries too hard to contain poetry, and points us to his own failure. As he falls, though, a figure rises to redeem his practice: Lucy. The

Lucy cycle from *Lyrical Ballads* concisely enacts the tremendous struggle the poet figure faces in holding together an organic community under threat from alienating modern life. Lucy is the figure for the violence that modern socio-economic boundaries unleash on women, who are still essential to the Wordsworthian poet figure's own life. Under the strain of the ascetic poet figure's battle with the demons of modernity, he falls into the trap of this violence, repeatedly rehearsing Lucy's death. This chapter makes inquiry into what Lucy's death—and resurrection—mean for an ascetic poetry that is always drawing attention to its own failure of discipline. I argue that the Wordsworthian poet figure's invocation of Lucy is the accidental provision that all of Wordsworth's poetry makes to protect itself from a dogmatic, reactionary lapse. For, despite the poetry of his later years, including his sonnets in support of the death penalty and his ecclesiastic sonnets that uphold the institution of the Anglican Church, Wordsworth's conservatism cannot overshadow the brilliance of his best, earlier poetry because those poems invite Lucy to run wild. In invoking Lucy, the poems retain a wild anti-culturalism that gives them resonance long after Wordsworth's historical moment.

In my third chapter, "Shelley's Sympathetic Apostasy: *Alastor* and Ascetic Wandering," I read the revisions Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetry makes to Wordsworth's ascetic program. The Shelleyan poet figure wanders far beyond the fold of the English landscape, into symbolic wildernesses that serve as a much more radical critique of the English public sphere. I take up some of the more famous criticism's of Shelley as abstract to the point of being ineffectual—Matthew Arnold and T.E. Hulme—to reflect on the poetic-spiritual value that abstraction has for Shelley, whose ascetic vision of the end times is dramatically different from Wordsworth's ascetic message. Through

readings of Shelley's Romantic manifesto, *A Defense of Poetry*, and his long narrative poem, *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*, this chapter explores the ways in which Shelley's poet figure rejects not only the social milieu, but also the Wordsworthian poetry that dwells too close to that milieu.

Shelley's rejection of the English political and literary spheres is much more traditionally ascetic, but the harsher symbolic landscape for his poetry results in a loss of sympathetic ground. Shelley's ascetic verse ultimately runs contrary to the ethical imperative of ascetic practice, which is to provide a model of holy poetry for the social body. Shelley invokes Wordsworth as a vehicle for sympathetic connection to English literary history, and this attachment allows him to carry his verse into the visionary landscape of a world reborn from the ashes of political violence. Shelley imagines Wordsworth as striving in vain to hold together the rubble of a failing socio-political system, and Shelley's own verse flees this fallen world to an uncharted, undeveloped territory. Shelley's symbolic wandering carries his poetry into the idealized landscapes of a world rebalanced, both politically and ecologically, that are impossible under the rule of Wordsworth's comparatively realist poetry. The virtue of ascetic poetry for Shelley is in the sympathetic bond to a poetic order, which allows him to carry his own chapters of the Book of Romanticism into far more dangerous aesthetic territory. Because he acknowledges the authority of Wordsworth's rule, Shelley legitimizes his own denunciation of Wordsworth, and creates the conditions by which his verse cannot be ignored as part of a common ascetic project.

My fourth chapter, "Keats's 'monkish cell': Monastic Rebellion and the Personal Sacred," considers Keats's peculiar position as the cloistered monk. I argue that within

the order of Romantic ascetic verse, Keats is the chastened novitiate who is not yet fit to wander on his own in the wilderness. Keats's critical reception and socio-economic position make him, in his own estimation and often in the opinions of his contemporaries, subordinate to Romantic poets with more gravitas, just as the monk is subordinate to the wandering hermit. The poetic spaces that Keats's verse constructs are all manmade, enclosed, and domestic in a way that Wordsworth's open landscapes and Shelley's visionary tracts rarely are. Though Keats's sense of himself as the cloistered cenobite is in keeping with his anxieties about his inferior class position relative to the other Romantics, his station in the monastery uniquely fits him to influence culture in a way that the other poets cannot claim for all their freedom to wander. This chapter draws on Gavin Flood's arguments that ascetic performance, even when it is withdrawn or cloistered, is never private; asceticism is always visible because it is part of a communal tradition. The monks who dwell in the monastery, therefore, often close to where the order ministers to the people, are in a better position to revise the sacred texts, to make changes to the Book, to transform culture.

Keats writes in a letter to Shelley, "My Imagination is a Monastry and I am its Monk," a declaration which reveals the extent to which he conceives of his own work as ascetic, regardless of how undisciplined his verse might appear to readers. The protected, indoor site of Keats's ascetic practice and his frustrations over his socio-economic realities overdetermine his poetic life combine to produce a body of poetry that is preoccupied with material objects and reliquaries, as well as with temples and sanctuaries built of his own imagination. In focusing with such intensity and with such discipline on the abundance of objects that transcend Keats's own economic position (the Elgin

Marbles, a lock of Milton's hair, the Grecian urn, etc.), Keats builds up an ascetic criticism of the power that English culture invests in these relics. Yet Keats is invested in constructing some solid ground on which he can stand, and the temples in "Ode to Psyche," "Ode on Melancholy" and *The Fall of Hyperion* are images that conform to rampant cultural materialism, but house figures who can undo that black spell. As Wordsworth invokes Lucy, and Shelley conjures the veiled maid, both phantom figures that overwhelm the poet figure and his texts, so Keats builds fanes to the goddess figures who catalyze his own self-immolation.

Romantic asceticism describes a poetics in which the intense spiritual commitment and discipline of the poet figures leads to verse that can restore to humanity the sense of its immortal glory. These three important Romantic poets adapt the structure of asceticism—emphasize different elements of ascetic performance—to produce very different kinds of socio-political critiques that all, nonetheless, do battle with the same evil: the emergence of political economy in the process of nineteenth-century modernization. This study examines the sacred tropes by which this critique is built, and seeks to prove that, in the process of building up this poetic discipline, Romantic poetry is transfigured into something that outlives the failure of art to hold back the sea of the modern.

CHAPTER II

HOLY HINTERLANDS: WORDSWORTH'S RURAL SACRED GROUND AS CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN

> How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heartstrings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times? – W.B. Yeats

This question that Yeats asks in "The Symbolism of Poetry" is one of the passages in which his deeply Romantic strain of thinking is legible. How, he asks, can art work against the "progress of the world" and restore life to the hearts of men, without resorting to religious methods? Fifty years after Wordsworth's death, Yeats's 1900 essay concisely recalls the underlying question of Wordsworth's prolific body of poetry and prose. Across his work, Wordsworth employs the tropes of ascetic practice; he uses the devices of scripture and written saints' lives to dispense a poetry that seeks for its structural support something much more solid and lasting than the emergent nineteenth-century culture of speculative economy and dissociated interpersonal relationships.

This chapter is an exploration of how Wordsworth calls on a model of ascetic performance to rescue his people, his fellow Englishmen, from the dark sublime of modernity and offer some recourse for a revival of communal sympathy and fellowship. I read, across very different forms of Wordsworth's written offerings, a lifelong and broadly imagined poetic project that relies on the common denominator of rural England as the holy ground for a poetry that can resist the modern. From *Lyrical Ballads*, in the

early stages of his career, to *The Prelude*, which was a work-in-progress up until Wordsworth's death at 80, to prose from the middle of his career, this chapter moves through readings of Wordsworth's writing to discover what makes the particular landscape of the English countryside so essential to his poetics. In the hinterland zones, caught somewhere between the old magic of primitive England and the machinery of the modern English state, the Wordsworthian poet performs poetic rites that sanctify the literary spirit of his country, and calls forth the shadowy spiritual powers that ensure an immanent critique of modern progress that survives long after the poet figure's mortal death.

Wordsworth, whose verse inaugurates Romantic poetic practice, is on the surface much less austere in his verse landscapes and in his poetic enactment of ascetic rites than the subsequent poets considered in this study. Though his example, I argue, lays the foundation for poetic accountability to a communal tradition, the different geographical and aesthetic contours of that community in Wordsworth suggest that his holy ground is domestic, while poets of the later generation adapt Wordsworth's vision of poetry's mission to exotic and cosmopolitan themes and locales. The ascetic figure can occupy a number of symbolic positions, but Wordsworth is most closely aligned with the priestly function wherein the ascetic's exemplary devotion is meant as a model for the community he serves. In this iteration of ascetic performance, the hermit's wandering brings him closer to the flock, though he is still set apart from them in terms of his sacred vocation. Given the priest's need to be near his people, the better to minister to their needs, Wordsworth's poetic speakers are often to be found in the border spaces between the wild forests and fells of an England as yet untouched by modernization, and the rural

towns and villages that are being drawn into an increasingly standardized national infrastructure.

The Wordsworthian ascetic poet figure does sometimes wander far from the rural fold of "real men," but these sojourns often take place in poems that constitute important exceptions to Wordsworth's general practice, and ones that were unknown to the second-generation Romantics who took up the mantle of ascetic poetics. Wordsworth's predominant aesthetic is staged in the hinterlands of the English countryside, which is the terrain of *Lyrical Ballads* and the site on which the foundational Romantic critique of modernization is played out. Wordsworth's self-proclaimed poetic vocation is to protect the purity and simplicity of rural life from the myriad plagues of excessive culture. He writes in the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that the new poetry he proposes, modeled on the "essential passions of the heart" found in "[l]ow and rustic life…is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who…separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation" (597).

In his poetry and his prose, Wordsworth expresses again and again his anxiety over this split between the rural English "people" on the one hand, and the over-civilized, urban English "public," on the other. In 1808 Wordsworth writes to his lifelong friend and patron Sir George Beaumont, "[t]he people would love the poem of Peter Bell, but the public (a very different being) will never love it" (194). For Wordsworth, the disastrous trends in English culture ruin the people of England beyond recognition into "a very different being." The public, driven by "fickle tastes" and "fickle appetites" are in

desperate need of sanctification through pure, natural poetry. This distinction, so essential to his work, is the constant premise of all ascetic performance: the pure self, stripped of affectation of all kinds, will be able to receive the holy word. Beyond this denunciation of the present state of English culture, Wordsworth takes another step typical to ascetic performance by charging "Poets" with indulging the public and creating the demand for their noxious poetic wares. Wordsworth's denunciation of the "public" as desensitized to the truly virtuous, natural way of English life is a staple in his writing because it is through this repudiation that his own better discursive program becomes necessary. For, though it is the people who suffer in becoming the public, it is ultimately the calling of Poets to influence and improve cultural tastes. Nietzsche similarly explores the ascetic's tactic of pathologizing the flock in order to exalt his own position:

> We must regard the ascetic priest as the predestined saviour, shepherd, and advocate of the sick herd: only then do we begin to understand his tremendous historical mission. The *dominion of the suffering* is his realm, his instinct points him in that direction, there he finds his most authentic art, his mastery, his kind of good fortune. He must himself be sick, he must be fundamentally related to the sick and underprivileged in order to understand them…but he must also be strong… (104)

For Wordsworth, the people most subject to suffering are those who live the more authentic, local lives, attached to the land and resisting speculation in the course of their traditional vocations. Their way of life, and all the spiritual value of it, is under attack. Through the use of ascetic tropes, Wordsworth manages to construct himself as the poet figure in whom the distance between what the English people are and what they should

be is symbolically eliminated. In the process of exercising intense discipline over his poetry in order to recommend to the public a course of spiritual healing from sickly tastes and vulgar political trends, the Wordsworthian poet figure charts an ascetic map between the hinterlands and the public sphere, and the life and death that lurk respectively in either province.

Wordsworth acknowledges that the sickly tastes of the English reading public are the result of "a multitude of causes unknown to former times" (599), that there are extenuating circumstances that create a generation of readers and citizens with appetites for sensation. Romantic scholarship often addresses the intense collective response to the political upheaval in England and on the European continent following the French Revolution and its violent fallout. Romantic poetry represents a world in turmoil where the generative, ideal potentials for human civilization and their tyrannical, destructive opposites are both possible. Indeed, the play between revolutionary promise and reactionary repression forms a large part of the historical narrative of this period in English literature. Critics have more recently considered this pendular effect in terms of how these broad changes to the political landscape are bound up with the developing technology of modernity that allows for more people to be aware of global conflicts and, thereby, to take an active, public interest in the stakes of these global movements for local English lives.[10]

[10] Thomas Pfau (*Wordsworth's Profession*) describes the crisis for Romantic creative production as a result of the new functions of the English state that turn the solid ground of a premodern English cultural imaginary into the shifting sand of dispossession and speculative economy. For Pfau, Wordsworth's poetic project is in service of conserving a Mary Favret, too, takes up the problem of virtual experiences of patriotism, explaining that emergent print culture allows for the spread of information: "Home and hearth are invaded by strange worlds and other times and the poet is pressed to prophecy" (*War at a*

Historicist critics describe the monolithic terror of encroaching modernity during the intensification of industrialization and standardization at the turn of the nineteenth century, giving readers of Romantic poetry a sense of how deeply shocking, how traumatic, some of the effects of burgeoning globalization would have been. In David Simpson's argument, the "multitude of causes unknown to former times" is evident in Wordsworth's verse as both a nebulous threat to culture and a particular threat to the lives of individual Englishmen, whose way of being is under attack. Simpson argues,

> …that the ghost-ridden dark and twilight zones of Wordsworth's poetry not only embody a metaphysical intuition about the death-directedness of all life…but that they also and most profoundly explore the processes and consequences of modernization experienced at one of its most critical transitions. These processes impose figures of death on Wordsworth's life; they are critical to the formation of his sense of hauntedness. (4)

Where Simpson ultimately finds in Wordsworth's work a principle of social concern, represented by deeply felt loss, as the best possible ethical recourse to such tremendous socio-economic flux, this compelling reworking of Romantic sympathy does not fully explain how Wordsworth manages to construct such a consistent and cohesive body of work when the anxiety over rapid change is such a palpable force in his poetry. I argue that Romantic sympathy, for Wordsworth, must be invested in a social structure that is strong enough to resist the drive of the modern to develop on the sites of demolished English traditions. This chapter examines the ways in which Wordsworth's poetry

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Distance 4). In both these studies, the anxiety of the English subject becomes more palpable as the conditions of their lives become more virtual.

dovetails with ascetic rites in order to carve a lasting space for his verse in a sacred English literary history.

The lyrical ballad is the form of Romantic verse that most resists the modern and the form most closely related to the spoken liturgy of monastic practice, being easily memorized and conducive to recitation. These are poems that rely on the gothic and the rustic to revive a dying tradition of folk verse; these poems attach to the old ways as a poetic-spiritual defense against the new cultural regime. This practice of offering ancient and sacred forms of communal expression, as a boon to a shaky social milieu, is consistent with an asceticism that resists social and political shifts in the secular sphere. The ascetic always rejects the mainstream in favor of spaces protected from the corrupting influence of civil development. The ascetic figure's performance enacts this rejection in a number of different ways and to different degrees; but, as Giorgio Agamben explains, ascetic resistance to the modern happens first at the most basic level of the rhythm of daily life and spiritual practice. Agamben explains how monastic ideals oppose secularized notions of time, showing some of the potential verse might have for recuperating organic life from the clutches of industrialization. He writes,

> We are accustomed to associate the chronometric scansion of human time with modernity and the division of labor in the factory. Foucault has shown that at the threshold of the industrial revolution, the disciplinary apparatuses (schools, barracks, colleges, the first real factories) had begun to divide periods of time into successive or parallel segments…Although Foucault mentions monastic precedents, it is rarely noted that almost fifteen centuries earlier, monasticism had realized, in its cenoby, for

> exclusively moral and religious ends, a temporal scansion in the existence of the monks. The rigor of this scansion not only had no precedents in the classical world, but in its strict absoluteness it has perhaps never been equaled in any institution of modernity… (19)

Here we see that the regimen that an English government, heavily invested in modernization, imposes on daily life is the pale shadow of a practice that offers the same stability through organic means. There is a certain poetic rhythm to monastic life that offers balance and discipline, but without killing the life force from which that rhythm arises. Agamben goes on to explain, "The Offices of prayer and psalmody were…ordered as a 'clock' that marks the rhythm of the prayers for daybreak…the daylight hours…evening…and midnight" (ibid.). Agamben makes a superlative claim for the uniqueness of the monastic practice of "horologium ('clock')…the name that designates the book that contains the order of the canonical Offices according to the hours of the day and night" (ibid.). Taking as my starting point Agamben's claim that a nourishing discipline is derived from the natural order of life, I suggest that, through a practice similar to the monastic form-of-life, Wordsworth's poetry—with its constant attention not only to fashioning meter to the real language of men, but also to the influence of circadian rhythm on human emotions—occupies a pivotal position in the history of poetic resistance to modernization. For Wordsworth, poetry has this power of temporal scansion and functions as his liturgy. His poetry is his unceasing prayer, his life defined by the rhythmic record of spiritual pursuit.

The parceling of time and space under the systems of a new industrial era are paramount concerns for Wordsworth, and the disastrous consequences of political

economy are everywhere in his poetry. “Michael,” for example, is a clear indictment of the modern industry that results in the dispossession of a local farmer and, relatedly, the failure of a sympathetic connection with his son. In “Resolution and Independence,” the Wordsworthian poet figure encounters the leech-gatherer, a man “old and poor,” driven to vagrancy and scavenging since he is of no more use in the socio-political machine. It is crucial that these critiques are rendered as a lyrical ballads, for the ballad is the poetic form that has the most in common with the temporal scansion and the simple, organic practice of daily life in which Agamben sees such subversive potential.

Nowhere in Wordsworth is the problem of identification with an increasingly modernized landscape more vividly registered than in the first stanza of “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey.” The speaker’s situation “Here, under this dark sycamore” (10) affords a prospect of,

> …these steep and lofty cliffs,
> Which on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of a more deep seclusion; and connect
> The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (5-8)

The “steep and lofty cliffs” that punctuate a “wild secluded scene” with a sense of sober solitude (“deep seclusion”) form an image that more properly belongs to the kind of anchoritic verse of the Arab Dream, in which the poet figure wanders in a more traditional, desert wilderness. The priority of peaks and wildness in the poem’s setting, therefore, makes an odd beginning, marking “Tintern Abbey” from the start as having something in common with the tropes of sacred writing. This poem’s lofty premise is compatible with, for example, the requirement in Mosaic narratives of the mountain-side

encounter that ultimately prompts social change. These lines are peppered with terms that convey an ascetic sobriety that points toward a higher plane of consciousness: "lofty," "impress," and "deep seclusion" all suggest the weightiness of the poet's apprehension, moving toward a softening intermingling, or transcendent peace, with the "quiet of the sky." Though the first stanza encompasses a panoramic vista, the use of "Here" in line 10, tonally disrupts the demonstrative case of this vision, ambiguously positioning the Wordsworthian speaker (and, as we later find out, his sister) under a tree of uncertain location before turning the poem's eye to the cultivated and domestic elements of this scene. The poet figure effectively sets himself up between the "wild secluded scene" and the cultivated pockets of the landscape that, under the poet's gaze, transform into a "prettyish kind of little wilderness."[11]

> The day is come when I again repose
> Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
> These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
> Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
> Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
> Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
> The wild green landscape. Once again I see
> These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
> Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms

[11] Lady Catherine uses this phrase in *Pride and Prejudice* to describe a garden enclosure on the Bennet estate, and "wilderness" is here symbolic of the relatively unrefined social position of the Bennet family and, as such, their unfitness to be linked with British peerage. In "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth uses a similar device, but with a positive aesthetic value.

Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone. (9-23)

Much critical interest has focused on the transmutation of the rural community into the "wild green landscape" and the ways in which enclosure cannot withstand the untamable power of organic nature in this stanza. The woods and copses "loses themselves," and the "hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows" turn to "little lines / Of sportive wood run wild." But the means by which this conversion is managed by Wordsworth's speaker merits discussion here for the speaker's subtle performance of asceticism. Having placed himself in the poetic spot best suited to intercession between the power of nature and the order of human dwellings, the speaker's culmination of his reflections in this stanza attach to "wreathes of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees…" The choice of "wreathes" suggests already some traditional valence that does not accord with a realist reading of this smoke as the output of charcoal factories on the banks of the Wye, and the passive "Sent up, in silence" conveys the anonymous intentionality of an offering. The smoke more closely resembles, in the symbolic order of "Tintern Abbey," the breath of a censer, rising from a sacred ceremony. The conditional metaphor of the hermit's fire, when combined with the sacramental bent of "wreathes of smoke," further marks this smoke as the ephemeral trace of an ascetic figure, who claims this space as a wilderness suited to his secluded spiritual practice. The hermit and the speaker of the poem, I argue,

are combined into the ascetic poet figure whose poetic sight connects the divergent points of view represented in the poem.

The work that this stanza performs, or what one might describe as the discipline that these lines enact, is remarkable if we read this moment as foundational not simply for the argument of the poem, but for the rule of Wordsworth's poetic practice. There is a ritual of spatial unification at work in these lines, but they also aspire to a temporal harmony that maps onto the march of national progress and to the Wordsworthian poet figure's advancement through his own life. To this point, the poet figure of "Tintern Abbey" seamlessly maps onto his own experience an organic uncontainability of the English landscape, even in the face of the literal threat of enclosure to this half-wildness and the figural threat of enclosure to the poetic consciousness. If conflict is resolved into the beautiful verse of the first stanza by the pivotal appearance of the woodland hermit (the ascetic figure), the poet figure's recollections take a telling antistophic turn toward the city as the counter-point to the poem's high argument.

The speaker, in the poem's own present moment, surveys the restorative scene in which the wild elements of the English countryside blend with rural human dwellings, but the second stanza emphasizes the devotional power that even the memory of this scene exerts when the poet is under urban duress:

> These beauteous forms,
> Through a long absence, have not been to me
> As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
> But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
> Of towns and cities, I have owed to them

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:--feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered, acts
Of kindness and of love… (23-35)

This passage reads like a priest's exhortation to his congregation to meditate on scripture throughout the work-week, so that the flock might be a model of love and kindness to those who have strayed. In this passage, the English landscape assumes the form of scripture and becomes the holy text whereby Romantic disciples can recall their own better nature in the midst of worldly tribulations. To "these beauteous forms" the speaker owes "no slight or trivial influence" on his best self, which is capable of performing acts "of kindness and of love" with no thought of credit ("unremembered" and "nameless"). Yet, for the forms of nature to have this influence, there is a deeply ascetic process that the speaker must undergo, in which he "[feels] in the blood, and [feels] along the heart" the rhythm of the Wye and its surrounding scene. As with ascetic scourges of the body, the speaker here takes his meditation on the verse that represents nature to his mind's eye so seriously that he feels his own body to be transformed until the spirit of nature "[passes] even into [his] purer mind." Utter concentration results in a corporeal sensation that precipitates the speaker into a recognizable state of Romantic "transcendence." This

is one instance of ecstatic experience, and this ecstasy is possible through precisely the kind of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" that Wordsworth's prose and poetry extol throughout his oeuvre. In the space of Wordsworth's poetry, specifically his balladic poetry, the word becomes the mediating force between the pure good of nature and the downtrodden human soul. The poetry becomes, as Agamben theorizes, both the enactment and the record of an organic spiritual practice that the poet figure can control through determined reflection.

The speaker goes on in this vein, saying that beyond the capacity for kindness and love he owes to beauteous natural forms "another gift, / Of aspect more sublime":

> ...that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world,
> Is lightened:--that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,--
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul… (37-46)

Here again, the "affections lead us gently on," for there is always a kernel of sympathy in Wordsworth's articulations of the workings of the Romantic spirit, but in this second half of the stanza, the speaker more forcibly impresses the necessity of subjugating the body, of "suspend[ing]" "the motion of our human blood" in order to "become a living soul."

The entire stanza is steeped in ascetic tropes that degrade the body in favor of a higher plane of simply being, but also, crucially, in favor of being better attuned to "affections" and right relationships among a human community. Romantic sympathy, then, is a constituent element of a much larger structure of sacred communal feeling. To feel sympathy with the people is the beginning of an entire rule of Romantic pursuit of a glorified community. Through the affections, through sympathy, as represented and encouraged by ascetic poetry, "we see into the life of things" (49) as the Wordsworthian poet does: not the isolated glimmers of healthy relationships, but the divine form that binds the people together.

In sight of the scene that allows for sacred wildness to creep back into a secularly ordered world, the Wordsworthian speaker is transformed into the ascetic poet figure who can likewise hold in equilibrium English life as it is and as it should be. "Tintern Abbey" is one of the strongest examples in Wordsworth's verse of a holy homeland aesthetic, in which the terrain familiar to him since his boyhood is both the source of comfort and consolation and the site that must be defended so that it may go on being a boon to weary Englishmen with pure hearts. The intense Englishness of the poem is the starker given that the poem declares itself as, in some way, a reflection on the French political landscape, being marked in the headnote as composed "On revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798," on Bastille Day. We see in "Tintern Abbey," inarguably one of the greatest efforts of Wordsworth's long career, that the commitment to the English landscape is a priority even at a moment that might call another, less devoutly English poet to cosmopolitan reflections. Wordsworth's rule of ascetic poetry is driven by concern for his flock, and the dangers afoot in other national zones are sources

of disquiet primarily because they may encroach on the provincial parish of his Romantic England. The headnote to "Tintern Abbey" designates the poem as a register of some geopolitical sensibility on the part of the Wordsworthian poet figure, but the concentration with which he meditates on the English countryside is an example of discipline that always returns his care to local life.

The provincial character of Wordsworth's visible poetry takes on strange dimensions when read in accordance with the hidden map of Wordsworth's poetic life, *The Prelude*, in which the Wordsworthian poet figure looms largest, for the country churchyards and rural tracts of his other work gain a cohesive, visionary tenor in the context of his thirteen-book epic of the poetic mind. In Book XII of the 1805 text of *The Prelude*, the Wordsworthian poet figure lets fall the backdrop of the public road into the psychomachian drama of the poet's responses to England's political character, present and past. Book XII turns from reflections of the poet figure's discontent with English national politics, with the reactionary conservatism that followed the disastrous burnout of the French Revolution, later to a vision of the druidical and mystical past of ancient England. The road has a strangely intercessional function, as we shall see, and its appearance at this juncture shows the middle ground, between unalienated labor and civilly engineered zones of progress, to be the country space in which the development of modern infrastructure is most visible through stark contrast. The road is the figure for ascetic practice in this book, which is metonymically representative of the broad range of personal and political anxieties *The Prelude* depicts. But to see the important figural work that the road performs, we must read Book XII with an eye for its political and spiritual premises.

The book follows the English historical pendulum as it swings from an overly civil political present in which individual souls are deadened to one another, to a political-spiritual past that carries the trace of barbarism. Between these two poles—the ancient and the modern—the poet is given to intrusive images of the rural. The shifting border spaces of the countryside anchor his feelings, which spasmodically range from bitter disappointment to romantic conviction. The public road forms a border between the modernizing force of the English present and the brutal druidical past. The road represents a hallowed ground where the poet figure can revive the holy magic of old, but under the aegis of a modern civic ethics.

The frustrated speaker and poet figure of *The Prelude* in Book XII (in the 1805 text, a continuation of Wordsworth's treatise on "Imagination, How Impaired and Restored," and, in the 1850 version, on "Imagination and *Taste*, How Impaired and Restored") attempts, as with "Tintern Abbey," to articulate the transfiguration whereby Nature repairs the imagination and brings the mind into contact with its deeper, organic sensibilities. He must list the many qualities of human feeling not contained in the rarefied sensibility that is provoked by imaginative experience. The poet figure says,

> Long time in search of knowledge desperate,
> I was benighted heart and mind, but now
> On all sides day began to reappear,
> And it was proved indeed that not in vain
> I had been taught to reverence a Power
> That is the very quality and shape
> And image of right reason, that matures

Her processes by steady laws, gives birth

To no impatient or fallacious hopes,

No heat of passion or excessive zeal,

No vain conceits, provokes to no quick turns

Of self-applauding intellect… (20-31)

A conceptual sanctification—a separating of the wheat from the chaff in the mind's impulses—is requisite for the poet figure's statement of critical authority. He must enact discipline ("steady laws" and "right reason") to guard against excessive passions. The invocation of Nature's power at the beginning of Book XII, then, serves to legitimize the poet figure's judgment of an English political sphere that transgresses the basic ethical imperative of Wordsworth's Romanticism, for, in indulgence of their sickly appetites, the English reading public is separated from the "Power" that might restore them to the status of an organic, glorified community.

There is a liturgical pattern to this Book, as there is in so much Romantic verse, of asking for favor from some transcendent principle and denouncing those agents which deter from holy pursuits, and then of setting forth some model for how to move beyond the realm of temptation and evil into the green pastures of spiritual quietude. The Anglican confession of sins, for example, has these movements: praise to God, a list of ways in which the sinner has grieved God, and a prayer that the purified sinner will now move through the world with right intentions. The language in which Wordsworth's ethical imperative is given also bears a striking resemblance to scripture (the foundation of all liturgy):

To seek in Man, and in the frame of life,

Social and individual, what there is
Desirable, affecting, good or fair,
Of kindred permanence, the gifts divine
And universal, the pervading grace
That hath been, is, and shall be… (39-44)

The echo of Paul's epistle to the Philippians (4:8) is resounding here, as is the Alpha and Omega tone of line 43. Such holy language is not uncommon in Wordsworth, but its deployment here is crucial, just before the poet figure chastises the statesmen of recent geopolitical conflicts and domestic planning, for giving more care to the increase of their power than to socio-economic plans for ensuring the health of the nation's citizens.

With settling judgments now of what would last
And what would disappear; prepared to find
Ambition, folly, madness in the men
Who thrust themselves upon this passive world
As Rulers of the world, to see in these,
Even when the public welfare is their aim,
Plans without thought, or bottomed on false thought
And false philosophy; having brought to test
Of solid life and true result the Books
Of modern Statists, and thereby perceived
The utter hollowness of what we name
The wealth of Nations, where alone that wealth
Is lodged, and how encreased… (69-81)

The avant-garde anti-capitalism of this rebuke, though familiar and consistent with Wordsworth's earlier poetry in general,[12] is noteworthy in the context of the progression of Book XII. The poet figure rhetorically demonstrates his spiritual power and his license to attempt a public sphere exorcism before giving priority in this poetic purgation to the burgeoning individual-centric free market national economy. This economic model, generated by attention to abstraction and not to English lives in practice, is the original sin in a progressive fall toward isolating consumerism.[13] The "Books [of] modern Statists"—Adam Smith clearly uppermost in Wordsworth's mind—are the foundation upon which an abuse of power is built. Public policy is carried out to "utter hollowness": the idolatrous worship of capital over a political discourse that accounts for the real lives of men. The most distinctive tenet of the poet figure's characterization of the scene of a corrupt policy-making arena, though, is that the public body over whom these "Rulers," in whom the poet figure long-sufferingly expects to find "[a]mbition, folly, madness," exert their will on a *passive* world.

The pairing of "passive" with "world," which is here a nebulous placeholder for the more specific description the poet figure gives later in this stanza of the material conditions which impede the "dignity of individual Man," makes clear the outcome of this thought experiment before it is carried through to its end. The world is passive, and the majority of the national subjects whose very lives are made different by the folly of these mad, ambitious rulers, have no influence in the public sphere. Wordsworth's

[12] See Nicholas Roe for an Wordsworth and Coleridge's radicalism in their early years, also Marilyn Butler's *Romantic, Rebels, and Reactionaries*.

[13] See David Simpson's *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern* for a detailed account of the alienating effects of the commodity form on community.

"passive world" construction runs counter to critical accounts of the democratic discursive potential that rises in tandem with the new Romantic era print culture,[14] and, again, this is consistent with the Nietzschean pathological ascetic, this lack of faith in the people's ability to overleap their conditions to infiltrate the public sphere is a condition for his own poetic profession. The tonal subordination of the "world"—of the "people"—reads, in one sense, as a stubborn subterranean snobbery on the part of a poet of gentrification. But Wordsworth's canny recognition of the already insurmountable barriers imposed by modernity to an egalitarian public sphere goes some way toward proving the uses of the ascetic structure of Romantic poetry in making redress for the crisis of uneven national development. Wordsworth's characterization of the world, the public sphere, as passive seems to run counter to a poetic agenda of raising up the common people to be heard in the national political arena. The speaker does here, as Wordsworthian speakers often do, represent the people as feeble and in need of a champion, in keeping with Nietzsche's sense of the ascetic as a peddler of the illnesses he alone can cure. But this identification of the people as feeble is hardly self-interested when we consider that the charge of care for the people, upon which asceticism is founded, casts the speaker's calling the world "passive" in a different, holier light.

Later in Book XII, having dispensed with his ritual panegyric on the healing power of nature, the poet figure continues his lament of the abased character of modern national politics in the middle of a strange paean to the public road. He has already in this book made the rhetorical moves that structure a critique of the state—a condemnation of capital (the root of all evil), a proscription of men in power, a rejection of the city ("A

[14] Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public*

heart depressing wilderness indeed…") wherein this tragedy of modern politics is staged. But there is a sudden shift, when the poet figure "turn[s] / To you, ye Pathways and ye lonely Roads" to escape the city that has become for him "a wearisome abode." The public road maps onto the movements of a wandering ascetic, and the poet figure assigns to the road the value of

> …a guide unto eternity,
> At least to things unknown and without bound.
> Even something of the grandeur which invests
> The Mariner who sails the roaring sea
> Through storm and darkness, early in my mind
> Surrounded, too, the Wanderers of the Earth,
> Grandeur as much, and loveliness far more. (151-57)

The road's vanishing point ("its disappearing line") suggests to the poet figure's childhood imagination a portal between the present England of industrial development, which can be traced through the development of the roads system,[15] and a grand past populated with "the Wanderers of the Earth." These "Wanderers" prefigure the druids that appear in a memory (later sequentially in Book XII) of the poet figure's visionary mood while travelling in Salisbury Plain, but here the Wanderers and the Mariner are juxtaposed with "Bedlamites" and "uncouth Vagrants." Why should these figures of lofty literary madness be balanced with figures of mental instability that the poet feared as a boy? The poet figure himself questions the purpose of this arrangement of his scene:

[15] *Roads to Power* and *Romanticism on the Road* both give an account of the public roads, even as the early nineteenth century, as in service of the emergence of the factory in rural English spaces.

…but why

Take note of this? When I began to inquire,

To watch and question those I met, and held

Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads

Were schools to me in which I daily read

With most delight the passions of mankind,

There saw into the depth of human souls… (160-66)

The line break at "inquire" keeps one foot of the passage in the question of structuring which observations are most important to the central thesis of the Book on the whole, and one foot on the act of immediate inquiry (as opposed to critical distance). The tension between "Familiar" and "lonely" in line 163 further contributes to some feeling of being caught, suspended between worlds invisible and visible, known and unknown. One possible reading of this structural epiphany of the poet's, based on the pendent arrangement of these lines, is that the "lonely roads" are more actively conversant with the poet figure than he is with the figures that pass thereon. This is a strange moment—the poet figure of *The Prelude* is at great pains to give a form to Mankind as it is and Mankind as it should be, and the result is that the country byway looms larger than any single character.

In Fredric Jameson's explication of the imperial symbolism of the road in Modernism, the road structures the anxieties of the English living at the imperial center about the exportation of Englishness to peripheral colonies. The figure of the road for Jameson compresses the disparity between the English center and its colonial outposts. He writes,

> Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole…it can never be fully reconstructed; no enlargement of personal experience (in the knowledge of other social classes, for example), no intensity of self-examination (in the form of whatever social guilt), no scientific deductions on the basis of First World data, can ever be enough to include this radical otherness of colonial life…let alone the structural connections between that and this, between absent space and daily life in the metropolis. (51)

The convergence of infinitude in the image of the road for modernist texts is oddly prefigured in this Wordsworthian moment of the public road. In Jameson's reading of *Howard's End*, the road symbolizes the knowable tracks that reinforce a sense of the boundedness of local life as colonial byways occupy more and more geopolitical reality and therefore more and more space in the English imagination. In *The Prelude*, the road is the figure less of the monstrous network of British Imperialism (though that system is certainly anticipated in Wordsworth's poetry) than for the current of Englishness that may yet resist the shackles of institutional nationalism. The road figuratively has more in common with the Giant Albion in Blake's *Jerusalem*, who is both the eternal spirit of man and the land of Albion, than it does with its counterpart in modernist aesthetics. The local, then, symbolized here by the public road and elsewhere in Wordsworth's poetry by the English country more broadly, is the site of a pure Englishness that precedes modern interference and interpolation. In Jameson's reading, the road is a symbolic compression of the anxieties of fully modern life, but Wordsworth's use of the symbol of the road

seeks to preemptively recuperate the road as not the byway to violent geopolitical investments, but the path back toward local magic.

The public road is a Romantic school for Wordsworth because its sublime properties lend an eternal character to the quaint contemporary—wanderers and vagrants are fused into one continuous image of the human, the eternal image of Mankind that defies the logic of socio-political development. This common denominator between Wanderers and Bedlamites, this timeless image of communal wandering, shows that for the poet figure the distance between these two figures is the disciplinary structure of society, under which regime the ailments that the state produces become threats to the state.[16] The poet figure warms to his theme of the evils of political economy that sees the bodies of the people as things to be managed according to a hegemonic agenda, citing the "name of education" as an enemy to real learning:

> …And now convinced at heart
> How little to that which alone we give
> The name of education hath to do
> With real feeling and just sense, how vain
> A correspondence with the talking world
> Proves to the most… (168-173)

[16] Foucault's work in general takes up the problem of discipline as a means of state control over the population. I am here thinking specifically of his arguments in his lectures on governmentality in which discipline serves to create the social milieu, and to eradicate the threatening figure of the individual with his desires that may run contrary to the state's agenda. The ascetic, anti-state discipline of Wordsworth's poetry attempts to manage a fine distinction in the figure of the individual between the possibility of alienation and the possibility of free discourse.

Again the poet figure chooses to identify the people with whom he converses on the public road as the "world," but here it is the "talking world," which changes the inflection of the earlier "passive world" in line 72. The "talking world" is a phrase more aligned with nature—the voices of rivers and mountains and trees—than with descriptions of human utterance. The poet's tone shifts as his imagination travels away from the corrupt city and comes to rest in the comparatively bucolic space of the public road, and the world that was felt to be passive in the face of reckless power now speaks with great influence and forms part of a nourishing correspondence. Social intercourse, in this more organic context, teaches rather than indoctrinates. The passivity of the talking world of real men, then, is the virtue that opposes the inexorable force of institutional, programmatic subject formation.

The public road scene in *The Prelude*, wedged thematically between the nineteenth-century English subject and the ancient Briton, shows the function of rural space in Wordsworth's poetics, which seeks to drive back the demons of modern industry and politics. In a broad national sense, the office the ascetic poet figure performs in the public road breaks down divisions between the nobler self, with its deep connections to the English community, and the diminished political subject whose sympathetic bond to the social body is under attack. The performance of asceticism makes possible the suspension of these differences, for, as Geoffrey Harpham explains, ascetic linguistics, at play in the written acts and speech acts of ascetic figures, discipline the body and the signs that represent that body until those material elements are in complete submission to a divine will. Harpham writes,

> A sign that truly signifies…is like a person who has been cleansed so that the apparent is identical to the real. This is a goal worthy of any discipline, and yet human beings are incapable of true signification; the successful 'performance' of signs can only be God's work. The best we can hope for ourselves is not that we learn to use signs, but that we become signs—and not spoken signs, but durable signs 'written in heaven' in a script which, defying the nature of script itself, is intimate with the divine essence. Signs may be vulnerable to demonic pollution, but the mark of virtue is that we aspire to the condition of signs, aspire to an utter materiality, a totally degraded and therefore perfect dependency on the animating spirit. (10)

In *The Prelude*, the road, as a marker of the development of English industry and commerce, is degraded until it becomes a pure symbol of an expansive and profound British history. The pseudo-natural zone of the road, because it forms a part of Wordsworth's epic of the growth of an English poet's mind, has a specifically national character, and in this moment the machinery of nation building is chastised into a more primitive sign that restores the glory of the natural Englishman.

The function of a sign that is co-opted into the ascetic practice of Wordsworthian poetry is the more complicated, the more subject to uncontrollable play, when we take into account Wordsworth's theory of the material touchstones that govern communal spiritualism in *Essays on Epitaphs*. The Wordsworthian poet figure presides over the rituals of life in the rural English community, acting as the arbiter between the public sphere, where the national readership is concentrated (predominantly in the perverted

cities), and the rustic lives of real people, whose discourse is enriched by proximity to nature. When he writes of graveyards, then, he is stationing his poetry in a curious public domain that is the shared province of English cultural nationalism and sacred communal life. *Essays Upon Epitaphs* demonstrates this overlap between the sacred and the national, for Wordsworth's metaphor for the soul's progress is the advancing sun, which also carries the metaphorical burden of colonial advancement and geopolitical development. Wordsworth writes in the first "Essay,"

> We respect the corporeal frame of Man, not merely because it is the habitation of a rational, but of an immortal Soul…It is a connection formed through the subtle process by which, both in the natural and the moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other. As, in sailing upon the orb of this planet, a voyage towards the regions where the sun sets, conducts gradually to the other quarter where we have been accustomed to behold it come forth at its rising…so the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the country of everlasting life; and in like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit, to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and of tears. (30-31)

To come full circle, clearly enough, brings the soul back to its point of origin, the place of its rising—to, we may assume given Wordsworth's plan for the soul's progress in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," to "God, who is our home" (line 65). The fading glory of the immortal soul for the duration of the body's mortal life is analogous to the mortal life of

human community and culture. This civil history of the human collective is likewise diminished along the lines of the sun's path toward its setting. Western historiographies suggest that civilization and modernity travel west, and that this progress entails the fading of magic in favor of the advancement of scientific and moral rationalism. Going west is, for *the* West, commonly tied to trailblazing a bright future for humanity through increasingly methodical thought and action.

Yet Wordsworth's immortal soul eventually comes back to the place of the sun's rising, which suggests that the soul craves to be unburdened of its cultural baggage, and to return to a purer and simpler mode of living. The "Essays" are consistent on the point that technology and modernization are circumscribing forces on originally transcendent human consciousness. Wordsworth elsewhere writes,

> And the spirit of the answer [to the child's question of whither the immortal soul tends] must have been, though the word might be sea or ocean, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a map, or from the real object in nature—these might have been as the *letter*, but the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably,—a receptacle without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity. (29)

The child's conception of infinity attaches, even at this early juncture in his ideological development, to material forms. The "map" and "the real object" are the tools of comprehension, signifying the distance that has already accrued between "God, who is our home" and the "little plan or chart" of fully socialized human consciousness. In this passage, then, there is a gap between signifier and signified, certainly, but there is a strange tripartite epistemological structure wherein the concept is reduced to the natural

form that best mirrors the idea, and then that form is further circumscribed by the map. If we read this process through the symbolic argument of the Immortality Ode, the linguistic gap that is epitomized in the epitaph is not only the distance between the word and the concept or the social and the immortal individual soul, but also the empirically measurable distance between urban sites of modern corruption and the unwritten wilderness. The necessity of the hinterlands in Wordsworth's poetics becomes clear here, for the natural images[17] so common to Romantic poetry, are the holy spirit that will animate signs once they are properly disciplined. Romantic poetry, by enacting such discipline, aims to return language to this primitive, sacred state.

Wordsworth's imaginary progress is eastward toward a simpler time, when the world was full of magic. But, since his aim is an English national poetry, he requires a common ground between magic and modernity on which to perform sacred poetic office. One of the prime locations of vestigial magic, across cultural and aesthetic traditions, is the graveyard—the burial site of human love and the haunt of beloved spirits. Thus, the churchyard of the rural community is a particularly common site within the holy hinterlands of Wordsworth's ascetic poetry, which always attempts to conjure the natural sacred in spaces that are threatened by the technology of rational nation building. Yet nature is eclipsed by this attention to the grave marker and the written record of mourning

[17] In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, de Man explains that "[t]he image is essentially a kinetic process: it does not dwell in a static state where the two terms could be separated and reunited by analysis; the first term of the simile has no independent existence, poetically speaking, prior to the metaphorical statement" (3). The poetic image originates like a natural entity (in de Man's argument, a flower). This balance between the static word and the living natural object is an ascetic paradox, and Wordsworth's entire practice turns on nature's ability to transmute language into something vital.

thereon inscribed, and Wordsworth's concern here is more explicitly for the English nation, rather than the land of England. Wordsworth goes on in the first "Essay" to write,

> …both in cities and villages, the dead are deposited in close connection with our places of worship, with us the composition of epitaph turns, still more than among the nations of antiquity, upon the most serious and solemn affections of the human mind; upon departed worth—upon personal or social sorrow and admiration—upon religious, individual or social—upon time, and upon eternity. (34)

Certainly we see here the value of the epitaph in constructing a sympathetic community based on shared loss and common principles of morality that generate grief among the bereaved social group, but what this passage begins to evolve is the recombination of the self and the social in the new context of Romantic Era modernization. For Wordsworth this spiritual fight for English culture is most efficiently fought in his own body—that is, the body of his poetic texts, which refract the embattled status of the English landscape. The emphasis here is on the English character of epitaphs in contradistinction to civilizations past, suggesting that the English are special in how keenly they feel "the most serious and solemn affections of the human mind." Yet what Wordsworth's adaptation of the heliocentric trope shows is that this keen feeling is not so much the result of improvement proportionate to advanced civilization so much as a profound demand on the mind to make a holistic inquisition of human concerns that are more easily compartmentalized according to socio-political relevance.

The site of the graveyard, in other words, forces human sympathy to knit together once again threads of moral being that dart in many different directions, toward different

discursive spheres. That "religious, individual, or social" are, in this passage, equivalent moral discourses is in keeping with Wordsworth's insistence on religiosity even where the institution of the church or the political effects of overly conservative, doctrinal judgment hamper an organic spiritual experience. Sacred space manages this polarity; the "religious" mediates the "individual" and the "social." The sacred space of the rural churchyard demonstrates the extent to which the religious serves a structural purpose in Wordsworth's work more broadly. As the figure of the road becomes the purified sign of a cultural restoration for England through ascetic poetry, so the churchyard, too, becomes purified, but to the end of a very different kind of ascetic experience: ecstasy. The cogent theory of the epitaph in Wordsworth's essays represents discipline devoid of underlying spirit, and the stone finally cracks apart, making a space for powers beyond the poet figure's control to enter his poetic domain.

The epitaph is the most concise, most concrete figure in a long chain of figures that work as binding agents for the fraying tapestry of English discourse, but as the figure becomes more fixed, the ascetic poet begins to lose control. Where the scene of the River Wye and the public road are signs that retain some wildness, the manmade quality of the grave-marker and the epitaph, as a figure for human control over the gap between life and death, changes the tone of Wordsworthian ascetic ritual. The epitaph bears the symbolic weight, as I have shown, of political, religious, and moral discourses, and the Wordsworthian poet figure is attracted to the churchyard because of its capacity to synthesize different modes of inquiry that are no longer housed in the same discursive

spheres.[18] The ultimate effect of choosing the epitaph as a figure of cultural stability, though, is to give the power of care for the people wholly to the human poet figure, rather than to a poet figure as a prophet of Nature's power. As Moses, in a moment of failed asceticism, takes credit for providing his people with water from rock in the desert and suffers the displeasure of God for his pride, so the Wordsworthian poet figure, in turning to the power of human creation in the form of the epitaph strikes the rock of the limit of his spiritual power.[19] When Wordsworth begins to take on the authority of combining separate spheres of discourse into the single, neat figure of the epitaph, he demonstrates the ill effects of fiercely holding together, by the power of his own poetic genius, that which no one man can manage. When he turns away from the wild power of nature toward the country churchyard, when the priestly poet figure forgets himself and moves too close to the social sphere, ascetic ritual loses its force.

[18] Recent scholarship on the country churchyard has examined the role that this space plays for Wordsworth's poetry in symbolically uniting an English community undergoing the alienating process of modernization. For Kurt Fosso, for example, death is the touchstone that creates the bonds of sympathy among the living by virtue of common mourning rites, and for Michele Turner Sharp, this space has the power to homogenize the rural and the urban as the confused sites where death and life intermingle. Scott Hess draws on these insights to suggest that, beyond a pervasive English anxiety over loss of sympathy, the epitaph registers the more particular fear of the poet at the loss of immediacy in the poet-reader relationship.

[19] The book of Numbers tells the story of Moses' lapse in submission to God, which results in his being barred from the Promised Land (20: 8-12). Under the pressure of leading his people to good, sustaining land, Moses emphasizes his own ascetic authority over God's power. Wordsworth's turn to the epitaph constitutes a similar lapse and appropriation of power that does not belong to him.

Partha Chatterjee, writing of the discursive fallout of nationalist politics, explains that the emergence of the modern state[20] is attended by a division of discourse into proper sectors. He argues,

> The point, therefore, is no longer one of simply demarcating and identifying the two domains in their separateness, which is what was required in order first to break down the totalizing claims of a nationalist historiography. Now the task is to trace in their mutually conditioned historicities the specific forms that have appeared, on the one hand, in the domain defined by the hegemonic project of nationalist modernity, and on the other, in the numerous fragmented resistances to that normalizing project. (13)

In the Romantic Era, political economy becomes formalized as a discipline that marks individual bodies as discreet entities, the tenets of Enlightenment philosophy make the individual mind into a province separate from and unreadable to other beings, and the threat of being lost in the deluge of the modern crowd (or mob) gains both material and spiritual reality. This partitioning is part and parcel of the project of nation building, a process accelerated by a surge in global warfare.[21]

Chatterjee draws on the remarks of Keshabchandra Sen, a Brahman critic of the postcolonial religious reformation in India, to explain the discursive challenges that religion presents for nationalist projects. Keshab explains to an 1870 English audience

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[20] *The Nation and Its Fragments*, though a study of the late-nineteenth and twentieth century postcolonial Indian state, is theoretically applicable to the British nation-state that is being formalized and institutionalized in new ways in the Romantic Era.

[21] Linda Brigham, "*Alastor*, Apostasy, and the Ecology of Criticism"

that the impasse in postcolonial cultural translation is in European Christianity, which "'appears too muscular and hard…It is not soft enough for the purposes of the human heart…Christian life in England is more materialistic and outward than spiritual and inward…In England there is hardly anything like meditation and solitary contemplation. Englishmen seek their God in society; why do they not, now and then, go up to the heights of the mountains in order to realize the sweetness of solitary communion with God?'" (qtd. in Chatterjee 39). There is an entire argument to be made about what a Victorian Era reading of Romantic ideals did to religious poetic feeling that Romanticism is no longer legible in English culture for Keshab. But the salient point for reading Wordsworth's hybrid border spaces of poetry is Chatterjee's naming an infectious loss of spiritualism in the west that ultimately bleeds into public discourse to the extent of enabling mass political violence.

I address Chatterjee's postcolonial critique of the mythical public sphere at length because this clear-eyed analysis makes visible some of the effects of nation building in the English center. Chatterjee writes, for example, that,

> [o]ur helplessness in understanding processes such as …the inexplicable fluctuations in the authority of particular political leaders seems largely due to the fact that we lack a theoretical language to talk about this domain of popular political discourse…One response involves the reassertion of the universal truth of the pure theory. Thus, claims are being made all over again on behalf of the citizen as a rational individual, transacting public business in accordance with calculations of rational interest and keeping 'culture' tucked away within the confines of private belief. There are

> similar claims about the need to separate politics and ethnicity, politics and religion. (226)

The postcolonial partition between public discourse and private spheres necessarily involves a degradation of either discourse, for anti-spiritual politics is more susceptible to materialism at the same time that anti-rational private belief becomes a marker for the uncivilized. My contention is that Wordsworth, through his complicated exploration of his as yet modernity-resistant borders is modeling a poetic discourse that retains the inward spiritualism that Keshab laments, and which builds from that principle a community that opposes "society" in the modern, secular sense. In his own terms, from his letter to George Beaumont on the subject of the reception of "Peter Bell," Wordsworth is attempting to preserve the "people," as opposed to the "public," a distinction that is a feature of violently split national political identity. His attempts to prevent a schism between secular and sacred discourse, though, are ultimately thwarted by excessive discipline. The turn to the epitaph, where it is meant to generate communal sympathy, in fact falls into the trap of human progress by valuing a manageable figure over the uncontainable forces of nature wherein true power resides.

Chatterjee's study considers the modern nation-state's disavowal of religion as a valid discourse in the public sphere as a disaster in its own rite, and Colin Jager's work on Romanticism and the secular demonstrates some of the implications of such thinking for academic discourse. Jager takes up recent secularization theory in the context of how the modern academy reads Romantic texts with an eye toward incorporating a literary period with some strongly anti-modern content into a still viable model of progressive canonical literary history. Jager lays the groundwork for his argument by glossing the

complexities of secularization theory thus: "We need to distinguish analytically between secularization (the description of a historical process) and secularism (whether understood as a doctrine or as a lived ethic)…the continued influence of the former has tended to obscure the latter as an object of study." Jager's study of secularism's role in Romantic studies addresses some of the field's best known arguments—Abrams, McGann, Levinson—on the question of how critical distance from Romantic writers' historical moment either leads contemporary readers to invest in a commonplace, transhistorical sense of estrangement, or allows them interpretive purchase through alienation. He suggests that materialist and historicist accounts coming out of the late 1970s and early 80s are connected, perhaps unconsciously, to Middle Eastern conflict in the form of the Iranian revolution of 1979, which, according to Jager, "announce[d] to the West, if it had not been paying attention before, that certain of its cherished pieties, such as the separation of religion and politics, were neither universally desired nor (though this was harder to see) constitutive of modernity" (3). Romantic studies, Jager convincingly shows, have an implicit connection to geopolitical turmoil that is rooted in unwillingness on the part of the coercive neoliberal university system to admit the possibility of religious civil discourse. Wordsworth's poetry anticipates this disciplinary fallout and, in consecrating the signs of the road among the other sacred reliquary objects scattered through the poems, marks the English literary tradition as potentially sacred as opposed to imperialist and violent. Wordsworth's poetry, in other words, makes a preemptive critique of the disciplinary boundaries that rule out the sacred as an object of genuine inquiry rather than anthropological interest.

Jager goes on to explain the effect of secularism as a Western historiography that privileges rational morality over spiritualism, in which "thinking becomes *critical* thinking at the moment that it leverages itself out of religion; the intellectual stance is counterposed to the religious stance, simultaneously its critic and its successor" (4). Here Jager's central critique of not simply Abrams's model of secularized spiritualism, but everything that came after that watershed moment in Romantic studies, makes clear the necessity of rethinking this model alongside dispatched traditional religiosity: "Abrams's influential turn to romantic natural supernaturalism as a cure for modern anomie was part of a relatively continuous, trans-disciplinary critique of modernity as soul-destroying and alienating, a critique dedicated to finding ways to repair a damaged culture without resorting to the particularism of religion" (5). The implication of Jager's logic is that to historicize Romantic Era writing requires a critical suspension of value judgments laid at the feet of religion itself in favor of reading the spiritual in Romanticism as still attached, whether wholeheartedly or reluctantly, to formal religion. Jager's argument leads to his compelling claim,

> On the one hand, romanticism will always seem like a continuation of religion by other means—the secular reception and transformation of 'religion' over the past 200 years have guaranteed this. On the other hand, romanticism's restless critical and institutional energies find ways to disrupt its own susceptibility to spiritualization—and in those disruptions one may read a critique of the secularism for which spiritualization is a primary way of containing the religious. (9)

The containment of the religious here needs to be carefully distinguished from the church as a tyrannical institution of human power, as in Wordsworth's letter to the Bishop of Llandaff. The term "religious," insofar as it has the capacity to reference a dangerous orthodoxy, calls to mind the apostatic fall of Wordsworth (as, for example, Shelley sees it in his sonnet to the elder poet) into the service of a corrupt national church. But the religious also houses the unsullied systems of belief that orient whole communities. If Romanticism is containing the religious in the secular, it follows that the poetry is leveraging the conditions of its own creation out of a conversation about poetry's political utility. If the religious is allowed to disappear in favor of a secular version of spirituality, in other words, all feeling is ultimately subject to the rationalism that takes discursive priority over everything else. Romantic aesthetics, in such a case, could not exist at all.

Chatterjee's and Jager's arguments about separate spheres of discourse are important for understanding what happens to Wordsworth's poetry when it stumbles into the chasm between ascetic discipline and state-sanctioned discipline. The effect of this failure of the ascetic poet figure to hold in balance the discourse of the people and the discourse of the public is far-ranging indeed when we consider contemporary political and academic modes of dealing with religion. But the crux of Wordsworth's poetry is that, when the poet figure fails to heal the breach between the sacred and the modern, he conjures a figure of spirit that cannot be bound by disciplinarity.

One of the contemporary implications of Wordsworth's poetic discipline is a recasting of geopolitical discourse in terms of a tragic loss of religious feeling, but the poetry represented here thus far has considered that loss as a widespread crisis for the

English people. The constituent sufferer in this crisis, though, is the modern subject who feels his personal relationships to be under threat from a corrupt socio-political infrastructure that pits us against each other in a competition for success and resources. Judith Butler's post-9/11 disquisition on geopolitical violence and communal mourning takes up the question of how personal loss might help to break new common ground in the global public sphere. She writes,

> Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a 'we,' for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous 'we' of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire…each of us is constituted politically in part by the vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (20)

The common experience of loss as the platform for a generative communal mourning is precisely the hope that Wordsworth attaches to epitaphs, but Butler's call for a change in our responses to violence is predicated on a community that is built from the basic component of the individual relationship with its illegible, unknowable emotions. To have "stuggled to find the conditions for our desire," to experience a relationship of such importance that its loss leads to mourning as though that experience is original, is the

postmodern legacy of Romantic consciousness. The uniqueness of personal attachments, which Butler's contemporary political theory cannot do without, is, I argue, born in the Romantic Movement with the Wordsworthian poet figure's shock at the loss of his loved ones, and especially at the loss of Lucy. His grief at her loss is uncommon, can only be his, but he also loses something by becoming detached from communal mourning, from a community that would grieve as a cohesive body for one of its lost members.

The Romantic aesthetic generally aspires toward the masculine principle of the sublime, and Wordsworth's verse in *The Prelude* demonstrates this bent. *Lyrical Ballads*, though, as the most common of his verse both in the sense of its subject matter and its familiarity among nineteenth-century readers, less often stumbles upon sublimity in that masculine sense than it encounters a distinctly feminine presence, but one no less powerful. The equivalence of gendered aesthetic principles is crucial here, for this is an act of resistance against the subjugation of women under a patriarchal political economy. In "Tintern Abbey," the Wordsworthian poet figure performs a common liturgical pattern in acknowledging the restorative power of nature and suggesting how one might access this power even in moments of spiritual darkness (in the mire of the city), but most of the poem tends toward a contained, individual experience of poetic discipline. Not until line 112 does the speaker of this poem acknowledge that another human creature participates in his spiritual life: "Nor perchance, / If I were not thus taught, should I the more / Suffer my genial spirits to decay: / For thou art with me here upon the banks" (112-15). In these first lines of the final stanza, the speaker accords this friendly figure, his "dear, dear Sister" Dorothy Wordsworth, a spiritual authority. He says to her that if he had not

learned the devotion to nature that keeps his spirit healthy, still he would not be at a loss for peace and comfort because her presence is a reservoir for his better nature.

"Tintern Abbey," I have argued, is one of the best models in Wordsworth of disciplined verse that invokes the influence of nature as a balm against the demons of the modern, but that control is violently interrupted here by the figure of Dorothy as she slides into the frame of the poem. The poet figure's discourse on his spiritual certainty has, to this point, been well ordered and kept within the limits of his own powers to share this wisdom with readers. Dorothy's apparition so late in the poem is at odds with the boon she is to the speaker, and her function in this last movement of "Tintern Abbey" is representative of how female phantom figures in Wordsworth's poetry present challenges to his ascetic poetics that are, I contend, the essential component of his cultural critique. For if, as I argue, the discipline in Wordsworth becomes overwrought once he casts all the symbolic weight of ascetic poetry onto the epitaph, then the appearance of Dorothy here, and her kindred figure Lucy elsewhere in *Lyrical Ballads*, is a provision the Wordsworthian poet figure makes for his own failed discipline.

In this last stanza of this conversational poem that has ode-like components, the address to Dorothy and the synthesis of the poet figure's spiritual lessons are simultaneous; address and synthesis are, in fact, the same effect. Not until Dorothy's apparition can the poet figure glean from all his past experience the spiritual truths he renders with such triumphant confidence. Dorothy's role in the poet figure's ascetic process is not simply to stand by as handmaiden to his genius or to bear vestal witness to his superlative spiritual facility. She is something else, something wild. The poet figure says to Dorothy, "and in thy voice I catch / The language of my former heart, and read /

My former pleasures in the shooting lights / Of thy wild eyes" (117-120). This is one of two references to her "wild eyes" in this stanza, and thus the poet figure emphatically identifies her as something beyond his skills of disciplinary classification. She keeps her wildness, refusing to be contained in the space he has measured for her, and because she does, the poet figure can turn to her to be

> …so [fed]
> With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
> Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
> Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
> The dreary intercourse of daily life,
> Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
> Our chearful faith that all which we behold
> Is full of blessings… (128-135)

In this passage, it is as though the poet figure has given up on humanity entirely. He sees "evil tongues" and "selfish men" and a lack of kindness—a failure of the "intercourse of daily life"—where he ought to see possibility in Mankind as a result of spiritual meditation on nature. There is an us-against-the-world tone to this passage, and the poet figure has forsaken a unified vision of human community in favor of this single personal relationship. The poet figure's own heart is not attuned to the natural scene and its delights as it once was, and the female heart here becomes the only remaining vessel for such pure communion. Recognizing that Dorothy is the key to his continued access to the power of nature, the poet figure charges her with wandering:

> …Therefore let the moon

Shine on thee in they solitary walk;

And let the misty mountain winds be free

To blow against thee: and in after years,

When these wild ecstasies shall be matured

Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind

Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,

Thy memory be as a dwelling-place

For all sweet sounds and harmonies… (135-142)

The poet figure does not want to keep her from the natural scenes that are now more her province than his own, since his heart has become more leaden with experience and wisdom. His prayer here is that the moon, a recurring figure in Wordsworth's poems about the phantom figure of Lucy, will light Dorothy's "solitary walk," her wandering on her own to absorb the power of nature without any social interference. She is aligned with "wild ecstasies," and figured as conduit for the untamable power of nature.

Yet the poet figure, in the very same sentence that he deems her more fit than himself for ascetic wandering, imagines her as the domestic structure of a "mansion" and a "dwelling-place," as though he cannot bear her freedom. There is an intense conflict for the Wordsworthian poet figure between the impulse to invoke the feminine sublime, to give to the strange female phantoms of his poems a power to check his own, and the urge to contain her, to retain her as a source of spiritual nourishment when he has lost his way. The grave-like quality of the domestic enclosure, in contradistinction to the agency of the feminine, is especially evident in "Strange fits of passion I have known," in which the balladic speaker rides toward Lucy's dwelling-place:

When she I loved, was strong and gay

And like a rose in June,

I to her cottage bent my way,

Beneath the evening moon. (5-8)

In this short, simple stanza, the speaker constructs a subtle hierarchy under which his lover is "strong and gay / And like a rose in June." She is intensely vital, but he is bowed—he *bends* his way "Beneath the evening moon." Lucy is upright, and the speaker is prostrate. He is subordinate to Lucy and to the moon, the repeated figure for natural feminine power throughout the Lucy poems. The moon's relationship to Lucy's cottage, in the speaker's perspective, becomes more interesting given the orb as a symbol for Lucy's power and the cottage as a symbol for the containment of that power. The moon and the cottage are referenced over and over again in this ballad, and the speaker's moment of crisis is precipitated by the conjunction of these two objects:

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof

He raised and never stopped:

When down behind the cottage roof

At once the planet dropped.

--

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide

Into a Lover's head—

'O mercy!' to myself I cried,

'If Lucy should be dead!' (21-28)

At the moment that the moon disappears behind the looming structure of the cottage, Lucy's vital power is eclipsed. The moon that illuminated Dorothy's unbridled spiritual connection to nature in "Tintern Abbey" is no longer visible to the speaker of "Strange fits." The way he imagines her fate represents the enormous problem of modern political economy for the ascetic force of poetry, here, for as the woman becomes the angel in the house, her capacity to signify the natural rhythm of English country life is lost.

Of all the responses that Wordsworth's Lucy poems have garnered, perhaps the most striking remains Coleridge's suggestion that "A slumber did my spirit seal" is a poetic displacement of an anxiety that Wordsworth might have keenly felt: "in some gloomier moment he fancied the moment his sister might die." Coleridge's characterization of Wordsworth's lyrical ballad begins and ends in Wordsworth's real attachment to Dorothy. This relationship governs, by the logic of Coleridge's interpretation, Wordsworth's sense of his place in the world, which, in turn, governs his poetry.[22] Wordsworth's bearing to Dorothy, his prepositional relationship to her, is in many ways the lodestone for the poetry, for the intense sympathetic bond between William and Dorothy generates the anxiety that drives so many of the lyrical ballads and especially the Lucy cycle. If we take Coleridge's proto-psychoanalytic reading of the Lucy figure as an intuitive and valid estimation of his friend's creative process, then it is crucial to a reading of not only *Lyrical Ballads*, but also to Wordsworth's entire body of work, that this sequence, the handful of poems dedicated to the ever-mysterious Lucy

[22] Judith Page describes the essential roles of the women in Wordsworth's life for his creative process "beyond mere domestic and editorial help, [the Wordsworth] women made the poetry possible by providing emotional and intellectual contexts in which Wordsworth could write…[the Wordsworths'] lives belie any easy notion of an ideology of separate spheres, because in the Wordsworth family the home was everyone's workplace and the focus of value" (3).

figure, breaks out of the careful control that Wordsworth's poetry otherwise demonstrates. These are not poems of discipline, but poems of ecstatic "fits" and dreams that the poet figure cannot bring under his control.

How, then, do we read "A slumber did my spirit seal," that tiniest and most confounding of all Wordsworth's lyrical ballads and, perhaps, of all his abundant body of poetry, given the poet figure's difficulty, in the Lucy cycle, of reconciling the inexorable force of modern socio-economic designations and the power of nature to incite a spiritual program of poetry? This poem, I argue, is the single most important characterization of the feminine in all of Romantic poetry, and it represents an indestructible critique of modern sway on organic community. The poet figure says,

> A slumber did my spirit seal;
> I had no human fears:
> She seemed a thing that could not feel
> The touch of earthly years.
> --
> No motion has she now, no force;
> She neither hears nor sees,
> Rolled round in earth's diurnal course
> With rocks and stones and trees.

The ultimate ascetic subjugation of the Wordsworthian poet figure happens in this poem, for the poet figure is laid to rest, into "[a] slumber," and his spirit (which is vitally connected to the female phantom who now mediates his access to poetry) is "seal[ed]"—buried and entombed. In proportion to the fading of his own body, Lucy is interred in

"earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees": she becomes nature itself, and the gap between her mortal form and her eternal essence is closed. If the domestic enclosure is the metonym for all shackles of political economy and socio-economic divisions between members of an organic, sympathetic community, then death is the ascetic solution to this corruption of our immortal being. The poet figure dies to himself as this feminine figure dies; with her loss, he no longer knows himself as a political subject or the "human fears" that comprise a life struggling against the constraints of modern English culture.

In the gospel of Luke, Christ says, "I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out" (Luke 19:40). If the people lose their ability to speak, to influence discourse, and to offer up praise of the divine power in nature, the earth itself will still find a way. In "A slumber," the earth finds its way in Lucy, the lasting impression of Romantic sympathy that should create community. She becomes a part of the natural rhythm of the holy hinterlands in Wordsworthian verse. She becomes the "rocks and stones and trees" whose temporal scansion can never be reduced to the progress of industry, enclosure, and capital. Where the stones are inscribed grave-markers, in *Essays on Epitaphs*, that represent the strain of discipline under the weight of human hubris, the "rocks and stones and trees" in "A slumber" cannot be interpolated into the technology of human language. The stone cracks, is "rolled" away, so that nothing can separate the human poetic soul from the natural from power from whence that poetry stems.

The rural English zone is the holy ground in which a battle is staged between the modern forces that threaten to destroy the organic human spirit and the poet figure's

disciplined attention to the rhythm of the natural world. Wordsworth's ascetic practice finally gets beyond his control, but succeeds in invoking a figure that does ultimately transcend her mortal coils to gain a life in poetry. Lucy is the figure for poetry that resists the dark sublime of modernity, and the "motion" and "force" of her is that she is the very spirit of Wordsworth's ideal project, the ecstasy that he calls forth to consume him when his ascetic work is done.

CHAPTER III

SHELLEY'S SYMPATHETIC APOSTASY: *ALASTOR* AND ASCETIC WANDERING

In Order

Matthew Arnold's famous sobriquet for Shelley—"a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain"—has been so enduring and so much inflected the way critics read Shelley that this metaphor is worth considering in detail. Arnold christens Shelley's poetics angelic in the same moment that he finds Shelley's verse lacking in a straightforward program of cultural influence. This characterization of Shelley as pleasing but useless reflects Arnold's own vexed relationship to the poet, whom Arnold admired in his youth, but later could not admit into his canon of poets who advance culture. Arnold accuses Shelley of allowing aesthetic appetites to overtake ethical responsibility, and metaphorically makes of Shelley a fallen angel. We might imagine that nothing would please Shelley better than to be identified this way, given his reverence for Milton, and the extent to which the Shelleyan poet figure sympathizes with the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. But what Arnold stumbles upon by rendering the Shelleyan poet figure in terms of a Miltonic metaphor is the deeply ethical quality of Shelley's work, for in the same way that Milton's Satan rejects the tyrannical social structures from which he has been exiled, without denying their existence, Shelley's poet figure seeks a critical distance from which he can make a radical commentary on the lapsarian state of an English society that he cannot entirely forsake.

Regardless of how Victorian and high Modernist readers have seen the ethereal Romanticism of Shelley's work as a problem for literature's political uses,[23] Shelley builds this high-flying practice up from the model of precursor poets who have great stakes in England's political development—Milton, certainly, but also Wordsworth. I argue that, in reading Shelley with the grain of some of these critiques, we can see that Shelley's rejection of all things worldly constitutes a necessary radical, ascetic rejection of the community that poetry is meant to reform. Arnold's reading, and those of other Shelley detractors such as T.E. Hulme, who chastises the Romantics for "flying off into the circumambient gas,"[24] places Shelley's verse in an otherworldly sphere of poetry, but these readings fall short in failing to recognize that this Shelleyan distance is a mark of his devotion to a communal English poetry. For Shelley's flying—one of the forms his wandering takes—is still a communal practice. Though he appears to be flying away from, in Shelley's own terms, "the blind and battling multitude" ("To Wordsworth"), the Shelleyan poet figure is catching on to the ankles of more socially engaged falling figures, signaling his inability to turn from the social burden of poetry. The question at the burning heart of Shelley's work, and at the heart of this chapter's reading of Shelley's narrative poem *Alastor*, is what kind of commitment can be sustained in the void. How does a poet who is so far removed from the world of men purport to engage and reform

[23] Orrin Wang argues describes Romanticism as the foil for other literary periods: "…the 'fable' of the institutionalization of Romantic studies…begins in the second decade of the twentieth century with high modernism's rejection of Romanticism…Romanticism [thus] enters the twentieth century as the negative discourse of modernism's more public, less university-bound cultural project" (4).

[24] T.E. Hulme, "Romanticism and Classicism"

that world through poetry? Shelley manages this paradox of the hallowed void, I argue, through his adaptation of Romantic asceticism.

The Romantic practice that Wordsworth inaugurates involves a recasting of poetic vocation as an ascetic performance, complete with the exaltation of the poet figure as the prophetic voice of a people, the imperative to find holy ground in which to experience the divine, and the forging of a bond of brotherhood among disciples of that spiritual power. In this chapter, I argue that Shelley takes the Wordsworthian model of ascetic poetry to new heights. I read Shelley's long narrative poem *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*, which more explicitly engages Wordsworth than any of Shelley's other allegorical poetry, to show that Shelley's far more radical rejection of English society coincides with a more exaggerated symbolic asceticism. The poem maps the progress of the Shelleyan poet figure's wandering over the whole earth and even into undiscovered, unimaginable places, but *Alastor* ultimately succeeds as a model of sacred verse because the poem establishes, through allusion to Wordsworth, a bond with a Romantic order of poetry.

In Shelley's 1817 sonnet, "Ozymandias," the speaker hears the tale, from "a traveller from an antique land," of a disintegrated figure of ancient power, wasting in the desert sands. Beyond the first line of this poem, in which the speaker meets the traveller, the entire poem constitutes an epitaph for Ozymandias, another name for the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses II, commonly believed to be the pharaoh represented in the Book of Exodus. This poem offers an example of an ascetic record of ascetic wandering into zones where culture is ruined. Shelley, who believed that human power led to ecological

failure[25]—that violence and injustice caused the earth to waste—offers in "Ozymandias" a radical complication to the symbolic import of the desert in ascetic practice. The wilderness, for ascetics, is the place that human culture cannot touch and, as such, the place where the soul can be truly purified. Yet in Shelley's deserts, power and technology still leave traces. The traveller says that Ozymandias's "passions…Which yet survive, and "The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed" are all "stamped on these lifeless things" (6-8). The features of Ozymandias that construct his tyranny are ingrained upon "these lifeless things," but those things are both the statuary that records his tyrannical hubris and the desert in which the statue lies wasted, to which Ozymandias's power has laid waste. For the Shelleyan traveller of this sonnet, the manmade effects of power are part of the land. The world is changed by human force, and however far one might wander, there is no space untouched by violent history.

The Shelleyan poet figure, then, must seek holier ground. The effect of this tale on the speaker of "Ozymandias" is unexplained and uncertain, except in the fact of the poem itself. The speaker is compelled to make poetic record of it. The traveller here is as an ascetic wanderer, in the order of the Arab Guide from *The Prelude*, who tells the poetic speaker the news of what he has seen: a disaster so far-reaching that the ends of the earth are not safe. The speaker and the traveller both comprise the Shelleyan poet figure, who encounters corruption and plans a daring escape to sacred poetic spaces hitherto unexplored. In reading the desert of "Ozymandias" alongside other representations of wilderness in Shelley, we can see that earthly spaces are still too

[25] See Alan Bewell's "Percy Bysshe Shelley and Revolutionary Climatology" for a reading of ruinous power, and Timothy Morton's "Shelley's Green Desert" for an account of Shelley's visionary ecological theory.

cultivated, too tame for the radical Shelleyan poet figure, who seeks not reform, but revolution. In *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, the bleak heights of Prometheus's punishment and the barren zone in which the pageant of human history is played out are ultimately bypassed in favor of a new earth, so green and full of life that it can only be imagined in poetry. The Shelleyan poet figure always visits the desert, and in so doing, signals his concern for human society, his suffering in a shared human condition. But he can never stay there, for he is called farther to poetic terrain no human can inhabit. In the anchoritic wandering that Shelley's poet figure performs, he finally comes to a fecund poetry that fills the void, but this is poetry so far beyond our world that it offers mankind no way out of the "our state, / This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate…" ("Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" 16-17). Shelley's poetry, though, still has to find a way to account for its social burden. If Shelley's verse cannot precipitate humans into a paradise of poetic making, then the poet figure must leave a record of where he has gone. He must leave his written life in the safekeeping of an order, for inclusion in the Book of Romanticism.

Contemporary criticism has reclaimed Shelley's aesthetic of the void—the proliferation of figures for uninhabitable times, spaces, and bodies—as central to his critique of the human will to dominion over all the earth. Karen Swann makes a compelling study of the recurring inhuman figures in Shelley's work—figures that hover in some dimension between life and death—and beautifully explicates the overlap

between Shelley's self-construction, undertaken with the backing of his acolytes, and his otherworldly verse.[26] She writes that

> …the Shelley circle's posthumous constructions of 'the Poet'…are cultic but not naïve…They are informed by passionate attentive readings of Shelley's poetic figures, including figures of the aesthetic as that which adamantly refuses to matter in terms of human economies of desire and exchange…the artist is most loyal to human needs and desires when his art preserves at its core a resistance to our demands.

Swann's reading here casts Shelley's circumambient poetics as a fundamentally ethical pursuit; poetry *should* refuse, for Swann and for committed poststuctural critics, to submit to the symbolic order of a state in the process of reducing its subjects to their commodity value. This utter rejection of worldliness is an essential component of ascetic performance, too, for what becomes inhuman becomes incorruptible. Yet Swann's account also describes the context in which such a poetics can appear: the faithful reproduction and circulation of the poet figure by his acolytes, by his circle.

Shelley's poetry of the inhuman is impossible without the followers he accrues. The Shelley circle—his coterie of second-generation Romantic writers and thinkers—were deeply invested in Shelley's ascetic self-construction as a poet figure constantly longing for oblivion and transcendence of the mortal world. Swann recounts Edward Trelawny's description of Shelley's funeral rites, glossing Trelawny's witness thus: "The fire consumes the elaborate machinery Trelawny has mobilized to produce this spectacle on a recalcitrant, modern landscape: in the end, all that stays with us is the boiling,

[26] Swann, Karen. "Shelley's Pod People." *Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic*. Ed. Forest Pyle. Romantic Circles. Feb. 2005.

fabulous body, with its unorchestrated energies, utterly transfigured into something rich and strange—into the elusive, ungraspable figure of poetic genius." Here even the left behind body of the poet figure is animated by a resistance to social systems and earthly contexts, and the final act of Trelawny's mythical Shelley is to shun those who would adore him, in turn generating endless devotion.

Shelley's poetry needs to generate a following in order to survive—but beyond that, it needs an order to which it can attach. In the Shelley circle's obsessive devotion to the poet figure—to his body, to his texts, to his literary legacy—there is the common faithfulness of all zealots. The ascetic makes converts who spread his story of intense discipline throughout the social milieu long after he is gone; where he cannot be compelled to descend from the peaks, his followers will do this cultural labor for him. Where Shelley does not care for his body, Mary Shelley and Leigh Hunt will squabble over the relic of his unburnt heart, so precious to Shelley's survivors. Yet they are only one side of the process whereby the ascetic finds a lasting form in which to contain his life's work. Shelley's circle takes up the burden and care for his posterity, but his covenant with Romanticism is what first engenders Shelley's ascetic fame.

The Wordsworth-Shelley dyad is the one that constitutes, more than any other pairing of canonical poets, the field of Romanticism, for, though the public interaction between these two figures is nonexistent, there is a proportionately intense meeting of the two poets' minds in Shelley's verse. G. Kim Blank, who argues that Wordsworth is the most important influence on Shelley and the most important influence of one major poet on another in all of English literature, writes that we might read in Wordsworth's "The Nightingale" the respective poetic characters of Shelley and Wordsworth in the

nightingale and the stockdove. The nightingale, on the one hand, is a Shelleyan "Creature of a fiery heart," and the Wordsworthian stockdove, on the other, sings "Of a serious faith."[27] The distance between the spiritual trajectories of these Romantic creatures provides us with an analog for the difference in how either poet conceptualizes poetry as part of a program of social intervention. We can see in these lines of flight the ways poetry dovetails with Romantic sympathy: for Wordsworth, poetry must keep close to men's hearts, minister to them at their level; for Shelley, poetry demands that listeners and readers aspire to a higher plan of affinity. The crisscrossed trajectories of these two Romantic birds, though, produces a harmony that shapes the Romantic canon.Wordsworth writes,

> O Nightingale! thou surely art
>
> A Creature of a fiery heart—
>
> These notes of thine they pierce, and pierce;
>
> Tumultuous harmony and fierce!
>
> Thou sing'st as if the God of wine
>
> Had helped thee to a Valentine;
>
> A song in mockery and despite
>
> Of shades, and dews, and silent Night,
>
> And steady bliss, and all the Loves
>
> Now sleeping in these peaceful groves!
>
> --

[27] G. Kim Blank. *Wordsworth's Influence on Shelley: A Study of Poetic Authority*. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1988. Blank's study posits Wordsworth as the Oedipal father figure whom Shelley must kill to legitimize his own poetic vocation.

I heard a Stockdove sing or say

His homely tale, this very day.

His voice was buried among trees,

Yet to be come at by the breeze:

He did not cease; but cooed—and cooed;

And somewhat pensively he wooed:

He sang of love with quiet blending,

Slow to begin, and never ending;

Of serious faith, and inward glee;

That was the Song, the Song for me!

The Wordsworthian stockdove, ensconced in the trees and singing of a serious faith—of natural piety—is earthbound and domesticated indeed in comparison to the fiery creature that so resembles Shelley's later image of the skylark. The nightingale sings "in mockery and despite" the many simple joys found in a peaceful grove. The "tumultuous" aspect of the bird's song suggests that the notes pour into the grove from high above, from where the creature tumbles on elevated currents. The source itself is invisible in this depiction of the common Wordsworthian scene, but no less is the stockdove, whose voice is "buried among the trees" and travels upon the breeze to the speaker's ear. The stockdove's song is "pensive," where the nightingale's is "fierce." Though they sound different to the speaker, these polar birdsongs are both audible and, in the space of this poem, blend together in one tumultuous harmony.

In the gap between Wordsworth's 1808 composition and Shelley's 1820 "To a Skylark," which extols the virtue of the "Scorner of the ground" (100), we see the germ

of the problem that is, for so much of Shelley's early career, the burden of Wordsworthian influence. The nightingale, in Wordsworth's characterization, has much in common with Shelley's skylark, the bird image of Shelley's own poetic soul. But the nightingale is stabilized by the formal coherency of Wordsworth's comparative, dialectical strain, and the skylark is something else entirely. Shelley's bird cannot be confined to any single principle. The creature is alternately "a cloud of fire" (8), "a star of Heaven" (18), "a high-born maiden" (41), "a rose embowered" (51), etc. The only governing principle that binds these figures together is Shelley's use of metaphor. These vehicles all suggest unattainable heights or places secret and remote. The distinction between Shelley's avian poet and Wordsworth's, though, is clearest when Shelley's poet figure in fact names the bird a poet:

> Like a Poet hidden
>
> In the light of thought,
>
> Singing hymns unbidden,
>
> Till the world is wrought
>
> To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not… (36-40)

This construction is very similar to Wordsworth's, but for the fact that the poet is "hidden / In the light of thought." Though the poet's song, in Shelley's poem, is meant to serve a Wordsworthian function in compelling sympathy, this process begins from a the "light of thought," which is far too abstract ever to describe Wordsworth's steady, traceable stockdove. Given this rejection of any firm foundation from which the poet can begin his work, the skylark is Shelley's register for the independent workings of poetry more than for poetic vocation. But in the speaker's positioning himself as the listening intermediary,

poetic vocation proves important enough that it, too, requires endless attempts at articulation.[28] Poetry is volatile, but so too is the figure of the poet who lives his life in service to this ungovernable, shapeshifting force.

The closely related figures of the Shelleyan skylark and the Wordsworthian nightingale are flighty, but one might reasonably assume that their tracks will take them far from the stockdove's perch. It is curious, therefore, that the appearance of the bird as metaphor for the role of the poet appears, in Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, so very pigeon-like and Wordsworthian: "A Poet is a nightingale who sits in the darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why" (516). The nightingale in this instance is more docile than the skylark in Shelley, and might easily be mistaken for the stockdove in Wordsworth's poem, cooing among the trees. To sit "in the darkness" lends a realism to the bird that we do not find in "the light of thought," and to sing for "cheer" and "soften[ing]," which are simpler, more balladic effects of song, makes the nightingale here much less radical than the skylark. The sounds are sweet, rather than piercing and the effect of the poet on his listeners is softening, but the bird's song to "cheer its own solitude" strikes a false note here, for the metaphor for the poet negates the simile used for the poet's audience. In Wordsworth's poem the stockdove's value is in its closeness; it is a creature that sings without reference to anything—anyone—except poetry, yet the song makes this

[28] Forest Pyle reads the skylark as an instance of nonrepresentational art that is not accountable for the pageants of human tyranny with which Shelley grapples in *Triumph of Life* and "Ozymandias," and I am here interested in how such a nonfunctional function of the skylark is transmuted by tethering the skylark to Shelley's other avian figures for poetic vocation.

tranquility available to men. The benefit of the stockdove, in other words, derives from the speaker's ability, as it were, to hear a tree falling in the woods. The nightingale in Shelley cannot bless his listeners in this way, for his song cannot even bring the audience into the metaphorical register. The reader—the public sphere—is here made of lower stuff; the public is the less convincing simile to the poet's higher stakes metaphor.

Reading this formulation of the poet's responsibilities in the *Defence* next to the manifesto's infamous ending—"poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"—highlights how complicated is Shelley's sense of how poetry works toward the social good. Poetry's power to promote sympathy and raise the tone of public discourse is a consistent feature of Shelley's work, but his formulations of this process are always murky. Though Swann's argument gives a sense of the potentials of a poetry that resists systemization, there is still an impasse in Shelley's poetics, which purports to participate in socio-political revolution, but never quite states how that revolution will work. Shelley's social theory relies on the agency of poetry itself as the catalyst for sound public engagement, rather than evolving a plan for what part men of genius ought to play in the progress of civilization. Shelley's active involvement in human community is difficult to imagine beyond the biographical information we have about his real life practice of love and friendship and other sympathetic relationships, and even these are ties that the Shelleyan poet figure resists on basis of their requiring an oppressive social contract. Even less than a sustainable plan for living with his own like-minded coterie does Shelley's verse bear out a suggestion for practical application of his idealism to the lives of real men—to the broader "web of human things." Shelley outlines his theory of sympathy in the *Defence*, saying,

> The social sympathies, or those laws from which as from its elements society results, begin to develope themselves from the moment that two human beings coexist; the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed; and equality, diversity, unity, contrast, mutual dependence become the principles alone capable of affording the motives according to which the will of a social being is determined to action, inasmuch as he is social…Hence men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actions…" (511).

Here again is a simile in service of Shelley's conception of how human society functions: the future is contained within the present *as* the plant within the seed. Shelley reimagines the Wordsworthian process whereby nature restores the organic sympathies of men as one in which men are themselves organic. Shelley overleaps—or flies by—the fundamental workings of Romantic poetry on the hearts of men; the Wordsworthian model is writ large in Shelley's highly metaphorical poetics. The capacity for a healthy social order, in Shelley's estimation, is so innate in humanity that a collective poetic unconscious needs little cultivation to grow strong.

This resistance to cultivation in Shelley's poetic theory and verse, though, is an important ascetic device, and Shelley's conception of an ideal—a Romantic—human community anticipates the turn that late nineteenth-century scientific and political discursive spheres will co-opt the natural for use within a progressive capitalist machine. Ferdinand Tönnies, in his fin de siècle exploration of how Enlightenment philosophy foregrounds the development of sociology as a discipline, identifies in nineteenth-century writing's preoccupation with nature an unintentional support for burgeoning models of

human development. Where the Romantic ascetic focus on nature is meant to stymy the growth of political economy, Tönnies's argument shows the opposite effect at play later in the century. Following Kantian theories of causality, Tönnies writes,

> All activity involves organic change; it leaves some traces, which either reinforce existing trends in growth and development, or point in a different and contrary direction…But if we human beings form a natural 'thought community' (in that causality like the sense organs, is integral to us, and we then invent names to signify the cause and effect), it follows that distinctions with regard to these processes can arise only from thinking…On this matter peoples, groups and individuals part company, although most continue, in their myths and poetry, to share the habit of portraying nature as an active agency in the shape of men and animals. (5)

What Tönnies' critique makes visible is the kernel of a competitive capitalist model of "trends in growth and development" that breaks the ground for a parting of the ways amongst previously coherent and sustainable groups. If thought is inherently organic and not examined for where it is corrupted by over-cultivation as it must be for Wordsworth, communal divisions begin to crop up. But even for Tönnies, at this later moment, myths and poetry are the curative for breakage within the community as a result of commodity-based discursive evolution. We see from this both the trap that Shelley continually falls into by insisting on the natural workings of the human being in society, as well as his method for digging himself out: the changeling metaphor that defies causality altogether. For if poetry, even organic Romantic ascetic poetry, makes itself inscrutable, then it can continue to resist the threat of modern political economy.

Where the human being comes into the equation, Shelley cannot use a metaphorical register as he can for his descriptions of poetry itself. For example, Shelley writes, "Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it" (520). In this hierarchy of figural language, the pure force of high poetry (lightning) is mediated by the poet (the nightingale) to a community of men who are not even quite themselves, not even quite natural; men are *as* auditors for sweet song, and *as* a mature plant contained within a seed. The choices of figural language are especially important in Shelley given his explicit theorization of the poetic faculty:

> Those in whom [the faculty of approximation to the beautiful] exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things…if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations…language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (512)

Here the viral spread of poetry is entirely dependent on these "others," the "community" from which poetry gathers force. The *Defence* is by no means the only Romantic poetic treatise to construct a complicated system whereby the causal relationship between high poetry and any sensible element of the known world is mercurial and difficult to elaborate in practical terms. These profligate formulations that branch and scatter and twine back upon themselves are a hallmark of Romantic writing, but even excess in

Shelley's hands becomes excessive. Life itself is metaphorical, and metaphor in Shelley is so fecund that the roots of his images are hardly ever visible. The place of human beneficiaries in his scheme is, therefore, hard to uncover.

Arnold's complaint is that Shelley is full of beautiful poetic constructions, but devoid of effective poetry, but Shelley himself makes clear the equivalence in his poetics of these unfathomable constructions—these infinite, irreducible metaphors—with the very essence of a poet's ethical burden. With the poet figure's superlative faculty for apprehending the relations between things comes the necessity of propagating a vital poetic sensibility among the depleted community. Shelley obviously feels this imperative, but his schemes fall on hard earth, and his metaphors do not manageably intertwine with any available system for national political development. David Simpson explains Shelley's tendency toward abstraction and endless metaphoricity in terms of an abhorrence of didacticism in any form, which results in a Shelleyan language that cannot be turned into the tool of any institutional program. Simpson writes,

> Whatever alliances Shelley sought to make between 'Science, and her sister Poesy'—and he did so seek—it seems that poetry was to remain the senior partner and the ultimate principle of cultural synthesis, as the argument of A *Defence of Poetry* makes clear. Poetry's principal executor is love, an anarchistic rejuvenating energy whose linguistic analogue is metaphor. The materials of science are its tools but not its essence…The suggestiveness of poetry is what appeals to Shelley as an alternative to the more explicit, propositional language of science and philosophy. At the same time, his recourse to suggestiveness, and to a complicated

> allegorical-symbolic apparatus, denies him the satisfactions as well as the encumbrances of clear communication. (166)

In some sense, then, the *Defence* is the failure of Shelley's scheme to bring the sciences into the fold of poetry—a failure of aesthetic cultivation. This shortcoming is corroborated by the *Defence*'s being born out of a resistance to Thomas Love Peacock's assertion in *The Four Ages of Poetry* that men of genius ought to be pursuing the developing fields of political economy rather than writing poetry. All science turns out to be hard science for Shelley, who cannot conceive of a way to implement the underlying art without killing it off. He cannot submit his verse to a program of national progress, for his poetry is driven by a rejection of that progress. In this, Shelley is following in Wordsworth's vein—"we murder to dissect."[29] Though Shelley's poetic theory tries to wed poetry and science under the banner of a pure poetic principle, though the diversity of his metaphors shows a poetic will to sanctify all manner of discourse, the available plots of the sciences are too restrictive for a poetry that must be allowed to grow wild and overrun a human will to mastery of holy poetic mysteries. Regardless of poetry's potential to intertwine with the known world, to improve it, as outlined by Shelley in the *Defence*, Shelley's poetry often abandons the cultivated ground of public discourse for uncharted poetic tracts, places not yet dissected by human progress.

Shelley's theoretical commitment to poetry's potential to purify social behaviors is unmatched by any other writer in the canon, but the figures he uses to delineate this function are always flighty. What we see upon an examination of how the avian figures of poetic vocation intersect in Shelley, and then again intersect with Wordsworth's

[29] "The Tables Turned," line 28

nightingale and stockdove, is that Shelley's poetic tendency to metaphors that never stop spreading and becoming other things makes his idea of the poet as difficult to pin down as a shape all light or a tidal wave on the sand. We can never expect a stable, grounded poet figure in Shelley's work, but this is precisely the point of Shelley's art, as Swann argues, for "the artist is most loyal to human needs and desires when his art preserves at its core a resistance to our demands." Yet we misread Shelley if we ascribe to his poetry an untethered poetic principle that allows verse free play without reference to the communal structures that give rise to poetry as a traditional practice. Flight is not only a winged ascent and scorning of the ground, but also an act of departing a site of danger. In this way, the flights of the Shelleyan poet figure correspond to the self-exile of ascetic figures to the barren, uncultured wilderness. Flight becomes a way of marking the social milieu as ruined and uninhabitable for survivors. When Shelley attaches his program for poetry's social potentials to the plant within the seed, then, he plants a social metaphor that may not survive in its original form long enough to bear sympathetic fruit. The Shelleyan poet figure flees the hard earth of disciplinary structures without waiting for the seeds of his poetry to take root in communal English life, so he needs a way to bind himself to that sphere lest his poetic pursuits be forgotten when he has gone from the world.

No matter how abstract and unassimilable Shelley's poetry may appear for English public discourse, it is impossible to read the metaphorical heights in Shelley as part of an intentionally ineffective poetry given the explicit political commentary in so many of his writings. Shelley preemptively defends himself from his anti-Romantic detractors in writing, for example, "The Mask of Anarchy," an indictment of the Peterloo

Massacre and the English Regency Government in 1819, and the "Address to the People on the Death of Princess Charlotte," which grieves for the death of liberal hopes for English power, but also for the nameless dead who suffer under this regime. These writings represent the limits of a radical poet's engagement, for there is no practical solution proffered, only allegorical and abstract ones. His poetics of the void is full of ethical intention, and if he cannot force his verse into the prescribed discursive roles of the English public sphere, Shelley can at least make clear the ways in which poetry fails the people when it stoops to the level of the status quo. For this proof of his righteous stance in withdrawing poetry from public purview, Shelley turns to Wordsworth as the apostatic example of a powerful poet who falls to the whims of public opinion.

Though the *Defence* works toward a theory of poetry wherein poetry is original, a force without an antecedent in human practice, and though Shelley's verse often spells out the different ways in which mankind has misrepresented the power of poetry,[30] Shelley's preoccupation with Wordsworth complicates any narrative of radical Shelleyan abjuration. Shelley's admiration for Wordsworth's early work rivals his reverence for Milton, and from Shelley's allusive discipleship to a Romanticism that Wordsworth inaugurates, it is clear that Shelley's want of poetic foundations is more traditional than an Arnoldian reading of Shelley's poetic persona would have us believe. Yet there is hardly a more decisive indictment of a fellow poet than Shelley's sonnet "To Wordsworth," which appeared in the same 1816 volume as *Alastor*, and in which the

[30] In "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," for example, poets past have failed to channel a "voice from some sublime world" to account for the spirit of beauty, and have desecrated this moving principle by giving it "the name of God and ghosts and heaven" (25-27).

younger poet seems to add his own indelible mark to what he perceives as Wordsworth's blotted copybook. Shelley writes,

> Poet of Nature, thou hast wept to know
> That things depart which never may return:
> Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
> Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
> These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
> Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
> Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
> On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
> Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood
> Above the blind and battling multitude:
> In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
> Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—
> Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
> Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

This denunciation of Wordsworth, following the Shelleys' reading of *The Excursion*, is firm in way that is rare and strategic in Shelley's oeuvre. Yet the certainty with which Shelley condemns the elder poet requires the naming of Wordsworth as foundational for a common poetic life—a common Romantic practice. There is the need of a serious faith in this moment of renunciation, for the bond is more sacred than the bond between, for

example, Byron and his "piss-a-bed" Keats.[31] Where there is no reverence, there is little danger to the critic, but this is not at all the case with Shelley's critique of Wordsworth. The Shelleyan speaker of this sonnet figures Wordsworth as alternately a constant "lone star," whose light is the more fixed in contrast to that which it illumines (a "frail bark in winter's midnight roar"), and a "rock-built refuge" that *stands* "Above the blind and battling multitude." Wordsworth is, in this poem, the constant cornerstone of the Romantic movement; his sins are proportionate to his mighty works. There is a ritualistic character in the listing of poetic certainties before naming that which must be lamented and proscribed.[32]

In the same way that the recitation of a creed precedes a confession of sins and prayers of the people in Anglican liturgy, Shelley here has to demonstrate the power and value of Wordsworth's eternal character before identifying the base elements in him. Shelley must officially denounce Wordsworth's tendencies toward conservatism, which

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[31] In his 4 November 1820 letter to his publisher, John Murray, Byron writes of "Johnny Keats' piss a bed poetry," treating a fellow poet with irreverence and contempt that are entirely absent from Shelley's castigation of Wordsworth. Though Bryon later expressed regret that Keats should suffer at the hands of critics, his initial disdain and scorn make whatever came after seem insincere. In Shelley's sonnet "To Wordsworth," though, the sobriety with which Shelley laments Wordsworth's growing conservatism is predicated on his sincere respect of Wordsworth's poetic faculty.

[32] Kenneth Burke, in his study of the interplay between classical and Christian rhetoric, explains some of the crucial features in Augustine's *Confessions* for the western literary tradition: "From the standpoint of form, everything should be considered as leading up to and away from the critical moment of conversion in the garden….There was a notable difference between the narrative method of the first nine books and the dialectical structure of the last four books" ("Verbal Action in Augustine's *Confessions*," *The Rhetoric of Religion* 164). I suggest that the religious rhetorical pattern that Burke identifies here, wherein the point of conversion marks a metamorphosis of a text's straightforward logical path into a dialectical pursuit of high concepts, is evident in Shelley's Wordsworthian poetry—in an abbreviated form in this sonnet, and in the more fully developed narrative rites of *Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude*.

make the fallen Wordsworth unfit at this point of decline in his career to represent the interests of English radicalism and a politically vibrant public sphere. Indeed, the final quatrain is steeped in holy language, for Shelley describes Wordsworth's song as "consecrate" before finally identifying the specific action that warrants rebuke: "Deserting." Here desertion and consecration are mutually exclusive terms, and Shelley's charge of apostasy works by the logic of apostasy in its older anthropological sense as an accusation of heresy that runs heterodox to the governing spiritual authority. In addition to deploying such religious logic to authorize his abjuration of Wordsworth's present course, there is an underlying fascination with location—with both locale and stance—in this poem. The star is in its apportioned place in opposition to its falling, the rock is a firm foundation only counter to its being no longer solid ground, and the poet is holy only so long as he does not abandon his post to wander elsewhere.

Shelley, in the language of this sonnet and in other poems such as "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," in which the speaker makes vows to the spiritual power that governs poetry, makes recourse to a deeply traditional religious process in order to sanctify his own poetic rites.[33] There is an underlying structure for his pursuit of sacred poetry, in no small part because Wordsworth's poetry is structured in this way. But Shelley's verse is often based on its ability to fly beyond Wordsworth's best efforts, to outstrip a Wordsworthian poetry that remains, for Shelley, woefully earthbound. What happens,

[33] Bryan Shelley (*Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel*) has detailed Shelley's admiration for the bible as myth and the frequency with which he uses scriptural figures in his verse, and Timothy Morton writes that "Percy Shelley…appeared to appropriate biblical language about the human stewardship of the earth." ("Shelley's Green Desert," *Studies in Romanticism* 33.3.410). Shelley's fascination with scripture is well documented, but I am less interested in the allusive power of the bible as literature here than I am in sacramental forms of the primitive church—less in the Book of God, than in the written saints' lives that become sacred texts in their own right.

though, to his own poetic position and principles in the process of pointing the figural finger? In Charles Mahoney's study of the Romantics' milieu of critical judgment, he explains that apostasy can never be a righteous stance either rhetorically or figurally:

> [A]postasy…repeatedly figures a standing so precarious as finally to be indistinguishable from a falling—and not an isolated fall at that, but an always-falling which can be seen to occur with reference not merely to political principle but, far more unpredictably, literary language. The unmanageability of the term is such that any definition of apostasy as simply a standing-off postulates a limit by which, in its rhetorical performance of falling, it cannot be constrained. (2)

For Mahoney, the indeterminacy of apostasy—the constant motion of its inconstancy—makes a judgment designating apostasy as such impossible for any critic to articulate without becoming complicit in the fall. Taking for granted Wordsworth's fall from grace in Shelley as a tandem jump that Shelley also performs, then, begs the question of what Shelley gains in aligning himself with beautiful failure. Shelley's inability to dismiss Wordsworth is a feature of his own deep concern for the English people, and since he cannot quite manage to be of the people in the way that Wordsworth does, he chooses to be of Wordsworth's order, to sanctify the rites that Wordsworth first sets out to perform.

Shelley's *Alastor*, written in 1815 and published in 1816, encapsulates the apostatic process Mahoney describes, for its second-generation Romantic critique of Wordsworth is complicit with its own apostatic fall. *Alastor* is the poetic narrative of a poet figure who, finding no sympathetic context in which his genius can exist in his homeland, takes to wandering the earth. The narrative frame is full of allusions to

Wordsworth's poetry, to the extent that Earl Wasserman's influential reading of the poem aligns the narrator with a Wordsworthian voice rather than a Shelleyan one. Shelley's most explicit allusion to Wordsworth happens in one of Shelley's most explicitly ascetic poems, and the coincidence allows us to see that asceticism is the traditional structure that grounds these poets in a sympathetic order of poetry. Michael Ferber explains that the title of the poem is an allusion to Homeric classicism, to an "alastor" as a "wanderer, outcast, one who is pursued by an avenging spirit" or, alternatively, a debt to Thomas Love Peacock's suggestion to Shelley that an alastor is "an evil genius, not the name of the hero" (655). From Wasserman's and Ferber's readings, the poem's ambivalent treatment of Wordsworth becomes even more tangled, for the spectre of Wordsworth in the poem is the authority that compels wandering—an ascetic abbot figure, father of a Romantic order—on the one hand, and the figure of an evil genius—a figure whose great spiritual powers have turned to darkness—on the other. This poem, I argue, proves the importance of reading the relationships of the canonical Romantic poet figures as an ascetic engagement, for the bond between them is necessary for the construction of an intricate critique of poetry's place in the contemporary English public sphere. The tightly woven web of canonical Romantic texts is so wholly absorbed in literary charges of apostasy because apostasy delineates lines of flight from a contemporary poetic obligation that the Romantics feel deeply, as well as from a literary historical burden. The lines that might mark a judgment of either Wordsworth or Shelley as an apostate instead constitute a Gordian network that forever intermingles the poets together as well as fusing politics and poetry into one discursive body that is always leaving trails as it falls.

The first two stanzas of *Alastor* are an invocation to Wordsworth—to Wordsworth's poetics and underlying theory of the spirit of Nature. The Wordsworthian virtue of "natural piety" is the centerpiece here, and this system of belief, from "My heart leaps up," is one of the more consistent and simple constructions of Romantic idealism in Wordsworth's poetry. Of all the moments in Wordsworth the narrator of *Alastor* might have chosen, "natural piety" is an important foil to the long and difficult poem that follows. In the first, the poem's narrator (distinct from the poet figure who is the principal actor of the poem) begins,

> Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!
> If our great Mother has imbued my soul
> With aught of natural piety to feel
> Your love, and recompense the boon with mine…
> …then forgive
> This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw
> No portion of your wonted favour now! (1-4; 15-17)

The first lines here call forth a host of natural elements (earth, ocean, air), but the final name in the set, "beloved brotherhood," is an ambiguous choice, for it might refer to the one life that holds these ecological features together, but the almost immediate allusion to Wordsworthian "natural piety" suggests that we might read "brotherhood" as the band of poets, following in and adding to the Romantic discursive practice that Wordsworth sets forth in Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The lines that I have elided are a repeating set of conditions for the favor that the narrator begs will not be withdrawn—if I have loved Nature enough, if I have been peaceful enough, if I have been good enough at natural

piety. This stanza, then, demonstrates the intensity with which the narrator feels the burden of a law for poetry that precedes him, culminating in his anxiety that he may have let pride in his own spiritual facility overtake his sense of service. If I have ever been good at all, "then forgive / This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw / No portion of your wonted favour now!" The worshipful rhetorical posture that we might expect from an invocation is here offset by a slight tinge of resentment and incredulity at the fact of some system that stands in the way of the narrator's being able to sing his own song. The line break between "withdraw" and "No portion of your wonted favour now!" further bears out such reticence, creates a formal rift between the narrator's stance and the favor he claims to seek.

Tonally, this first stanza mimics a Wordsworthian strain of verse dedicated to Nature, and the edge with which the narrator conjures a corporate Romantic muse immediately begs the question of authority and influence, but, as with "To Wordsworth," there is an oddly liturgical pattern of establishing piety in order to authorize exorcism. The second stanza takes a sharp turn with allusion to a darker and more complicated side of Wordsworth, the "obstinate questionings" of the "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." Shelley finds the kernel of irreducible doubt in a Wordsworth poem that confidently asserts the divine element of humans as that which must be protected from the forces that diminish our natural glory. This second stanza shows the Shelleyan poet figure's instinct for finding the darkness even in a poetry that purports to remind us of our nobler nature. The dark side of Wordsworth in this poem coincides with the narrator's haunting the steps of the natural principle of poetry to graveyards:

> Mother of this unfathomable world!

Favour my solemn song, for I have loved
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
And my heart ever gazes on the depth
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are… (18-29)

Having dispensed with an appeal to the "beloved brethren," the narrator goes directly to the source, the "Mother of this unfathomable world," and proclaims that no other figure has ever entered his devotional equation, "for I have loved / Thee ever, and thee only." Why, then, does this stanza go dark? The narrator watches the "shadow" of the Mother and the "darkness of [her] footsteps," and plunges into the depth of mysteries. Yet this does not seem to be the darkly glittering air of a still wood and the holy mysteries of Nature's sanctuary, for the narrator ponders deep mysteries in at sites of human ruin and decay. Following his invocation, Shelley's narrator decides to use Wordsworth's ghost as a channel. The narrator chooses to get his hands dirty and makes of Wordsworth's graveyard trope something much darker.

The second stanza, though, ultimately argues that communion with spirits among charnels and coffins is an ineffective ritual that fails to conjure what it should. The

speaker is "hoping to still these obstinate questionings," hoping to reconcile himself to the Wordsworthian creed, by "forcing some lone ghost…to render up the tale / Of what we are…" But the speaker has not succeeded, or, we may say, the ghost of Wordsworthian Romanticism has failed as the conduit of such a tale. Following the graveyard images in which Wordsworth's "obstinate questionings" are entombed, the stanza continues the narrator's lament of a sacrament that does not manifest holy magic in his hands:

> Like an inspired and desperate alchymist
> Staking his very life on some dark hope,
> Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks
> With my most innocent love, until strange tears
> Uniting with those breathless kisses, made
> Such magic as compels the charmed night
> To render up thy charge: . . . and, though ne'er yet
> Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,
> Enough from incommunicable dream,
> And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought,
> Has shone within me… (31-41).

This passage—this binding of the invocation to Wordsworthian Nature—is full of occult references that belie the otherwise orthodox ritualistic language ("inmost sanctuary" and "woven hymns"). Lines 31-36 are more aligned with a ritual of dark blood magic than with a holy conjuring, for the narrator, in his desperation to see the "inmost sanctuary" of Nature's truth, has "mixed awful talk and asking looks / With [his] most innocent love,"

his most unrefined desires, "until strange tears" and "breathless kisses, made / Such magic as compels the charmed night." The materials of the speaker's own body, his tears and embodied passions, constitute a magic that turns on compulsion. The transfiguration of the body in service of a spiritual power is a device of ascetic performance, as we see from the power of nature felt in the blood and heart of the Wordsworthian poet figure in "Tintern Abbey." But in the Wordsworthian case, that bodily discipline is passive—a submission in humility to the beneficent force that governs the organic world. For the narrator of *Alastor*, there is too much emphasis on his own role in this process. Ascetic submission goes slightly wrong. Free grace is overshadowed by black spells in the frame of *Alastor*, and the narrator's hope for accordance with the "voice of living beings, and woven hymns / Of night and day, and the deep heart of man" is a hope for a Wordsworthian effect from an asceticism that is radically different from that which Wordsworth's verse expounds.

In fact, given the strong resemblance of the narrative opening of Alastor to Wordsworth's "Lines left upon the seat in a Yew-tree," which is an obvious cautionary tale of the disaster of unsympathetic Romantic genius, I argue that *Alastor* absorbs the Wordsworthian critique of Shelley's aesthetic tendencies toward withdrawing his poet figure from a bonded community. The spectre of Wordsworth is a necessary foundation for a tale of a poet figure who is destroyed by isolation and refusal of human community. Isolation and wandering, though, are essential components of ascetic performance, and Shelley's version of this practice is an important rejoinder to a Romantic poetic rule that he finds too conservative, too tame. The poet figure in Shelley must go the brink of poetic experience, must enter the void, in order for a communal Romantic critique of the

nineteenth-century English social milieu to be effective. Shelley's ascetic model, though, must note the established limits of Romantic ascetic practice for its radical example to have value. The narrator, having dispensed with his appeal to Wordsworthian Romantic tradition, begins his story of the poet figure thus:

> There was a Poet whose untimely tomb
> No human hands with pious reverence reared,
> But the charmed eddies of autumnal winds
> Built o'er his mouldering bones a pyramid
> Of mouldering leaves in the waste wilderness:—
> …
> Strangers have wept to hear his passionate notes,
> And virgins, as unknown he past, have pined
> And wasted for his wild fond love of his wild eyes.
> The fire of those soft orbs has ceased to burn,
> And Silence, too enamoured of that voice,
> Locks its mute music in her rugged cell. (50-54; 61-66)

As with the brilliant youth of Wordsworth's "Yew Tree," the narrative adventure that the poet figure of *Alastor* is about to undertake is predicated on where it ends: alone in a barren wilderness, with no human sympathy to bear witness to the youth's untimely death. In the "Yew Tree" case, the dissolution and disillusionment of the young talent is brought about by neglect, by removal from the public sphere, by the lack of a social outlet for his poetic gift. Without social engagement, poetry turns to poison that kills off the human body. Yet, the mutual rejection of this young genius, who is a deserter and who is

expelled by the state, transfigures, through the mystical properties of the "waste wilderness," the Shelleyan poet figure into a wandering holy man rather than a degenerate citizen. The symbolic register of asceticism redeems the vainglorious poetic genius and covers him in the robes of disciplinary tradition. The Poet in *Alastor* is thus not a Wordsworthian poet figure, but a rogue Shelleyan one who puts on the mantle of Wordsworthian natural piety and Romantic sympathy and finds it so ill fitting that he flees to the bleakest possible spaces—empties his life and his verse of the ghost of authority.

In Exile

Shelley's verse, once it strikes out for holy lands, the likes of which Wordsworth's intensely English poetry would scarcely dream of, comes up against the problem of what the renunciation of the conservative political and poetic practices of another poet mean for the poet figure in Shelley's own texts. Worry over loss of sympathetic community for the sake of one's principles defines Shelley's real life and bleeds into his verse. Shelley's politics in the pamphlet that saw him expelled from Oxford, *The Necessity of Atheism*, as Colin Jager notes, are a reworking of the Enlightenment theories of Locke and Hume, but Shelley accomplishes a brilliant rhetorical feat in naming atheism as the crux of his statelessness. His alienation from an English community is what proves his commitment to his beliefs, in which poetry is set above all forms of systematic power. Jager argues that Shelley is ultimately able to separate the connotations of this word from a radical politics that cannot be contained by a system in which doctrine is inseparable from social ideals, and to transfigure the

appellation into the sign of membership in a community of righteous outcasts.[34] By taking on this moniker, this marker of himself as transgressive, heretical, and degenerate, Shelley volunteers himself to wander, to fight demons in the wilderness. But these demons are complicated figures in Shelley's verse tales of wandering poets, for they alternately symbolize his rejection of the English public sphere and his anxieties over poetry's potential solipsism. As the Poet wanders over all the earth and through all time, his itinerancy is interrupted by tempting apparitions whom he either rejects or embraces, and he is led by the narrative force of the poem, to the impossible position of being ruined by poetry and statelessness both.

The incitement to wandering in ascetic practice is the depravity of the social milieu, the recognition that civilization is morally burning, wasting, and falling apart. This is consistent with Shelley's impassioned frustration with the reactionary policies of English parliament, with the restrictions on democratic liberties, and violence enacted as a response to civic discontents, and with his naming of contemporary intellectual discourse as fallen and insufficient to the task of radicalism. England in 1819, for example, is a rotting state that Shelley's radical principles and desire for aesthetic transcendence cannot abide. Yet this is a very authoritative position for radical young poet who has been, at this point in his life, preemptively thrown out of English institutions. Shelley's wandering is not voluntary, but his use of sacred tropes in his verse codes his exile as holy quest, covers the sin of his own disengagement from the English public sphere. Romantic asceticism makes exile and solitude conditions of social engagement, rather than a punishment doled out by corrupt state powers.

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[34] Colin Jager, "Shelley After Atheism." *Studies in Romanticism,* 49(4), 611-631. Winter 2010.

The ethical position of an ascetic figure, though, depends entirely on where one stands, whether civic duty is the highest calling of human life, or whether civilization is a dark enchantment that lures humanity away from its true potential. This is a problem for the poet figure of *Alastor*, who meanders away from his native country and takes a tour of the wonders of the ruined world: "The Poet's journey in lines 106-28 carries him to the sites of great civilizations of the past in search of knowledge; he moves backward in time from the Greeks to the Phoenicians (Tyre and Balbec or Heliopolis), the Jews, the Babylonians, the Egyptians (Memphis and Thebes), and finally to Ethiopia…"[35] The poet figure's wandering does not begin as a truly ascetic endeavor, for he still has an affinity for the fame and legend accruing to these zones of fallen power. The poem is caught between a sense of awe at the works of mighty civilizations and a disdain for these records of ruinous power. The precarious position of the ascetic is clear from Edward Gibbon's late eighteenth-century account of how the fourth-century fall of the classical state coincides with citizens' abandonment of democratic discourse for fanaticism:

> There is perhaps no phase in the moral history of mankind of a deeper or more painful interest than this ascetic epidemic. A hideous, distorted and emaciated maniac, without knowledge, without patriotism, without natural affection, spending his life in a long routine of useless and atrocious torture, and quailing before the ghastly phantoms of his delirious brain, had become the ideal of nations which had known the writings of Plato and Cicero and the lives of Socrates and Cato. (qtd. in Waddell 7)

[35] Neil Fraistat's note

Gibbon's description of the ascetic prefigures the poet figure of *Alastor*, who will encounter the veiled maid, a feminine projection of the poet figure's own mind, and who will then waste away, a "distorted and emaciated maniac" without any national allegiance and without any natural sympathy. In Gibbon's terms, an alienation from the state and an alienation from sympathetic bonds coincide, in the same way that, for Shelley, Wordsworth and England are condensed into a poetry that does not go far enough for him. Ascetic wandering can read as an abandonment of civic duty, but *Alastor* sets out to prove that the state is not a partner in the ascetic mission to rebalance the world, for democratic discourse is degraded beyond repair. The progress of the nation-state in Shelley's poem is not something that can be managed—held at bay, but not completely eradicated—as in Wordsworth's poetry, where there is still hope that culture can be cleansed, hope of reform. Exile and the asceticism of the desert both signify a lack of civil responsibility that is incompatible with Wordsworth's model of ascetic verse and with Gibbon's model. Yet the desert fathers do not imagine themselves as deserters, and this is certainly not how Shelley imagines his poetic vocation.

The tension between a Wordsworthian model of ascetic poetry and a Shelleyan one continues to drive the poem, though the narrator has tried to lay the burden of Wordsworth to rest once and for all before beginning the story of the Poet. At the beginning of the narrative proper of *Alastor*, the narrator describes the construction of the Poet's faculty in very Wordsworthian terms, but then describes the un-Wordsworthian turn that the Shelleyan poet figure takes. The Poet,[36] a youth of genius, is nourished by

[36] In *Alastor*, the principle actor is called simply "the Poet." This generic name roughly coincides with my sense of the "poet figure" in whom the biographical facts of a

Nature; he is content and fulfilled while he is young in his homeland, but for reasons that the poem never quite makes clear, this ease ends when adolescence passes:

> By solemn vision, and bright silver dream,
> His infancy was nurtured. Every sight
> And sound from the vast earth and ambient air,
> Sent to his heart its choicest impulses.
> The fountains of divine philosophy
> Fled not his thirsting lips, and all of great,
> Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past
> In truth or fable consecrates, he felt
> And knew. When early youth had past, he left
> His cold fireside and alienated home
> To seek strange truths in undiscovered lands. (66-77)

The first four lines of this stanza bear an uncanny resemblance to Wordsworth's praise in Book I of *The Prelude* of the River Derwent, whose murmurs blended with the nurse's song, and Shelley's tone here is distinctly Wordsworthian despite the fact that he never read Wordsworth's epic of the poet's progress.[37] Yet there is again something amiss about the allusion here, for the lesson of nature is "all of great, / Or good, or lovely, which the sacred past / In truth or fable consecrates…" Whatever is good of "the sacred past" is made holy, *made* sacred by "truth or fable." Here, though, with the uncertain

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Romantic poet's life are bound up with the semi-autobiographical characters of poets in the poetry.

[37] Blank writes of *Alastor* that "It is difficult to find anywhere else in Shelley where a nurturing figure is held in such reverent and anxious deferral, and anywhere else where Shelley or any other poet sounds so much like young Wordsworth" (7).

qualification of "truth or fable" for a consecration of human history, is the discordant Shelleyan note in a rite that reads as more typical of Wordsworth.

Where for Wordsworth, the truth of mankind's divine nature has the potential to cast history in a noble light, this passage draws our attention to the fact that there is no way to be sure whether our optimistic views of human civilization are grounded in truth or built up by the "frail spell" of "fable." The poet figure here moves psychically beyond the little rivers of a picturesque English childhood to the "fountains of divine philosophy" and to "*all*" of "the sacred past," to some universal history that he feels and knows apparently by instinct, by the impulses of the "ambient air." As though he knows better than a Wordsworthian poet figure ever could, the Poet of *Alastor* outgrows the comfortable and contented context of his homeland, of Wordsworth's sacred England. He rapidly progresses past the Wordsworthian stage of childhood to a more widespread, global affinity that makes it impossible for him to stay at "His cold fireside and alienated home." Allegorically, this point of origin is Shelley's England, the country whose politics are too conservative, too confining to support the growth of the Shelleyan poetic mind.

At the level of a national critique, *Alastor* rejects a poetic practice that reforms public discourse. As long as the structures of state power are extant in English culture, there is nowhere for natural affections to flourish in a way that might lead to a renewal of socio-political English life. In Shelley's work, a reading public with critical potential becomes a stagnant institution that forecloses the most provocative crisis in and of

Romantic poetry: poetic sympathy.[38] Shelley negates Wordsworth's sense of sympathy, as the element that lends political efficacy to poetry, when he confines the figure of Wordsworth to the English borders and turns loose the Shelleyan figure to wander everywhere else. The socio-political responsibilities of the poet to his public are not a registered crisis for the poet figure of *Alastor*, for his palpable crisis is pure poesy, without reference to any social entanglements. Yet these responsibilities leave traces: the poem's invocation to Wordsworthian natural piety, and the poet figure's own body, which trails magnificently into nothingness.

In his very moment of commitment to sympathetic Wordsworthian Romanticism, in *Alastor*, Shelley withdraws the poet figure from the public gaze. The public, for Shelley, makes a travesty of reading poetry by assigning poetry a function in the machinery of social networks. Yet Shelley commits his own breed of apostasy by extricating poetry from public discourse, for he refuses Wordsworth's imperative, in the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802)", that "in spite of things gone silently out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" (606). The poet is here in the Preface set a task of unification, not abstracted to the region of poetry that remains aloof from the social body, but rather committed to the collective as that which must be improved by poetry. In Wordsworth's theory, the reader's natural critical capacity and affinity for poetry have been corrupted by "a multitude of causes

[38] Andrew Franta argues that the rise of a national readership forces "a radical rethinking of what it meant to be a poet and what poetry was for" (18). Franta reads the mass public as the site of a process of social judgment—a discourse, rather than a receptacle of received ideological stances or a diametric, reactionary opposition to poetry. This dialectical power of the public, though, is not operative for Shelley, who sees no place for the radical stance in his contemporary English public sphere.

unknown to former times"—by the thoroughly modern conventions of reading that are antithetical to a sacred encounter with poetry. Shelley's poetics is not as committed to mediating this modern experience as Wordsworth's is. Rather, Shelley points to underlying social sympathies that have a grander purpose than supporting "Time's worst statute, unrepealed," which is, in his sonnet "England in 1819," a concise expression for tyrannical Regency governmentality. Shelley finds value in originary sympathy, outside of the machinations of tyrannical power, by seeing there that "the future is contained within the present as the plant within the seed" (511). A future possibility is always co-opting the present moment so that Shelley's poetics creates a poet who is so engrossed in history as to be incapable of participating in his own historical moment.

The Poet's wandering takes him into the wilderness, away from human fellowship. In his pilgrim's progress toward pure poesy, he moves away from the "cold fireside and alienated home"—symbolically the English public sphere—toward the ruins of civilizations past:

> His wandering step
> Obedient to high thoughts, has visited
> The awful ruins of the days of old:
> Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste
> Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers
> Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,
> Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoe'er of strange
> Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,
> Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,

Dark Æthiopia in her desert hills
Conceals. Among the ruined temples there,
Stupendous columns, and wild images
Of more than man, where marble daemons watch
The Zodiac's brazen mystery, and dead men
Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,
He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day
Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (107-28)

The "meaning" that "flashed like strong inspiration" on the Poet's vacant mind, that reveals to him the mysteries of human history ("the birth of *time*," a construction of civil life), is clearly poetry itself, in the same metaphorical raiment that it wears in the *Defence*: "poetry is a sword of lightning" that plays some ambiguous role in undoing the tyranny of history and a history of tyranny. The Poet's wandering seems to carry him to all the places where there still exist the traces of a violent power that must be razed to the root by the all-consuming lightning blade of poetry. These are not the wonders of the world for the Poet; they are sacrificial altars. The language of violence abounds in this stanza ("awful," "fallen," "mutilated," "burning"), but the most arresting construction is

the description of the ruinous temples where “dead men / Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around.” The line break here binds “dead men” and “Hang,” so that hanged men linger here. Men whose lives have been sacrificed to the fabrication of uneternal edifices are shown for what they are—murder sanctioned by the state. The illusion of violent sacrifice made in the name of civil glory is undone, and in this stanza the Poet has looked his last on even the remnants of a human history that repels him.

In the context of his final stop-off in the realms of human power, the poet figure briefly sojourns in the Arabian wastes, and this wilderness is the place in which he renounces sympathy. Following the above stanza that details his itinerary, we learn that in all this time that the Poet has been lingering and gazing on “The thrilling secrets of the birth of time,” another human figure has been present. The poet figure encounters an Arab maiden who is devoted to him—who tends to his needs where he takes no measures to sustain his body:

> Meanwhile an Arab maiden brought his food,
> Her daily portion, from her father’s tent,
> And spread her matting for his couch, and stole
> From duties and repose to tend his steps:—
> Enamoured, yet not daring for deep awe
> To speak her love:—and watched his nightly sleep,
> Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips
> Parted in slumber, whence the regular breath
> Of innocent dreams arose: then, when red morn
> Made paler the pale moon, to her cold home

Wildered, and wan, and panting, she returned. (129-39)

The maiden gives her own food and sleep, and steals away from her father's tent, for the sake of devotion to the Poet. In a sense she gives up her social virtue to the Poet here, though I argue that the sexual charge of the language in this stanza is discharged in truly ascetic fashion, for the maiden is "wildered"—bewildered and made wild by watching the Poet who sleeps without reference to her presence at all. Why does she leave? Why does she not become his vestal and follow him about, ministering to his needs? Her return to her "cold home" echoes the "cold fireside and alienated home" from which the Poet himself has fled. Her situation should incite his sympathy for the entrapment of another soul in an oppressive social context, but this is not his response. Indeed, the poem gives no indication that the Poet notices the Arab maiden at all. The Arab maiden cannot stay with the Poet because his poetic quest, his calling, is not compatible with social structures of any kind. To be at the Poet's side signifies an abandonment of her "duties"—her care of the community—and her "repose"—her care for her own person. The life of the Poet is in every way contrary to care, to cultivation, to civilization.[39] Her service to the patriarchal social structure, symbolized by "her father's tent," would not be negated by fellowship with the Poet, only commuted into another kind of social constraint.

The Poet, though, does not do this intentionally; he does not reject a relationship with the Arab maiden out of an instinct toward protection or social justice or the sanctification of human bonds. Rather, he collapses the possibility of sympathy into the narcissistic projection of the poet's own ideal self. The solipsism of the poet's encounter

[39] See Introduction for Geoffrey Harpham's remarks on asceticism's anti-cultural bent—a resistance to family and community life that nonetheless takes the Book into the wild, brings human culture into radically uncultured ecological spaces.

with the veiled maid is the passage (other than the Wordsworthian allusions of the narrative frame) that critical readers of *Alastor* most often take up. In this poem, so informed by the ghostly presence of Wordsworth, the veiled maid is the vehicle of Shelley's disfiguration of Wordsworthian Romanticism. The Poet's meeting with the veiled maid goes beyond Wordsworth's ascetic model—beyond the limits of wilderness in Wordsworth's verse, and beyond the limits of a healthy organic community that Wordsworth's poetry services. The encounter that the Poet has with the veiled maid takes place once his wandering brings him, past the barrens of the human world, to "the vale of Cashmire, far within / Its loneliest dell, where odorous plants entwine" (145-46). She appears only once Poet has crossed the waste into the mythical zone where "plants entwine" in "a natural bower" found "Beneath the hollow rocks" (147). The fecund stage for the poet's psychosexual meeting with the veiled made is a place of fable, one that is coded as futuristic paradise—a world that has not yet come to pass, but will be more than human imagining.

The veiled maid is a dream vision of the Poet's as he sleeps in the mythic vale, but the uncanny quality of her goes beyond the strangeness of a dream. She is a psychic projection of the Poet's own mind, and the poem's description of her illuminates the Poet's self-absorption, the foils of a truly ascetic practice:

> …He dreamed a veiled maid
> Sate near him, talking in low solemn tones.
> Her voice was like the voice of his own soul
> Heard in the calm of thought; its music long,
> Like woven sounds of streams and breezes, held

His inmost sense suspended in its web

Of many-coloured woof and shifting hues.

Knowledge and truth and virtue were her theme,

And lofty hopes of divine liberty,

Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,

Herself a poet… (151-61)

Her voice, "like the voice of his own soul" speaks of "lofty hopes of divine liberty,/ Thoughts the most dear to him, and poesy,/ Herself a poet" (153; 159-61): She is precariously distinguished from the poet by a frail simile, which is subsequently collapsed as her body is conflated with her song. There is here no tempering of "High instincts" with "mortal Nature," as there is in Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," for the veiled maid's mortality is nonexistent; she has no corporeal life, only the life of poetic sympathy—a half life which feeds on the poet's own life until his very body is a wasteland. Her voice, which is to say "the voice of [the poet's] own soul," is "Subdued by its own pathos" (165). There is no cathartic potential here, for pathos is not rerouted through sympathy, but turned destructively upon itself. The poetic body of the veiled maid interrupts poetry's operations, for there is no human form in which to invest poetic content: "and in their branching veins/ The eloquent blood told an ineffable tale./ The beating of her heart was heard to fill/ The pauses of her music, and her breath/ Tumultuously accorded with those fits/ Of intermitted song" (167-172). The imperfectly imagined bodily operations of the veiled maid—her heartbeat, her breath—overtake the poetry itself, for there is no material body to absorb poetic excess. The self-collapsing figurative body of poetry here nullifies Wordsworthian sympathy. Though the giving

over of the body to spirit, the experience of ecstasy, is a feature of ascetic performance, the spirit and the body are one here, so transcendence is not possible, only destruction.

The Poet finds in the veiled maid a fit receptacle for his sympathy, a figure worthy of his attention and care, and he pours his poetic energies into this immaterial construction of his, into himself until sympathy turns violent: "His strong heart sunk and sickened with excess / Of love…Then, yielding to the irresistible joy… / Folded his frame in her dissolving arms." (181-82, 185, 187). This is not an ascetic deprivation or self-inflicted illness, for the Poet's weakness stems from "excess." Though we might read this a moment where the discipline of the wanderer crosses over into visionary ecstasy, the veiled maid's behavior suggests otherwise. She yields to "irresistible joy." This is not a pure joy that a man in pursuit of holy mysteries would welcome, for "irresistible" implies a temptation that cannot be overcome, by either the Poet or the veiled maid who is himself. She gathers the Poet into her "dissolving arms," takes him into a darkness that he cannot survive. Following this encounter, the Poet figure feels a deep despair and the poem registers his culpability in his own suffering:

> The spirit of sweet human love has sent
> A vision to the sleep of him who spurned
> Her choicest gifts. He eagerly pursues
> Beyond the realms of dream that fleeting shade;
> He overleaps the bounds… (203-7)

Human love takes action here, enacting retribution on the Poet for his misdirection of his faculty for intellectual beauty. The Poet has neglected the ultimate ascetic duty, which is to facilitate a loving community even though he may not participate in communal life

himself. His lack of concern for others has resulted in this psychic disaster, but the Poet does not learn from this, does not change his behavior. He continues to pursue "that fleeting shade" and "He overleaps the bounds." Everything about the encounter with the veiled maid and the fall out of that dark dream rings with transgression. He does not turn from his self-love to a true sympathy with other human creatures, but continues to worship the idol of his own genius over the divine power that bestows that genius.

In Shelley, the quest for holy ground takes topographical turns that are in keeping with the models of wandering anchorites who seek out wilderness in which to perform rites of sanctification. Yet the earth that Shelley eventually finds after wandering through his own many poetic deserts is not the known world of Wordsworthian verse, nor even the ruins of that known world. Shelley's holy ground is an earth far more radically cleansed than Wordsworth's; the purification is so much more intense and dramatic that the figure of the human is purged in the process. Alan Bewell explains Shelley's revolutionary theory of natural renewal thus: "Shelley's social therapeutics are constituted as a recovery of a nature that preceded the fall into sickness, but this recovery proceeds through a radical critique of contemporary disease geographies as preeminently social formations" (628). Shelley over and over again visits desert spaces wherein the pageant of human power is staged—in *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Triumph of Life*, in "Ozymandias," and especially in *Alastor*. What I suggest in rereading Shelley's radical social landscape in terms of his poetry's ascetic register is that Shelley's verse prefigures the whole world as a desert in which art is the shimmering mirage that is the only beautiful thing on a ruined horizon, yet a thing that provides no sustainable relief. Shelley's own poetry, then, ultimately quits this sphere in hopes of bringing about a

rebalanced world, but with disastrous effects for his own figural body. The poet figure himself must be sacrificed; he must give himself back to the natural divine power against which he has committed sympathetic apostasy.

The Poet, the figure for Shelley's poetic self-construction, transgresses the imperatives of Romanticism in two crucial ways. In the first place, he rejects his duty as the figure of the poet—refuses to assume himself the role of embodied phantom in whom a national readership may invest reactionary feeling. In the second place, this refusal to perform the role of the poet effectively calls forth precisely the destruction of the Wordsworthian "perfect image of a mighty Mind" (581. XIII. 69). The poet of *Alastor*, in this configuration, degrades not only the social body, but the mind and the perfect image it conjures: he dissolves poetry itself. The "mighty Mind," in Wordsworth's poetics, is the faculty which

> "Exerts upon the outward face of things,
> So moulds them, and endues, abstracts, combines…
> Doth make one object so impress itself
> Upon all others, and pervade them so,
> That even the grossest minds must see and hear
> And cannot chuse but feel. (XIII. 78-79; 81-84) (fix the quote!)

The "one object" that "so impress[es] itself/ Upon all others" is poetry itself—the effect of the mighty mind's—the poetic genius's—unifying powers. The "grossest minds" that Wordsworth references function as the poetic interlocutor that forces a mobilization of the poet's powers for social good.

The poet figure of *Alastor*, though, is overtaken by the conflation of the faculty of natural piety with Nature itself: the body, removed from all social contexts, cannot receive the powerful feeling of poetry without annihilation to both self and poetry: the poet, longing to extend infinitely his encounter with pure poesy, seeks poetry's universal source and proclaims, "Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched/ Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste/ I' the passing wind!'" (511-13). Nature's capacity to restore the poet's aesthetic gifts and to incite imaginative experience is here mutually exclusive with Nature's own uncontainable destructive force. The poem, in imaging Nature, images its own infinitely deferred death—its own sustained fall. The wasting of the poet's body is, on the one hand, the effect, as I have said, of his refusal of any material body in whom poetry can be confided, but this wasting is also the alchemical process of Shelley's text. *Alastor*, in housing "obstinate questionings" in verse that engages Wordsworth so ambivalently—melds together a disappointment in Wordsworth's failures with its own failure to control symbolic production. In other words, both the form of decaying verse and the content of immanent Romantic critique are left to trail the clouds of glory that mark the illuminating burst of the discursive play between Shelley and Wordsworth.

The final stanza of the poem, the speaker's lament of the poet figure's death in an impossibly poeticized natural scene, condenses *Alastor*'s questioning of Wordsworthian Romanticism, of what happens "when all/ Is reft at once, when some surpassing Spirit,/ Whose light adorned the world around it, leaves/ Those who remain behind" in a "pale despair and cold tranquillity" (713-18). "Tranquillity," of course, recalls Wordsworth's poetic formula of "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (611), but these lines scrutinize the

possibility of an infinite affective loop in which sensational and sentimental poetry sets up the conditions for a degenerative mourning on the part of a bereaved readership. Shelley's poem disavows this product of poetry circulated among "the cold fireside and alienated home" and values instead poet figure's trailing away into the speaker's elegy for "Nature's vast frame, the web of human things,/ Birth and the grave, that are not as they were" (719-20). Where the Preface argues for a reconciliation of the people to natural, originary poetry, *Alastor* can do nothing but look on in "pale despair and cold tranquillity" as the world changes, and the conditions of harmony between Nature and verse and "the web of human things" become themselves utterly changed and inaccessible. This withdrawal can, of course, be read as a radical allegorization of Shelley's dissatisfaction with both the English public sphere of the "tempestuous day" and with Wordsworth's poetics as having an apparently reactionary stance toward the public that Wordsworth is determined to exalt. Yet neither a reading Shelley either as radically blazing a new poetic path or as shirking the poetic responsibility that the Preface sets up could do justice to the intense ascetic labor in the self-contradictory text of *Alastor*.

Alastor draws Wordsworthian Romanticism into its own "many-coloured woof and shifting hues." The poem presents natural piety simultaneously as an ineffectual means of traversing human society and as a poetic gift that cannot be refused. What *Alastor* rejects—that which it apostatically renounces—is the English public's potential to influence poetry, the potential that Wordsworth still identifies in English culture if it can be reformed. Shelley's poem would seem to protect poetry from the threat of the masses by its act of self-enclosure—its self-immolation at the altar of pure poetry. Yet

the poem's invocation functions, by allusion, to construct a different kind of poetic sympathy. Certainly there is a critique of Wordsworth at play, but "play" is the operative word here, for aesthetic play itself constitutes the highest form of inquiry. *Alastor'*s Wordsworthian allusion makes sure of two things: the poem's proper acknowledgement of debt to Wordsworth (of *Romanticism's* debt to Wordsworth), and, thereby, a critical advancement by virtue of its very aestheticization of this Romantic debate.[40] *Alastor* assumes a place in the poetic history so valued by the *Defence* at the same time that it attaches itself to a poet for whom sympathy is the defining ethical goal. Even Shelley's apostasy is thus an impossible affinity with Wordsworth rather than a refusal to account for poetic sympathy. *Alastor* accesses both a human society that is connected to Wordsworth's poetic project—all its popularity and immediacy—as well as a reaction to Wordsworth that both legitimizes and revises Romanticism proper. The poem sympathetically embraces its precursor poet, and, rather than folding Wordsworth's framing poetics into its dissolving arms, *Alastor* finds the communal body of Romantic poetry. He finds a textual body that can absorb the shock of radical poetry into the ethical poetics of sympathy. The text of poetic criticism is always embodied and decaying, always invoking the phantoms that trail through Romanticism without reference to any stable poetic or political position. "The web of human things" and the "many-coloured woof" are the same infinitely entangled fabric that opens itself up to continual reworking in Romantic criticism, in the sustained act of reading Romanticism.

[40] Carol Jacobs, *Uncontainable Romanticism*. Jacobs reads the ekphrastic mode in Shelley's poetry as producing an uncertain effect for the reader, one in which the certainty of the critic's own position is lost in a poetic account so framed and layered that discreet figures disappear.

My contention in this chapter is that the interwoven falls of the Romantic poets have long term effects for what happens to poetry after the failure of even its most committed poets to sustain a revolutionary poetry. I read the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley both as self-consciously poised at the end of the world. But what kind of end the poetry prophesizes is uncertain: the cataclysmic moment in which Wordsworth and Shelley believe themselves to be living might precede a solipsistic fall into darkness, or it might foreground a shift in the balance of a new earth where mankind no longer has dominion. The political world still retains some hope of poetic reform for these poets, but the public sphere ultimately lapses into the neoliberal program of reducing subjects to their political identities and commodity value. This is clear in Wordsworth's Lucy poems as a local and personal effect, but Shelley's wider wilderness spaces represent this trauma on a global scale. In Wordsworth, the Romantic landscape—especially the rural and woodland spaces of the majority of his poetry—is the holy ground to which the poet flees, having identified the urban social situation as depraved and sickly, to gain spiritual clarity. For Wordsworth there are still sacred spaces in England—"in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us,--the place where in the end / We find our happiness, or not at all!" (*The Prelude* XI. 142-44). These spaces can be mapped and marked and cordoned off so that holy ground survives and, with the help of poetry, may push back in time to retake urban spaces. For Shelley, the world is finally not concerned with the happiness of humanity, nor conducive to it. Humanity will have to give way to the spirit of nature, will have to subjugate itself so that the earth can be sanctified and made new.

The only way through, from a world in which the decayed fragments of human power waste in the sand, to the mythic vale of a rebalanced world, is the extinction of the

human. Bewell writes that Shelley "looked at depopulated nature—the *desert*—as a far more ominous monument than the broken sculpture, showing not tyranny's susceptibility to time, but is continuing presence not only *in*, but *as* physical space. Tyranny is ruin, and Shelley intended his readers to recognize that 'those passions…*yet survive* stamped on these lifeless things'" (635, Bewell's emphasis). The Shelleyan poet figure does not undertake his wandering in the desert with an eye toward healing a sickening world. He flies to the desert so that the figure of the human can finally be killed, with all its self-interest and will to power, even over poetry itself. He takes to the desert so that when his own figure is wasted, poetry will continue into the radically green world where he cannot go. If we see, then, that Shelley's endgame is a fecund and radical world of pure poetry, the location of the poet figure is inconsistent in Shelley's theory and verse for precisely this reason: pure poetry should not need the poet to circulate its divine will. Shelley's verse offers up the poet so that poetry can overgrow a blight of human power that survives even in one with such devout intentions as his. If this offering should not bring about a new world, though, Shelley's bond with Wordsworth ensures his place in a continuing ascetic critique that will survive them both.

CHAPTER IV

KEATS'S "MONKISH CELL": MONASTIC REBELLION AND THE PERSONAL SACRED

Hearth

In July of 1820, after he hears of Keats's consumptive hemorrhage, Shelley writes to Keats in concern for the latter's health and future, "I have lately read your Endymion again & ever with a new sense of the treasures of poetry it contains, though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion. This, people in general will not endure…In poetry *I* have sought to avoid system & mannerism; I wish those who excel me in genius, would pursue the same plan… (517). Shelley is very "anxious" that Keats should survive to grow into a brilliant poet, but what sort of improvement he looks for in Keats is unclear from this letter. He objects to *Endymion* on the basis of its lack of discipline: there is treasure in it, but not poured out in proper measure. Keats's nuggets of good verse are "treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion." What Shelley seems to suggest by this is that Keats must better regulate his verse, better discipline his poetry. But Shelley immediately goes on to caution Keats against "system & mannerism." Keats should impose some order on his poetry, but not too much. Shelley's advice to the slightly younger poet puts Keats in an impossible position: he must be well-measured and refined in the manner of more mature, educated, privileged poets, but he must also work by natural instinct, against "mannerism," if he is to participate in a Romantic aesthetic. Keats's response to Shelley in August 1820 offers us insight into how Keats met with the pressures of being suspended between patronizing encouragement and impossible expectations. He writes to Shelley, "you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an

artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furl'd for six months together…My Imagination is a Monastry and I am its Monk…" (524). For Keats, it is Shelley who has no discipline—no understanding of what a poet must learn by hard work and construct from the materials at hand, no sense of what fixity of character it takes to be still and bear one's social burdens. Keats metaphorically situates his poetic practice at the most confining and domestic of ascetic sites, the monastery, and, in doing so, he puts himself in a position to critique assumptions about what constitutes devotion to poetry.

In this chapter I read Keats's poetry for the ways in which it resists a traditional Romantic model of poetry in which proximity to nature is requisite for the sanctification of the poet and his verse. In offering an ascetic figure for his poetic faculty, Keats upholds the Romantic rule in which poetry touches the divine and so inspires a body of worshippers, but Keats's class position forces him to inhabit a particular enclave of ascetic performance. Critics often note the projection of Keatsian speakers into spaces Keats himself never saw or even properly read;[41] these faraway places where ritual wandering might take place are remote from Keats in every possible way. Keats is too poor to attain to the expansive landscapes and wildernesses of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron, too uneducated, and too frail. He has no access to the ascetic wandering that so often coincides with the Romantic sublime, but his imaginary nonetheless participates in the ascetic tropological structure of Romantic poetry. Indeed, given his preoccupation

[41] Marjorie Levinson reads "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" as an example of Keats's middle class reading of Homer in translation, not having the opportunity of classical training as the other Romantics did.

with sacred architectural structures—monasteries, temples, etc.—Keats represents an important and overlooked position on the spectrum of ascetic performance: the cloistered monk in his cell, dwelling closer to the social milieu than any other Romantic ascetic poet figure. The result of Keats's position in an architecturally bolstered enclave of Romantic asceticism is a poetry constructed of treasure-like materials: metaphors and poetic scenes that have a manmade, tangible quality to them, unlike the organic and circumambient figures in Wordsworth and Shelley. Keats pays homage to the ascetic foundations of Romanticism, but he builds a practice of his own from comparatively substantial figures and images. Keats ultimately fashions, I argue, a poetry that ministers to an English culture increasingly under the sway of commodity form in a very different way than the verse of Wordsworth or Shelley.

The asceticism of Keats's poetic practice is more explicit in his letter to Shelley than in most of his poetry, and naming himself a "monk" is the closest Keats comes to aligning himself symbolically with an early Christian ascetic tradition. He more often plays the part of poetic votary of classicism. In this rare case of identification with a more Judeo-Christian ascetic practice, Keats is the figure of the monk—the most social of ascetic figures. The monastery is often adjacent to social spheres, and these monks work amongst the people.[42] This holy ground suits Keats, who values human sympathy above his own renown. The desire for community is the foil to the Keatsian poet figure's anchoritic discipline, and Keats's verse makes commitments not to the spirit of nature,

[42] Nicholas Roe's recent biography explains, "Raised between the City and rural Middlesex, as a child Keats always lived on an edge…that suburban threshold has many counterparts in Keats's poetic topography…" (13). Though his poetic position commands a view of the natural realms that Wordsworth's and Shelley's verse traverse, Keats's poetry takes place within the social milieu.

but to other figures, whether human or spirit. In his sonnet "Bright Star," for example, the poet figure longs for an eternal constancy that he associates with the discipline of holy men, but professes that he cannot live up to that model:

> Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
> Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night;
> And watching, with eternal lids apart,
> Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
> The moving waters at their priestlike task
> Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
> Or, gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
> Of snow upon the mountains and the moors… (1-8)

The poet figure craves the critical distance of a star or a hermit who never sleeps in the course of his duty to watch over and cleanse the domain of mankind. The sonnet offers the image of discipline: a holy figure who shuns desire and wanders into nature in order to provide spiritual protection for the realms of men, encompassed by "earth's human shores." The Keatsian poet figure cannot perform such an ascetic task, for he is faithful to the carnal pleasure of his lover's breathing: "Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath, / And so live ever—or else swoon to death…" (13-14). The possibility of ascetic devotion seems to disappear in the face of interpersonal relationship, but for the Keatsian poet figure this personal attachment inspires its own kind of piety. In this sonnet, his care for the lover is so great that his very life is sacrificed to her. This sonnet echoes Wordsworth's lyrical ballad "Strange fits of passion I have known" insofar as in the final line the speaker imagines the lover's death (" 'O mercy!' to myself I cried, / 'If Lucy

should be dead!'"). But the Keatsian difference is that the poet figure too will expire. So long as he can "hear her tender-taken breath," he has eternal life, but if he should lose the sense of her, he will "swoon to death." The Keatsian poet figure's life force is wrapped up in others, and his very life is forfeit when this connection is lost. This is not the coolly detached self-immolation of Shelley's Poet in *Alastor*, or the stoic sacrifice of the Wordsworthian poet figure to a sublime Lucy, but Keats's poet figure still gives himself over to something greater than himself in this sonnet.

"Bright star" gives the negative example of ascetic practice—the version of devotion that Keats's poet figure cannot perform—and marks the province of the personal as the holy ground of Keats's verse. In "When I have fears that I may cease to be," we see a more conflicted engagement of the Keatsian conundrum of being caught between commitment to a poetic life and desire for a human one:

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
> Before high piled books, in charactry,
> Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
> When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
> Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
> And think that I may never live to trace
> Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
> And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
> That I shall never look upon thee more,
> Never have relish in the faery power

Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore

Of the wide world I stand alone, and think

Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

The first lines of this sonnet list figures that resemble a scriptorium more than any bleak desert or lofty peak. The speaker imagines himself surrounded by "high piled books" that record his "teeming," abundant thoughts, imagines himself surrounded and immersed in the fruits of his poetic labor, in "rich garners." His conditional hope is that his poetic mind will produce a mountain of books containing "Hugh cloudy symbols" transcribed by the "magic hand of chance." The speaker hopes for divine inspiration to write sacred poetic texts; he aspires to be an illuminator surrounded by books. The first eight lines of this sonnet suggest the speaker's devotion to poetry, and his willingness to give himself over to a sacred duty to record sacred verse, to keep to his workroom, but when the "fair creature of an hour" appears, his care for his ascetic poetic vocation is cast aside. The idea of being separated from this figure, this "fair creature,"[43] is the thing that finally drives the Keatsian poet figure into the wilderness. The loss of this creature propels the poet figure to "the shore / Of the wide world" where he "stand[s] alone" The infinitude suggested by the shore, and its status as the margin of habitable human realms makes the shore here an ascetic landscape, and, like Wordsworth's and Shelley's grapplings with phantoms in the wilderness, this thought of the "fair creature" in wild isolation lays waste to the poet figure's plans: "love and fame to nothingness do sink." But what we see from

[43] Cox's note to the poem explains, "Woodhouse suggests the 'fair creature' is the same woman Keats had seen at Vauxhall in 1814," but I read her as a phantom figure who represents the loss of social sympathy.

this poem, and from "Bright star," is that the poet figure will never leave to wander unless the possibility of human love dies.

"Bright star" makes a ritual renunciation of an established model of ascetic poetry, and then turns devoutly to the sacred in the human. In "When I have fears," Keats builds an image of asceticism that is much more in keeping with the abundance of architectural figures; this is an ascetic enclave in which the poet can imagine himself. But even here, where Keats is more at home among piles of books and rich garners'-worth of poetry, the need for sympathy supersedes devotion to poetry. The Keatsian poet figure longs to live in the service of poetry, but beyond that, he wishes to live among beloved others. This desire for community marks Keats's practice of Romantic asceticism as a rebellion against the models of Wordsworth and Shelley. Though Keats's poet figures may hide themselves away, they do not give up human society. When human society forsakes Keats, though, his poetry performs the ultimate sacrifice.

Keats's figurative relegation to the monastery has a historical precedent in the early Christian ascetic movement. The development of communal life out of the solitary life of the desert changes the direction of monastic influence on secular culture. Ascetic practice in the third and fourth centuries culminates with Pachomius's institution of communal living among the scattered pilgrims in the desert. With Pachomius's proposition "that the monks living as hermits come together to eat and share the fruits of their labors," begins the era of monastic order; Pachomius sees the communal possibility in a network of solitaries. The common life that Pachomius founds eventually evolves into common dress and walled enclosures, "which included a church, refectory,

dormitory, garden, and a separate lodging for visitors."[44] With the establishment of communal rule, the desert father becomes one possible position on a spectrum of monastic life. In his *Rule*, St. Benedict describes the hierarchy of sacred life, distinguishing between anchorites and cenobites thus:

> First, there are the cenobites, that is to say, those who belong to a monastery, where they serve under a rule and an abbot…Second, there are the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind. (7)

Only after an ascetic has internalized the rule under which he serves can he be fit for wandering and solitude. Benedict's scale suggests that the cenobite who has not yet been a part of the order long enough to strike out on his own is more susceptible to "the vices of body and mind" that threaten ascetic discipline. The movement of the Keatsian poet to the monastery thus represents an apparently backward progress from the Romantic ascetic poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley, in which the ascetic poet figure has a much greater degree of freedom to range. Keats, as the latest heir to an ascetic symbolic order of poetry, should recede in power based on his identification with an unproven, novice

[44] *The Desert Fathers*, translation and introduction by Helen Waddell. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

figure. The hierarchy Benedict sketches, though, is complicated by the historical tendency of ascetic practice, despite its premise of removal from the community, toward a communal structure.

Between Shelley and Keats, we see an abbreviated version of the social development that takes place between Antony's original desert example and Pachomius's incorporation of holy life. As though he has had quite enough of the extremism of the desert aesthetic, as in his rejection of the eremite's vocation in "Bright Star," Keats calls readers indoors. But once communal life is established as the rule, there is an inherent judgment in granting the exception to the anchorites as Benedict does in this passage. Keats's choice of the monastery as the symbolic site of his ascetic practice is compatible with his anxiety about critical judgments of his unseasoned poetry, but his affinity for the secure dwelling place of holy life is also significant for this reading of Keats's poetry as an immanent critique, rather than a distant one, of the socio-economic conditions of his England. When he retreats to his monkish cell, Keats paradoxically moves closer to the social milieu than his Romantic precursor poets, and his verse becomes the more democratic through this proximity.

The monastery of Keats's poetic imagination represents a withdrawal from the expansive models of Wordsworth's and Shelley's poetry, and, at the same time, a withdrawal from the public that these earlier models seek to sanctify through poetic rites. Keats's withdrawal is an ascetic double bind, an alienation from both the order of Romantic poets and the flock of a national readership. Keats's withdrawal is inherently rebellious, for there is an underlying sense in his reactions to the criticisms of his work that these judgments are based on unjust rules, that the discipline others impose on him is

a dogmatic tenet of elitism in the literary establishment. Keats's preoccupation with enclosed and domestic spaces can be understood as a protective fortification against the slings and arrows of Keats's reception among poetic contemporaries and the English reading public. Disappointed and defensive, Keats determines to quit the public sphere, to abjure the literary culture that rebukes him. But his retreat to the metaphorical monastery does not hide him as effectively as he seems to wish, for the monastery is still part of an ascetic project in service of the public, and Keats continues to write, to illuminate, his verse that will never be truly private. Gavin Flood explains that the private does not exist in ascetic practice; he writes,

> Asceticism is always performed, which is to say always in the public domain (even when performed in privacy). One of the key features of the performance is that it is public and can be observed. Asceticism is therefore performance because the reversal of the flow of the body is enacted within a community and tradition. Ascetic acts performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition. (7)

The cell, private though it seems to be, is still the site of an observable, public performance of tradition. Because there can be no real privacy in ascetic practice, whatever Keats does must still influence the workings of culture. Flood's point here about the sway private ritual has on public life assumes a community with agency, a set of people who are invested in tradition and who therefore survey the ascetic as he performs discipline. The masses manage the monk, but he paradoxically exerts the force

of his rule on them. By this logic of ascetic performance, the community's judgment of the ascetic figure is precisely what designates his life as a feature of communal tradition. He is necessary to them, even if they do not see him, even if the enclosure of the monastery keeps them from witnessing the extent of his commitment.

Flood's point is that cloistering is a collapse of the public and the private, and, in effect, that the meek and downtrodden shall inherit the earth. The unassuming postulant at his private rites submits to tradition in order to gain sway over it, but once he does gain this authority, he can work great change: "[t]he ascetic conforms to the discipline of tradition, shapes his or her body into particular cultural forms over time, and thereby appropriates the tradition…[and] is also the vehicle for change or transformation" (6). Though we can see from his withdrawal into architectural places of worship that the Keatsian poet figure abjures the community as they abjure him, these sites of sacred experience prove that Keats's verse never forsakes an ascetic devotion to poetry. But the form of devotion must be rebuilt. Keats's residence in the monastery of Romanticism, far from shielding him from the world, puts him in a position to challenge assumptions about the conditions that must be in place before worthy poetic offerings can be made. He is not on the fringe of the public sphere or wandering far beyond it in the wastes. Keats is the Romantic poet whose invisible hand resides behind walls adjacent to social spaces, and he gains a tremendous power in this self-placement and self-fashioning as a lowly, cloistered cenobite.

Keats's "Sonnet. Written in disgust of vulgar superstition," one of his earliest surviving poems from the period of uncollected compositions that precede his *Poems* (1817), is relatively less known poem, and one that critics most often include as a

footnote to readings of Keats's anti-religious politics in his major works.[45] This sonnet does not represent a subtle, mature critique of Anglicanism, but it is, I argue, an important example of Keats's developing architectural aesthetic, which he constructs as an alternative to religious and literary establishments. Keats is in political accord with the network of second-generation Romantic public figures insofar as his rejection of institutional religion closely aligns with the Hunt and Shelley circle program. In this regard, he is a fit postulant, for he believes in the social plan expounded by the poetry of that coterie. When Keats writes his "Sonnet. Written in disgust of vulgar superstition" during the Christmas season of 1816, he exhibits his characteristically vehement mistrust of institutionalized religion. Indeed, his sonnet is "unwontedly anti-Christian" in Douglas Bush's terms, but within the Hunt circle sonnet competition that likely prompted this piece,[46] the Keatsian offering is distinctive for how bound up it is with a physical, palpable sense of the institution of the church. Keats's poem does not ride the current of purely philosophical arguments such as those expounded by Hunt in his "To Percy Shelley, on the Degrading Notions of Deity" or anything of the like found in Shelleyan verse. Hunt's sonnet traffics in that typical Romantic combination of natural images and abstract nouns:

> When in the midst of the all-beauteous skies,
>
> And all this lovely world, that should engage

[45] John Savarese, for example, alludes to "Written in disgust of vulgar superstition" in the course of his reading of "Ode to Psyche" as an example of classicism that in Keats is more orthodox than any Christian symbolic register. ("Psyche's 'Whisp'ring Fan' and Keats's Genealogy of the Secular," *Studies in Romanticism*)

[46] Jeffrey Cox's note to the poem explains the context of the Hunt circle sonnet competition.

Their mutual search for the old golden age,

They seat a phantom, swelled into grim size

Out of their own passions and bigotries… (3-7)

The "all-beauteous skies" of "this lovely world" are the antidote, when alchemically combined in some mysterious relation to the "old golden age" of classicism, for a sickening "phantom…of their own passions and bigotries," which is as precise a description of doctrinal disease as Hunt gives. The evils of institutional religious are sickly phantoms and the curative for that epidemic is in a nostalgic view of the "old golden age," but these are critiques and radical theories so widely circulated in the Shelley and Hunt circle that no more precise figures for the decrepit English state are necessary. Keats's politics and his disdain for system are radical, too, but his sonnet does something that Hunt's will not: Keats's poem constructs a critique from concrete materials and brings a radical position to the ground level of a lived experience of the church.

The modifications that Keats makes, to the more typical abstract mode of second-generation Romantic critiques of institutional religion, exemplify, even at this very early phase of his poetic career, Keats's commitment to illuminating the material conditions for oppression, rather than the theoretical ones. There is realism in this anti-Anglican poem that calls on the reader to imagine from whence this dissenting everyman voices his rebuke. The sonnet opens with the tolling of church bells, appealing immediately to a common sensory experience, and showing how strong is the pull of liturgical rhythm, even for such a critical speaker:

THE church bells toll a melancholy round,

Calling the people to some other prayers,
Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,
More heark'ning to the sermon's horrid sound.
Surely the mind of man is closely bound
In some black spell; seeing that each one tears
Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,
And converse high of those with glory crown'd.
Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp,
A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
Into oblivion—that fresh flowers will grow,
And many glories of immortal stamp.

Keats's sonnet follows the pattern of Hunt's sonnet—of naming an ambiguous obfuscating agent ("some black spell" that keeps the Anglican subject anaesthetized), offering some classical antidote ("Lydian airs," for Keats) to this dark phantom, and suggesting some natural element that is lyrically combined with classicism ("fresh flowers will grow"). However, the Keatsian deviations from the Shelley circle model are significant, for, far from abstracting religious oppression from any material figures in which to invest this evil, Keats's sonnet gives an identifiable source in the bells. The speaker is unconsciously compelled by the rhythmical power of the church at the same time that he is hyperbolically repulsed by the effects of liturgical rhythm. There is still some perceptible sway, with a material condition, that this sonnet cannot transcend, that

keeps the poem attentive to the fact that the newly modern subject is pulled in opposing ideological directions. The poem aspires to Shelleyan abstraction, with the vague "some other prayers, / Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares." The stupor into which the English community is plunged by the tyrannical church is, at first, nebulous. But the poem cannot resist the urge to attribute this to a knowable point of origin, to adherence to "the sermon's horrid sound." Abstractions get refined until they are metonymically represented in concrete images. The poem is itself enchanted by some bodily religious experience, by some sensible connection to, metonymically, a bell-tower, its church, and the dark power the church houses.

The bells are the binding element of this sonnet, but they are not themselves, at any point, described in derogatory terms. They are associated with "melancholy," but this is hardly a simple denunciation in Keats, for melancholy, though it exerts an irresistible, magnetic pull on the poet figure, is also of the same class of forces that induce a delicious passivity, as indolence. In the case of Keats's ode, indolence is the gateway to an encounter with figures of spiritual power: "Ripe was the drowsy hour; / The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less…" (15-17). The speaker of "Indolence" lets go of sense before he is visited by divine figures. Indolence and melancholy both are affective forces that still the mortal sense and allow the poetic faculty to see other possibilities. The melancholy lull in the first five lines of the "vulgar superstition" sonnet is associated with the rhythmic spell of the church, but melancholy nonetheless gives ways to epiphany when the speaker names the "black spell." This poem is conflicted: compelled and repulsed at once. The repetitive, percussive effect of the bells is heard in the "other"—"other"—"more" sequence that lists the dogmatic

fallen fruits of a hegemonic religious system. Keats here demonstrates a keen understanding of the conjunction of antediluvian cadence and modern content. The bells themselves have so much rhythmic power, so much poetry, that they can weave an evil spell even on the poet figure who is wary of their message. The speaker of this sonnet is responsive to the bells, regardless of their symbolic alignment with a "black spell" that holds the English masses in thrall. This is the height of desecration for Keats: that natural poetic rhythm should be bound up with the trappings of the godforsaken, "gloomy" institution of the church.

In this sonnet, where he cannot tune out the sound of the bells, the speaker's antidote to this "black spell" is to form a congregation of one—of individual "fireside joys, and Lydian airs, / And converse high of those with glory crown'd." The church of this sonnet is the hearth, the sanctuary of poetic experience and reflection: it is the hallowed space where the brilliant minds of the past converge with the present and incite Keats's Romantic asceticism. In his building of the domestic, fireside monkish cell, the Keatsian poet figure makes a corrective to the bells' song that is used, by the church, toward fiendish ends. He creates a space that keeps him enclosed and protected, and he fills that space with a poetry that originates long before ecclesiastic corruption. Keats is rebuilding his cell and, by extension, the church of poetry both liturgically and architecturally insofar as the reference to "Lydian airs," which signals the rhythmic alternative to the church's tolling bells, appears in the same line that the holier ground of the "fireside" is established as distinct from the physical source of the bells' call. The concurrence in this one line, of the call to worship that strikes the ear and the place that compels the body, represents a Keatsian reconstruction of sacred poetic experience.

"Lydian airs" overpower the bells, so that they only "sigh" and "wail" quietly in the background of poet figure's classical theme. The sound of the bells is subordinated to and incorporated with an anti-ecclesiastical poetic liturgy. Once the melancholy fit of the church's compulsion passes, the poet figure can enter into the private temple of a classical aesthetic.

Keats reforms the poetic critique of the church from the Hunt-Shelley model that, for "vulgar superstitions," does not come close enough to the material point. In the process of taking a stake in the real conditions of religious hegemony, Keats also sets forth a new rule for how Romantic ascetic poetry impacts the public sphere. The Church of England will not do for the Keatsian speaker, but neither will the order of Romanticism as it currently stands. The final lines of the sonnet are evidence of how ill at ease the monkish speaker is with both the state model and the model of an existing poetic fraternity. The speaker cannot turn a deaf ear to the bells, but he can extricate them from their cultural context, and write them into the rhythm of his own poetic paean to the "fresh flowers [which] will grow" once the bells are done with "their sighing, wailing ere they go." In this, the speaker assimilates the bells into an organic life cycle as something that must die in order for new spiritual vigor to emerge. This suggestion of a natural power that will overtake corrupt human systems is not far from Wordsworth's poetic rule, but there is something amiss about this new denomination of the bells as somehow in service of a natural order, for they become part of a speculative future, divorced from the reality they represent earlier in the sonnet. At the end of the sonnet, the flowers grow in the wake of the dying sound of the bells, but how can the speaker bear witness to this rebirth from where he sits indoors by the hearth? The "fireside" is a symbol of human

industry and architectural divide from the elements. These inconsistencies show that, in this particularly early instance, Keatsian verse is going through the motions of natural piety, but that making vows to an organic sensibility is not what the Keatsian poet figure truly seeks. The value of poetry lies elsewhere. Keats is redrawing the plans for holy sites, is remaking them apparently without reference to the foundational tropes of other Romantic poetry. Neither the sacred countryside nor the sublimely green new earth will do for Keats, who prefers to consecrate materials made by human hands as aids to his poetic practice.

What this sonnet shows is the Keatsian poet figure's confusion as to how he can best minister to the people who are under the "black spell" of the religious establishment, for he tries to sanctify the bells, the human tool that stands in for a manmade place of worship, but he also tries to grow fresh flowers as his Romantic ascetic forbears might do. The spiritual oppression of the masses is certainly a crisis for the speaker of this sonnet, and one that should prompt ascetic withdrawal from the corrupted social sphere, but Keats resists that call even in this very early poem. In the tiny, fireside cell of Keats's sonnet there is a massive crisis. From the seclusion of his chamber, the speaker of this poem imagines a reckoning for slavish, dogmatic English society, but what the speaker himself ought to do in the face of this disaster, this "black spell," is unclear even to him and for the poem. Where a more seasoned ascetic might be able to retain some prophetic detachment from such a catastrophe, the Keatsian speaker is caught between the calls of church bells and Lydian airs; sheltered in the domestic space, and in defense against the outside. Keats's Christmas Eve sonnet refuses point blank to stir beyond the threshold of privatized poetic liturgy, literally in spite of the call to engage in communal feeling. This

sonnet is waiting for something new to grow—or for something new to be *built* that will guard against present horrors. Since the propagation of poetic spiritual defense will be difficult for a poet who remains in his cell, Keats's poet figure builds from the inside out, laboring for an immanent critique of hegemonic cultural forces.

This speaker of "vulgar superstition" has a clear, firm sense of what he prays will die, but a far murkier conception of how better things might flourish instead. Will flowers, which have a cyclical organic life, grow? Or will "glories of immortal stamp"? Keats's speaker has a limited understanding of a conditional future. If there is something volatile, unstable, and unfit about Keats's sonnet, Wordsworth's ecclesiastical sonnet "Decay of Piety" (1827) offers the more patient, ordered (and arguably reactionary) perspective of a weathered wanderer. This ecclesiastic sonnet, from Wordsworth's elaborate project to give the history of the Church of England from its druidical past to its nineteenth-century present, was composed some ten years after Keats's Christmas season sonnet. Neither Wordsworth nor Keats read the other's poem, but these two sonnets bear an uncanny resemblance to one another:

> OFT have I seen, ere Time had ploughed my cheek,
> Matrons and Sires-who, punctual to the call
> Of their loved Church, on fast or festival
> Through the long year the house of Prayer would seek:
> By Christmas snows, by visitation bleak
> Of Easter winds, unscared, from hut or hall
> They came to lowly bench or sculptured stall,
> But with one fervour of devotion meek.

I see the places where they once were known,

And ask, surrounded even by kneeling crowds,

Is ancient Piety for ever flown?

Alas! even then they seemed like fleecy clouds

That, struggling through the western sky, have won

Their pensive light from a departed sun!

The Wordsworthian speaker of this sonnet is situated in the communal practice of the same "fast or festival" that draws the rest of the churchgoers, who are "punctual to the call / Of their loved church." But there is no designation of "other" for the church as with the Keatsian sonnet, and likewise there is no alienation from the church for Wordsworth's speaker. "House" as an appositive for church echoes the Keats sonnet's domestic sensibility; the speaker imagines the church as a safe place, protected from the harrowing outdoors, such that we can imagine the warmth of the "house of Prayer" simply by contrast with "Christmas snows" and "visitation[s] bleak of Easter winds." So far, this sonnet of Wordsworth's in the more cenobitic in tone. Yet there is, unsurprisingly, no sense of confinement in the case of Wordsworth's speaker. He, like the adherents he has observed, has made his way through inclement weather to partake in a social phenomenon. As is often the case in Wordsworth's verse, the speaker of this sonnet does not simply observe the elements, but is participant in them. Wordsworth's ascetic poet figure paradoxically maintains his footing in both the solitary natural realm and the spiritual community. This sonnet's conflation of liturgical time with natural cycles likewise writes the poetry of nature into the church, albeit in a retroactive, nostalgic way. This elemental sanctification is sealed by the final tercet of the poem. The speaker

laments the decay of piety, asking "Is ancient Piety for ever flown?" at the same time that he aligns religious piety with natural piety, for the original piety—the original rhythm of the church—is suffused with the same "pensive light [won] from a departed sun" that clings to mankind in the process of his fall toward civil obedience in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" ("trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home").

The two sonnets come to oddly sympathetic conclusions—neither speaker is under any illusion as to whether or not the church will decline in influence over human experience. But this is met with utterly contrary responses: a kind of furious relief on the one hand, and rhetorically ambiguous dejection on the other. This difference points us to a new way of understanding the principle schism between Keats and Wordsworth: Keats does not value a position of authority in the community, for that authority comes from distance—from being set apart and above one's people. Keats's poetic religiosity is also deeply communal, but his poet figure most often expresses this as devotion to the personal relationship. Communal sympathy is privatized, in "Bright star" and "When I have fears," as is ascetic ritual.

Keats imagines the religious experience of poetry as deeply personal, as something that must be closed off and protected from a community, but this withdrawal is not a rejection of the social sphere. Keats's symbolic move into the monastery is motivated by fear of a community that constantly disciplines him though he longs so much to be in fellowship with them. The hearts of the public are not yet prepared for Keats's Romantic word; his poetry finds few sympathetic readers in its own historical moment. Nietzsche's modern, anti-religious theory of the ascetic helps us understand the evolution of the ascetic paradox in Keats's poetry. Nietzsche writes, "where spirits of

strong and independent constitution withdraw in isolation—oh, how different it looks from the desert imagined by intellectuals!--, for in some cases, these intellectuals are themselves the desert" (88). Nietzsche's concept of the ascetic as a desert within himself, which spatially collapses the distinction between the anchorite and the cenobite, is crucial for considering how Keats manages to transmute the space of the monastery into his own Romantic wilderness. Nietzsche elaborates his sense of the individual-as-desert by noting that the desert might be any space where "commotion" can be avoided, "for we philosophers need respite principally from *one* thing: from 'the contemporary' above all" (89). Keats is scared of everything beyond his own doorstep, and he resists current public discourse because he considers himself chastised and disciplined by the world. The contemporary is a source of anxiety for Keats, and the retreat his poetry almost always makes is to a classicism of his own construction. This turn to classicism, too, is echoed in Nietzsche's theory and its site of individual asceticism: "When Heraclitus withdrew into the courtyards and colonnades of the great Temple of Artemis, his was a worthier 'desert'…But what Heraclitus avoided is no different from what we avoid today: commotion and the democratic chatter of the Ephesians, their politics, their news of the 'Empire'…the trash of the market-place, of 'the contemporary'…" (89. In Nietzsche, the ruins of the classical era are the holy ground for intellectuals who pursue an ecstatic vision of human history. In Keats, this is the first ascetic step: to raise classical temples in which to reform the religion of poetry. Through classicism, Keats writes the spiritual potency of asceticism into a private space that is ultimately limitless as "the shore / Of the wide world" (12-13). He inscribes his ascetic practice on the vaulted domes of Romantic sanctuaries that image the infinite, but only as it exists within the finite human

imagination. No pilgrimage is necessary, no wandering. The reformed Romantic ascetic figure in Keats's poetic rule needs only himself and the materials of his own imagination.

In a letter to George and Georgiana in September 1819, Keats writes, "Whenever I find myself growing vapourish, I rouse myself, wash and put on a clean shirt brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoestrings neatly and in fact adonize as I were going out—then all clean and comfortable I sit down to write. This I find the greatest relief—Besides I am becoming accustom'd to the privation of the pleasure of sense. In the midst of the world I live like a Hermit" (363). Keats's sense of discipline—the condition for his actual writing, if not the indolent prewriting stage of composition—is in keeping with a ritualistic sensibility that he himself represents as monastic. The question of Keats's asceticism is what this performance serves in a poetics that resists "going out," embraces "privation of the pleasure of the sense" only when it is found in "the world," the contemporary. He sits alone, proclaiming himself clean, to write himself into a space where none of his contemporaries can be. This is certainly an ascetic performance, but the "monk" and the "hermit" are roles Keats rarely plays in his poetry. His asceticism is far more explicit in his letters, which are signs of personal relationships Keats valued deeply, and which require a more serious symbolic register as such. Keats is most accountable to Romantic asceticism where he describes his poetic intentions to those he loves and venerates. His poetry, though, even though it does not demonstrate the same ascetic rigor that Keats's letters describe, cannot unburden itself of devotional tropes. Keats's Romantic ascetic relationship to community is a difficult one—complicated and painful. But his reverence for love and sympathy is such that he builds fanes and temples to the poetry of personal feeling. In the readings that follow, I consider how Keats's Romantic asceticism builds

up community without recourse to the contemporary, and practices devout sympathy without public support.

Temple

In the development of Keats's poetic faculty, in the progress of his verse over his short career, we can see a dramatic break with the authority of an English literary model propped up by cultural requirements that are untenable for a modern middle class. After *Endymion*, Keats repeatedly turns to concrete architectural figures for his own imagination, and gives up meditating on the reliquaries of other men's genius, which represent unattainable cultural heights. In the poems he writes before his confidence is shattered by the *Endymion* reviews, though, Keats focuses his poetic devotion on the products of artists who have been absorbed into high English culture. Before he comes to understand that there is no place for him in the nineteenth-century English culture industry, Keats fills his poems with objects—"treasures," in Shelley's terms—that have been passed down from glorious figures of the cultural past. The most famous sonnets from this phase of Keats's poetry all record indirect aesthetic experiences: "On first looking into Chapman's Homer" describes an ecstatic experience of art, but gleaned from a text in translation by a reader with no classical training; "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" is a lofty representation of sculpture that the speaker is seeing in the British Museum, outside its original classical context; "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again" is an act of poetic wandering, but wandering that can only be taken up virtually and vicariously through another man's work. In the pre-*Endymion* phase of his writing, when Keats is still devoted to an English literary establishment that reveres and appropriates

Homer, and that houses Shakespeare and Milton (as well as Wordsworth and Shelley), Keats's poet figure still seeks the sacred in approved artifacts of high poetry and art.

From these poems, relics of Keats's reading, Keats's preoccupation with economic realities is clear, for he chooses to bless objects without use value; he stores up treasures that exceed the grasp of commodity form. Already in his poetic development, Keats sifts through cultural history for materials he can use to ground his own verse. Christopher Rovee reads in Keats's curatorial project of 1817 a burgeoning anti-capitalist critique into these poems that so worshipfully represent works of genius past:

> Keats's evocation of the museum as a site not of resonance but of wonder may have conditioned his reception as a devotee of sensuous consumption, enchanted by and desirous of objects he can see and reach toward but cannot touch. What struck his earliest readers as by-products of this thwarted acquisitiveness, however—the excesses and aesthetic overloads of his poems—could from another perspective be seen as potentially productive…we encounter the 'trash of Keats' as generative in its own right, supplying a model to subsequent connoisseurs of the secondhand, aesthetes and otherwise, who would piece together an oppositional stance from the refuse of consumption's logic. (1015-16)

The implication of Rovee's argument is that Keats's secondhand poems mark Keats himself as trash, as the generative "refuse of consumption's logic." The piles of treasure in Keats's poems are the foundation for an incarnate sacred aesthetic that reaches its culmination in Keats's great odes and in *The Fall of Hyperion*. If the secondhand sonnets are rooms full of treasures that allow the Keatsian poet figure to forget his socio-

economic shortcomings and to circulate his own verse among the relics of high culture, then the odes show all those relics to be the bedrock for Keats's building of grander, more elaborate architectural figures that will suit his poetry.

In Keats's odes, we can read his departure from a poetic economy which values literary history above the contemporary subject's powers of imagination, which values the voices of the Oxbridge-educated elite over the voice of the common man. "Ode to Psyche" begins to bridge this gap allegorically, for Psyche is an intercessional figure, standing between Keats's submission to the literary establishment—Homer, the Elgin Marbles, *King Lear*, Milton, etc.—and his supplanting of this history with figures exclusive to his own literary imagination. "Psyche"—one of the "Great Odes" of 1819, one of the poems critics since Keats's contemporary moment through to the present consider representative of his matured poetic powers—is a carefully wrought experiment with the limits of the human imagination. "Psyche" begins, as so many of Keats's poems do, with the frame of the dream: "Surely I dreamt to-day; or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?" (4-5). Dream-state and consciousness are often blurred in Keats, but the uncertain boundaries of conscious and unconscious energies are an especially significant beginning to this poem that collapses the distinction between psychic space and physical space. In this ode, Keats explicitly condenses ascetic wandering into what seems an unconscious afterthought. In the next lines, the speaker says,

> I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
> And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
> Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side

In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof (6-9).

He wanders "thoughtlessly" here, but this thoughtlessness is a strange designation for the Keatsian poet figure, who is, in the earlier poems of reverence to aesthetic forbears, very solemn and deferent in his wandering, virtual though it may be. The stage-whispered reference to wandering in "Psyche" is in direct opposition, for example, to the way the speaker of "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again" progresses through the anxieties represented in that sonnet:

Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme,
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire. (9-14)

"King Lear," composed in 1818, a year before "Psyche" is attentive to the allusive network of English literary history—"Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion"—and represents the burden of influence in a sequence that, like Shelley's speaker's invocation to Wordsworth in *Alastor*, conflates the natural inspiration for poetry (the "clouds") with poetic personae. The clouds, which transmit the poet's divine theme and protect him from being tempted off his path into "a barren dream," forcibly echoes "I wandered lonely as a cloud." The Wordsworthian clouds follow England's chief poet (Shakespeare) and the Keatsian poet figure follows the clouds. The plea, the prayer, of this sonnet, then, is to sovereign poets, a prayer that the speaker, once he has passed through the forest of mad genius, will not be forced to wander in the wilderness of dreams. The Keatsian poet

figure begs that his wandering will be disciplined and ascetic, rather than idle and tormented.

"Ode to Psyche" undoes the oblations of "King Lear," or perhaps considers the immolation complete with the burning up of both the speaker and his concern for how his own reading and writing will accord with an order of English poets past and present. But the tone of these early lines of "Psyche" is flippant on the point of ascetic ritual: the speaker performs this rite not solemnly, but thoughtlessly, and "on the sudden" "faint[s]" or *feints* "surprise." Though it is strange to consider the ode as part of Keats's mature phase given the mere year of separation from his major sonnets on secondhand experience, "Psyche" is a post-*Endymion* offering that testifies to a conversion of Keats's poetic character.[47] This abandonment of an established symbolic pattern of Romantic writing, of the poet figure's seeking higher holy ground beyond the social milieu, is worth reading carefully for what it suggests about Keats's new rule of poetry. In "Psyche," the speaker stumbles upon Psyche and Cupid locked in embrace under a "whisp'ring roof" of foliage. Why, here, does the mythical wood take this form? Why does a traditional site of Romantic asceticism start to resemble a manmade dwelling—a feature of socio-economically bonded community?

The argument of "Psyche" is that the goddess Psyche, "latest born and loveliest vision far"—a figure, perhaps, for the poem itself as the most recent and the superlative Keatsian poetic offering—has no temple and that it befalls the speaker to build her one.

[47] The other secondhand sonnets I mean here are "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," all three are major poems, but from the year before *Endymion* and the critical calamity that followed; all are preoccupied with an external agent of imagination, where the odes, in *Endymion*'s wake, abandon that process.

Fairest of all the goddesses of Olympus is Psyche, "though temple [she] has none" (28). The speaker identifies all the accolades Psyche lacks before he professes himself devoted to offering her worthy praise, but his praise takes curiously concrete form:

> O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
> Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
> When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
> Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
> Yet even in these days so far retir'd
> From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
> Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
> I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.
> So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
> Upon the midnight hours;
> Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
> From swinged censer teeming;
> Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. (36-49).

The time of "antique vows" and the "fond believing lyre"—the time of classic myth—is coeval with the time of Wordsworthian "happy pieties," when the "haunted forest boughs," and "the air, the water, and the fire" are all "holy." The stanza begins with the nostalgic lament of the passing of these equivalent forms of devotion, but then dispenses with the necessity of either classical authority or the natural powers to which Romantic verse generally pays homage, as when Wordsworth writes the ode-like "Tintern Abbey"

in praise of the natural landscape that sustains his spirit, or when Shelley looks in *Alastor* to a future in which the world reclaims its organic power to undo human tyranny. In the present moment of "Ode to Psyche," the speaker has access to traditional holy grounds. But in this poem, so far removed from outdated modes of worship, inspiration is still possible through the muse of the speaker's "own eyes." His mind and body are the instrument, the site, and the ecstasy all in one condensed center of worship.

The speaker in this stanza could be the hermit of "Tintern Abbey," alone in the forest and sending up smoke as from a censer in service of the natural spirit that delivers divine poetry unto the solitary figure. Keats's performance of this poetic ritual, though, is distinct from Wordsworth's lyrical ballad version in that the speaker desires to becomes himself the form that bears witness to her glory. He offers his own mind and his own figural body as building materials. This reads as an apostasy from the Romantic rule that Wordsworth establishes and Shelley adapts, for Keats, unlike the other poets in the Romantic canon makes his own psyche, his own experience, and his own feeling the object of poetic devotion. In the final stanza of the ode, the speaker's alchemical vision of holy redevelopment becomes clear:

> Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind,
> Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
> Instead of pines shall murmur in the win:
> Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
> Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
> And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,

The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in! (50-67)

I have argued that allusive exorcisms in Shelley follow a liturgical sequence in which the foundational precepts of Romantic poetry must be named before they can be expelled. This Keatsian example follows that pattern: we can hear in the "untrodden region" of the speaker's mind the echo of the untrodden ways where dwell Wordsworth's female phantoms, figures for ecstatic experience that gets beyond the carefully cultivated spaces of his unwild wildernesses. The comparatively uneducated (by elite universities or by the school of Nature) Keatsian mind is "untrodden" and ready to house the phantom figures that cause Wordsworth and Shelley so much trouble. The Keatsian poet figure here seems a brash zealot, willing to face spiritual trials that well-established holy men have been too wary to engage. The wilderness of the Keatsian imagination in this stanza has its sublime components: the brood of elder pines of Shelley's "Mont Blanc"—the "wild-ridged mountains"—are here in the "dark-cluster'd trees" on the steeps of the Keatsian poet

figure's mind. But the speaker of "Ode to Psyche" insistently supplants these structures, these natural emblems of a Romantic religiousity, with "branched thoughts," and "[w]ith the wreath'd trellis of a working brain." His mind is a "wide quietness," the compact wilderness of the single intellectual, and he converts this anchoritic domain into a "rosy sanctuary." These two very different figures for the domain of poetic genius, both deeply ascetic images, hinge on the line break that separates the harsh sacred landscape from the safe enclosure of sanctuary, making of Keats's own mind the temple in which a veil is torn.

In "Ode to Psyche," this brain-construction that invites the goddess figure to nest in the poet's consciousness is innocuous. But Keats's development of the church of Romanticism does not end with Psyche's temple, and, in the cases of "Ode on Melancholy" and *The Fall of Hyperion*, laying new groundwork is a much more dangerous labor. In "Ode on Melancholy," the final stanza is a distillation of the peril that attends the installation of the goddess figure in the temple of the mind. The speaker expresses concern for whomever might hear his words, assuming that audience members are experiencing the same temptations of oblivion that the speaker himself has encountered: "No, no, go not to Lethe," he says, as though mournfully recalling his own close call in the act of pulling a fellow traveler in human feelings back from the ledge. Do none of the things that seem the most relieving, but instead invest this feeling in the sensible world, "For shade to shade will come too drowsily, / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul" (9-10). Suicide is unnecessary, for the death drive in Keats's work, the affinity between desire and suffering, between pleasure and pain, is so strong that the

task of the speaker and the auditor is to suspend the state of humanity but a little while longer.

The cure in "Melancholy" is the ephemeral moment of natural bliss that has more in common with a Wordsworthian worshipful aesthetic:

> But when the melancholy fit shall fall
> Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
> That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
> And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
> Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
> Or on the rainbow on the salt sand-wave,
> Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
> Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
> Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
> And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

The "weeping cloud" that "hides the green hill in an April shroud," here again, sounds like Wordsworth—a lonely cloud, remote from the speaker's prospect, that passes over the countryside. The addressee of this poem might be viewing from some picturesque-conducive site, a far off hill in the midst of a rejuvenating shower. But melancholy turns this entire scene into a death rite—the ambient feeling that falls "suddenly" transmutes this fecund prospect into a picture of decay. From the sequence of the ode's argument, we can see that the value of everything on the speaker's list of "my favorite things" is worthwhile only insofar as it will last for a *short* while. The benefit of nature is not lost on Keats, who so admires Wordsworth, but the experience of nature has value in Keats

only insofar as it reminds the speaker of his own fleeting humanity. The impermanence of happy love and of beauty and truth—the flashing quality of these perfect images in Keats—is the condition for enjoyment.

But Keats theatrically tips his ascetic hand in this stanza, for the speaker cannot uncouple these images of a sensible reality from an underlying sense of the death and enslavement they carry with them. In this stanza, there is a tone of disdain for the corporeal frame. The imperative to "glut thy sorrow" on the morning rose juxtaposes what should be a pure, natural image with restorative powers, with the deadly sin of gluttony. The speaker encourages his advisee in the field of melancholic feeling to "emprison" his lover's "soft hand," shackling the image of a tangible human body to entrapment. The melancholic lover should "feed" on his mistress's eyes. This movement of the poem combines the bodies of the real world with a gross and insatiable desire that tends toward death.

Keats performs all the ascetic's repugnance at the physical world in this second stanza, but this antistrophe complicates a straightforward rejection of the body by mingling a repressed disgust for worldly pleasure with terms of economic exchange. The speaker is concerned with the "*wealth* of globed peonies" and the "*rich* anger" that the mistress shows. It would be entirely compatible with an ascetic renunciation of the corrupt world to impugn the flesh and money (the root of all evil) in one fell rhetorical swoop. But images of wealth and riches are of the highest class in Keats's poetic hierarchy. We cannot read this stanza in "Melancholy," then, as a simple rejection of worldly pleasure. Rather, this moment is evidence of the poet figure's deeply conflicted stance within a poetic order that extols transcendence. Keats's poetry is caught in a

shame spiral, for since no lofty objects—no alpine summits or infinite expanses—comprise his experience, the spaces to which he retreats often take on the likenesses of that which he disdains. This is the reason, for example, that a sonnet written in utter contempt of formalized religion assumes such a religious form, and that, in general, a poetics that abhors commodity form is brimming with commodifiable objects.

The socio-economic boundaries in Keats, as I have said, in keeping with Marjorie Levinson's sense of Keats's verse as allegorical for his class position, are a definite factor in Keats's choice to brick himself into the metaphorical monastery. The construction of the symbolic cell is analogous to nineteenth-century partitioning of the "women's question"—to relegating those without a voice in the public sphere to a private domain over which they can preside. Keats's builds the monastery where he might preside over a poetry that records the divine workings of his own mind, but the Keatsian poet figure is not master of the enclosures he assembles in his imagination. For in the odes, which mark the withdrawal of the Keatsian poet figure from a public realm he fears, the poet cannot do without sympathy. He shuts himself away from the public, but invites the figures of private feeling into his sacred spaces. In "Psyche" the architectural figures for the poet's imagination are clearly created in devoted service of a feminine figure for sympathy, but "Ode on Melancholy" shows clearly what kind of ascetic sacrifice the poet figure makes when he invokes the phantom figures of personal affect:

> She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
> And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
> Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
> Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (21-30)

The "she" who dwells with Beauty is the lover, full of mercurial human emotion, prone to rages that are in direct opposition to the steady expression of ascetic discipline. Her death is the condition for poetic transcendence, for the poet's own finer feeling to be unmoored from its earthly, sympathetic tethers. As in "Bright star" and "When I have fears," the loss of the human beloved is the only event that can incite Romantic ascetic wandering, but the Keatsian poet figure does not crave this loss to set him free for spiritual pursuits. He dreads the loss and resents the exile into which loss would propel him. Those sonnets, though, do not go as far as "Ode on Melancholy," for they stop short of rendering the poet figure's own death as sacrifice, as offering to a governing spiritual principle.

"Melancholy," again like "Bright star" and "When I have fears," has much in common with Wordsworth's "Strange fits of passion I have known": the address is to a listener who can identify with the affective troubles of the speaker ("And I will dare to tell, / But in the Lover's ear alone, / What once to me befell"); as in Wordsworth's poetry, the resolution to this excess of passion is the death of the love object. For the stoic Wordsworthian poet figure, a surge of personal feeling is unbearable and unseemly, and he subjugates that feeling when he imagines its source dead. The pain of pleasure and the

agony of attachment have no place in disciplined Romantic verse. But where Wordsworth's balladic speaker lets the possibility of Lucy's death resound horribly without any sense of how this emotion might, once recollected in tranquility, propel him to a higher experiential plane, the speaker of Keats's ode speculates a very different outcome to violent feeling.

The speaker tells the addressee that, if a melancholic genius can detach from the beloved, can part ways with this person who represents socio-economic as well as emotional entanglement, he will be able to vanish and reappear within the temple walls. Barring the transient experience of flowers and the shifting light of the rainbow and the short-lived beauty of lovers' passion, the speaker explains the eternal undercurrent of finite human life: "For shade to shade will come too drowsily / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul," and, when the shade does fall, the poet figure will, "in the very temple of Delight" stand before Melancholy's "sovran shrine." If he can pass beyond the first fervor of communal life, he will be free to fight demons alone in the desert of the individual mind, the wild sanctuary of the Keatsian imagination. To be reborn, holy and pure, one first must die. The poet figure must embrace a social death in order to gain new life in the temple of poetry. Yet even this alchemical ascetic rite is imperfectly managed, for the Keatsian poet figure cannot cross the river of the dead without carrying some trappings of the material world, the world in which love is incarnate in the human "mistress." In the temple, Melancholy herself is veiled and has no image; the speaker instead describes her material effects. Her "sovran shrine" is here the manifestation of her superlative power, but "sovran" also calls forth currency—the British sovereign—as though, by investing in the goddess figure, the Keatsian speaker has stored up his treasure

in a heaven of his own making. The solidity of her fane is his reward for enduring a shadowy existence in the world of men to which he does not truly belong. He pours his life force into trophies that he could not win in his social life.

The poet figure's body dissolves in proportion to the solidification of the form of his poetic offering. His perspective is the only evidence we have of Melancholy, a refracted vision of the shrine only, which is the referent for what is "seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine." The poet figure's superior frame of mind is the only channel to Melancholy and his vital energy is poured into a palpable, visible object. Here again, there is the language of consumption: his "strenuous tongue" and "palate fine," figures also for singing and poetic refinement, are the features that allow the poet to "taste the sadness of her might." To "taste" a religious experience of melancholy is a much more disciplined sensory act than the "glut[ting] thy sorrow on a morning rose" in the second stanza. This is the holy ground, the psychic space, in which pain and pleasure are balanced. The poet figure is ultimately suspended, is "among [Melancholy's] cloudy trophies *hung*." The final line of the ode holds in abeyance the opposition between the violence of corporeal life and the insubstantiality of poetic figures.

In "Melancholy," the poet figure is suspended in this poetic chamber, this intermediate space that manages the gap between Keats's real life as a struggling, suffering poet and his figural life as a chosen one whose very essence is poetry. There is a gap here between the figural and the material that Keats must confront again and again. Karen Swann reads Keats's practice of walking this fine line of self-figuration in terms of the commodity culture that the young poet at once resists and masters. Swann reads the

Adonis tableau in *Endymion* as one of the more embarrassing instances of self-promotion in Keats,[48] seeing in this moment how attentive Keats's work is to the nuance of a nineteenth-century proto-selfie culture. She writes, "In the manner of the radically abstracted and self-absorbed model or commodified image, he seems at once hollow and too full of himself, completely occulted and too ostentatiously promoted" (23). Swann unearths the root cause for Keats's performance of asceticism: Keats is paradoxically suspended between an unattainable, unreal image of himself and a highly visible object of public desire. In Flood's description of ascetic performance, he insists that the privacy of the monkish cell is really quite public. Keats occupies the metaphorical monastery, the poetic sanctuary, as a way of making paradoxical self-making under the sovereign rule of commodity form, seem traditional. If he can find his own quiet corner in the structure of Romantic asceticism, Keats can write the conditions of his poetics—this speculative material culture of a middle-class tradesman without the bedrock of history and wealth to support him—as something concrete, timeless, like the eternal rocks beneath transient foliage.

Yet this corner is not at all quiet, for another presence is there already when the Keatsian poet figure enters with a mind to worship, undisturbed by the contemporary. The challenge to this reformation of tradition that is meant to carve a space for Keats in the brotherhood of Romantic poetry is in the force of feeling that cannot be contained even by Keats's many magical objects. The phantom figures whom Keatsian speakers are always surprised to find in the confines of carefully structured poems—Psyche,

[48] Swann's argument draws on the premises of Christopher Ricks' important study, *Keats and Embarrassmen*t. Ricks argues that the unflinchingly personal elements of Keats's work are an innovation in art's potential to represent and account for the unspeakable nature of human life.

Melancholy, and especially Moneta—are femme fatales who threaten even a poet figure so heavily defended by walls of his symbolic enclosure. Keats, as ascetic builder, consecrates the church of poetry to his own deep feeling above all. His feeling is most moved by the possibility of sympathy, so the figures in Keats's temples represent the eternal afterlife of both the beloved human figures in his poetry and the intense emotional experiences they elicit. His goddesses are the figures of the intense affective experience that occurs when the poetic monk insists on cloistering himself; these phantom figures are the force of feeling that has nowhere to go, bricked into the poet's consciousness and threatening to dissolve him unless an opening from which they might burst forth presents itself.

The Keatsian aesthetic that I have traced in this chapter—from Keats's resistance to a traditional ascetic practice, to the architectural figures it sets up to supplant that tradition, to the overpowering ghostly figures of lost human sympathy—reaches its apogee in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats's final unfinished poem. The poet figure expresses his uncertainty as to whether his work will live on, accepted by the reading public as poetry, or die with him, the untold dream of a fanatic. The first stanza reads,

> Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
> A paradise for a sect; the savage, too,
> From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep
> Guesses at Heaven: pity these have not
> Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
> The shadows of melodius utterance.
> But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;

For Poesy alone call tell her dreams,
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable charm
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say,
"Thou art no Poet; may'st not tell thy dreams?"
Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse
Be Poet's or Fanatic's will be known
When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave. (1-18)

The figures for poetic vocation here are ascetic, but Keats again resists identification with the "fanatics," who "weave / A paradise for a sect" or the "savage," who "From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep / Guesses at Heaven." The fanatic shares his dreams with "a sect," a community, but asks no more record of his holy dreams than that, and the "savage," whose perspective is lofty as that of an ascetic on the mountain top, leaves no trace of his visions. The poet figure does not disdain these figures, though "fanatic" suggests an unsavory zealotry, and "savage" suggests incivility. He identifies with them, not in terms of their exaggerated asceticism, but in terms of their ignominy, for Keats is ever concerned that his life spent in devotion will fade into nothingness. Embedded in this stanza is the underlying reproach for a public that might reject Keats's poetic offering even when it has involved the sacrifice of his own life. The poet figure asserts that no man alive has a right to assert that another human being's dreams are not the stuff of

poetry, for humanity itself is poetic: “every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions, and would speak” if he were not put off by fear that others will not think his language fine enough. The human is sacred for Keats—not as a shadow of divinity that originates elsewhere, but in his incarnate glory—and only dogmatic cultural practices can silence his poetic soul.

This is the argument of the poem, but the narrative itself begins with the speaker’s dream of what seems to be a cultivated, developed scene. The dream space is, once again, made of distinctly Keatsian materials. Once the poet passes into the plane of poetry, he is awestruck by a scene that he does not expect to find:

> When sense of life return’d, I started up
> As if with wings; but the fair trees were gone,
> The mossy mound and arbour were no more;
> I look’d around upon the carved sides
> Of an old sanctuary with roof august,
> Builded so high, it seem’d that filmed clouds
> Might spread beneath, as o’er the stars of heaven;
> So old the place was, I remembered none
> The like upon the earth: what I had seen
> Of grey cathedrals, buttress’d walls, rent towers,
> The superannuations of sunk realms,
> Or nature’s rocks toil’d hard in waves and winds,
> Seem’d but the faulture of decrepit things
> To that eternal domed monument. (I. 58-71)

In this transitional passage, the natural conventions of Romantic poetry vanish ("the fair trees were gone / the mossy mound and arbour were no more"), and are replaced by this "old sanctuary" that is "so old" that the speaker "remember[s] none / The like upon the earth." The models that the speaker can remember from his earthly life have something in common with the fragmented statue of Ozymandias; "The superannuations of sunk realms" tell the story of a ruined human world. But Keats's speaker is missing the organic logic of renewal that fuel Wordsworth and Shelley; his imagination, however much it may improve on the real world of men, is still modeled on "the faulture of decrepit things."

The limit of the Keatsian imagination is the human mind, but the mind is built as a fane and populated by figures for personal feeling that are impossible to resist. As Melancholy threatens to overtake those with a poetic sensibility, and hang them among her cloudy trophies, Moneta appears in *The Fall of Hyperion* to honor the speaker in telling him of his finer capacity for feelings that will destroy him. His ability to suffer and his poetic faculty are one in the same, and Moneta's revelation of the speaker's exceptionality proves to be his undoing. In approaching Moneta's shrine, the speaker hears her voice:

> … 'If thou canst not ascend
> These steps, die on that marble where thou art.
> Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,
> Will parch for lack of nutriment; thy bones
> Will wither in a few years, and vanish so
> That not the quickest eye could find a grain

Of what thou now art on that pavement cold…' (107-113)

The anxieties of a Keats just two years off from his deathbed are palpable in these lines, in which the speaker hears a poetic divinity telling him "thy bones / Will wither in a few years" so that not even the most attentive human soul could find a trace of them on this hard floor. His flesh is "near cousin to the common dust." *He* is common, and unless he can overcome this mortal failing to approach the altar of poesy, he will waste into oblivion, remembered by no one and memorialized by no speck of human matter. Happily, the speaker mounts the steps to the altar in time, and, after his "Slow, heavy, deadly" progress (129), regains his voice to ask, " 'What am I that should so be sav'd from death? / What am I that another death come not / To choke my utterance, sacrilegious, here?' " (138-140). What makes him different, sets him above the common masses, makes him capable of passing into the holy space of pure poetry? Moneta tells him: " 'None can usurp this height,' return'd that shade, / 'But those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest…'" (147-149). The poet's finer feeling, his suffering in the corrupt world of the flesh with its susceptibility to tyrannical power, is his golden ticket to this sacred experience. The self-fashioning of the poet figure in Keats, as exceptional, as unique among other humans in the kind of concern he can feel, results in the dissolution of the poet's body and his transfiguration into the very temple; the poet and his work become the trophies that commemorate the ascension of private feeling to the highest goal of poetry.

Yet in *The Fall of Hyperion*, the last iteration of the Keatsian ascetic process, when the poet figure is ready to trade his flesh for the substantive relics of poems that will last and hold up even against the contempt of the public sphere, he suddenly loses his

nerve. He cannot understand why, if he is chosen on the basis of his capacity to suffer and to sympathize with the suffering of all the human world, he should then be removed from human service. For the Keatsian poet figure, the singleness and solitude of ascetic practice are not a mark of spiritual virtue, but the beginning of poetic failure. We see this from Keats's famous critique of what he read as Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime": the lofty position of a Romantic ascetic in the order of Wordsworth and Shelley is too far removed from the people, is at the extreme end of a performance that should benefit the community. The poet figure continues to question the priestess Moneta as a skeptical child trying to learn his catechism might. He asks,

> 'Are there not thousands in the world,' said I,
> Encourag'd by the sooth voice of the shade,
> 'Who love their fellows even to the death;
> Who feel the giant agony of the world;
> And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
> Labour for mortal good? I sure should see
> Other men here; but I am here alone.'
> 'They whom thou spak'st of are no vision'ries,'
> Rejoin'd that voice—'They are no dreamers weak;
> They seek no wonder but the human face;
> No music but a happy-noted voice.
> They come not here; they have no thought to come—
> And thou art here, for thou art less than they.
> What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,

To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing;

A fever of thyself—think of the earth;

What bliss even in hope is there for thee?

What haven? every creature hath its home;

Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,

Whether his labours be sublime or low—

The pain alone, the joy alone; distinct:

Only the dreamer venoms all his days,

Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.' (154-176)

The moment in which Keats finally questions what results from his self-contained critique of poetry's place in public discourse, when he understands that poetry must be shared for sympathy's sake, is here in the last *Hyperion* fragment, where the poet figure cannot get out and where he cautions the reader not to go at all. We see from the questions the speaker asks Moneta that the award he has earned is discordant with everything he has done to reach this point. The key to the symbolic kingdom Keats has built is hidden earlier in *The Fall of Hyperion*, in what I suggest is the crucial moment in Keats's entire poetics, when the speaker consumes the potion that brings on his sacred vision. The speaker "[eats] deliciously" of a meal that seems to him the refuse of an angelic feast,

And, after not long, thirsted, for thereby

Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice,

Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,

And, pledging all the mortals of the world,

And all the dead whose names are in our lips,

Drank. The full draught is parent of my theme. (I. 41-46)

This draught is the parent of Keats's entire theme, a consumptive act that seems to undo the material of human flesh and give the poet figure strength to build, in place of the body, the firm fixtures of holy poetic temples. But to drink, to consume, to take in nourishment is an exclusively human act, and the Keatsian speaker knows this well. In the speaker's drinking this draught is the suspension of the poet figure's life and death. His sublime encounter with the paradox of mortality does not propel his conscious thought (as opposed to his involuntary imagination) to a heavenly beyond; it forces a rare Keatsian evocation of undeniable human sympathy. In this act of communion, the speaker does not dwell on his own feelings, but thinks of his fellow mortals, of kinship. Taking the sacrament, the Keatsian poet figure toasts, "pledg[es]," "all the mortals of the world / And all the dead whose names are in our lips." Sympathy, here, is not simply an effect of sacred poetry that tends the natural source of spiritual power. Humanity is divinity, and Keats's poet figure, in this defining moment, allows his care for a whole community to overtake him. This declaration of commitment is what builds the "old sanctuary" of *Hyperion*, the eternal form of the poem, but sympathy does not save the poet figure. The poet figure gets absorbed into the vision of Saturn's temple, into the story housed therein, and he does not make it out again, as the poem ends with the infinite trail Apollo makes.

Sympathy is not salvation in Keats's poetry, I suggest, because Keats's final resistance to a life constrained to the boundaries of political identity is in his refusal to invoke the names of other people who suffer. He will not use them to build his own practice. An absolute refusal to employ the memory of the dead in his own pursuit of

glories of immortal stamp is clear in the excised first stanza of "Melancholy," which Keats himself cut from the poem, but which Charles Brown added back in for 1848 publication, long after Keats's death:

> Tho' you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
> And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
> Stitch creeds [shrouds interlined above] together for a sail, with groans
> To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;
> Altho' your rudder be a Dragon's tail,
> Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,
> Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
> Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
> To find the Melancholy, whether she
> Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.

Though seekers of Melancholy would attempt to find her by building a vessel from the materials of the departed ("dead men's bones" and the "phantom gibbet mast"), and from the various human follies that led to their deaths ("creeds" or precepts for what is noble, and hunts for dragons and gorgons), the pilgrims could never find her this way. Though the loss of human life is among the chief causes of sorrow and mourning, this loss is unspeakable in Keats's poem. Mourning will not lead to Melancholy, because loss is too deep a feeling—a thought that lies too deep for tears. This jettisoned stanza warns the reader not to do this dark thing. The dead are too sacred to be invoked in Keats's rebellious monastic ritual. So reluctant is he to assign any kind of use value to the dead,

that even the stanza that begs they be allowed to rest in peace, and not drudged up to produce the beautiful tears of melancholic dreamers, is something Keats will not say.

Keats rebels against the established model of Romantic asceticism when he turns his poetic devotion inward—into the monastery, into the sublime infinitude of the human imagination, and toward human love. For Keats there is no external principle, no transcendence that is greater than the human condition. Wordsworth and Shelley both have a care for the English community, but their practices are committed to, above all, natural poetry. Keats's ascetic performance, though, suggests that critical distance is not the only way verse can minister to a social sphere under a "black spell." A critique of, and care for, the people is more effectively made In Keats's poetry when the poet figure stands on common ground. The common ground is holy, and the sacred is personal in Keats. Reading his verse for its engagement with Romantic asceticism shows that a poet who can read as self-interested in fact internalizes an ethical commitment to community so much that he gives his own figural life for the love of people. This act of unselfish devotion is what finally generates "love and fame" among readers. His immolation at the altar of communal poetry is a Romantic ascetic sacrifice that shores him up, makes him a fixture of the English poetic tradition.

CHAPTER V

CODA: THOMAS HARDY AND THE GHOSTLY AFTERLIFE OF ROMANTIC ASCETICISM

When Thomas Hardy was a young man, he longed to be a Londoner. He spent several years of his early adulthood in London, becoming intimately acquainted with urban life and partaking of all that the city had to offer of politics and culture. In 1866, though, the architectural firm Hardy was working for set him the task of helping to excavate the St. Pancras graveyard—the same site where Percy Shelley had courted Mary by her mother's grave—to make way for the Midland train line. Though, on first arriving in London, Hardy had been enthusiastic for modern development, this winter of digging up graves that impeded a growing urban infrastructure was to be his last before returning to the country.[49] That this should have been the breaking point in Hardy's cosmopolitan experiment is, I suggest, significant for how we read the influence of Romanticism on Hardy's development as a literary figure. Participating in the work of national progress disturbs the ghosts of titanic literary and political figures of the past, and Hardy's departure from London—his rejection of the social milieu—seems driven by disgust at the wrecking of a site of communal tradition, and a site of the myth of the Romantics. Hardy's turn from active engagement in the English public sphere, at its epicenter in London, back to the country, where he came into his fame as one of the most influential and successful literary figures of late nineteenth century England, we see the lasting influence of a Romantic aesthetic of intense devotion that depends on critical distance. Yet Hardy's career and work show that the dark sublime of modernity, which the

[49] Claire Tomalin, pp 80-81.

Romantics prophesize and adamantly resist, holds such sway by the late nineteenth century that poetic calling is quelled. A poetry derived from the organic rhythm of provincial life has little enchantment for a literary public sphere where novels are all the rage. Hardy takes up the novel form, which, for Wordsworth, is the form associated with "sickly tastes," and thus, for a time, Hardy resists ascetic vocation and wanders, like a prodigal son,[50] away from the fold of poetry.

Hardy's fame and financial success as an English literary figure come from his prose, though poetry was his first love, and this first phase of his career signifies a withdrawal of sacred verse from the public eye. Dennis Taylor observes, "Hardy maintained that his literary vocation was that of a poet, not a novelist. His novels were what he did for a living; his poetry—enabled by the success of his novels—was what he did for immortality. Where novels for Hardy somehow pander to…society, poems resist it and yet also command it by seeking higher ground" (451). Poetry for Hardy, as for the Romantic poet figures, attains to an elevated critical position, but Hardy resists offering his verse up to the public for fully thirty years—the first half of his career—because he views the precarious state of poetry in public reception as a source of peril for any writer living in his historical moment. Hardy writes in his "Apology" at the beginning of his 1922 volume *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, "The thoughts of any man of letters concerned to keep poetry alive cannot but run uncomfortably on the precarious prospects of English verse at the present day…the hazards and casualties surrounding the birth and setting forth of almost every modern creation in numbers are ominously like those of one of

[50] Hardy begins his literary career by abandoning poetry in order to pursue the more worldly form of prose. This mirrors the biblical story of the prodigal son, which is an inverted ascetic performance.

Shelley's paper-boats on a windy lake" (560). Hardy uses "Shelley's paper-boats on a windy lake" as a figure for the violent storms of critical reception in an essay that repeatedly cites Wordsworth as the authority on poetic theory. Wordsworth, as the longest-lived and most publicly engaged of the Romantics, is the support Hardy uses for his explanation of poetry's being as necessary as religion to prop up English culture. But Hardy here offers up Shelley, who, like Keats, seems to die from and to his poetry, as the example of how little devotion to verse pays back in kind its most faithful practitioners. Poetry's position in the literary market is as unstable as a flimsy toy boat in a hurricane, and if Hardy cannot live by his pen, he is not willing to die on it. The self-immolation of Romantic asceticism—the poet figures' willingness to die so that their poetic offerings may gain eternal life—is too extremist a performance for Hardy, but his "Apology" and his poetry show him working out methods of poetic observance that do not demand martyrdom.

Though Hardy takes a despairing view of poets' prospects, his novels are evidence of a sense of ethical responsibility to the English public, and that sense of care for the community is a precondition for poetry in Romantic asceticism. Across his prose and poetry, Hardy positions himself as a clear-eyed critic of English culture, as ascetic figures must do to prove the weight of their own better models, but his poetic theory grapples with modern skepticism. The "Apology" is full of references to pessimism as a rational approach to the cultural conditions of Hardy's historical moment. The cautionary tale of Romantic idealism—the paper-boat on a windy lake—is Hardy's justification for having waited so long to bring his poetry to light, and he goes on to give some possible causes for the poor state of English readers' reception of verse:

> Whether owing to the barbarizing of taste in the younger minds by the dark madness of the late war, the unabashed cultivation of selfishness in all classes, the plethoric growth of knowledge simultaneously with the stunting of wisdom, ‘ a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’ (to quote Wordsworth again), or from any other cause, we seem threatened with a new Dark Age. (560)

This passage, though it is indebted, as the whole of the “Apology” is, to Wordsworth’s contempt for the modern, does not echo Wordsworth’s disdain for novels, which the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* holds responsible for the Romantic Era public’s “sickly tastes.” Hardy’s theory is more in line with Shelley’s sense that “the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy” (514). Hardy does not go as far as Wordsworth in lumping the novel in with the causes of diseased culture, and he shares Shelley’s sense that poetry and prose are not mutually exclusive terms. But, for all his success as a novelist, and his claim in the “Apology” that “pure literature” is possible across different forms, the novel loses ground in Hardy’s literary life. He chooses later in his career, when “we seem threatened with a new Dark Age,” to give himself over to poetry entirely. His conversion to poetry, in the face of a Dark Age coming to pass, is the legacy of Romantic ascetic verse.

Once he establishes that English culture is in a state of crisis, Hardy chooses to extol the superlative virtue of poetry as a remedy for that degeneracy and, crucially, to liken the steadfast social merit of poetry to religious tradition. He explains in the “Apology” that poetry is like religion in its firm tradition and power to keep the English public morally grounded. He writes, “poetry, pure literature in general, religion—I

include religion, in its essential and undogmatic sense, because poetry and religion touch each other, or rather modulate into each other; are, indeed, often but different names for the same thing—these, I say, the visible signs of mental and emotional life, must like all other things keep moving, becoming…" (561). This is an important formulation for Hardy, given that his novels make scathing critiques of the church and its political effects. Religion, in its poetic sense, is a force for moral good, but in Hardy's novels religion is a source of spiritual oppression.

In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's last novel before giving up prose to write poetry exclusively for the rest of his life, the character of Sue Bridehead famously represents a mistrust of the church as the fully institutionalized body that hampers true affections ("mental and emotional life"). Sue invokes poetry as the pure antithesis of a dead religious system, saying, " 'There is little poetry in a church'" (287). In Hardy's final novel, there is an unresolvable tension between a poetic transcendence of social norms and the hegemonic social networks, as the church and marriage, that sanction those norms. This tension, though, is a result of the limitations of the novel. Regardless of the problems endemic to the institutional church, Hardy sees in the time-worn practice of communal religion something necessary to the preservation of English culture: "one may ask, what other purely English establishment than the Church, of sufficient dignity and footing, with such strength of old association, such scope for transmutability, such architectural spell, is left in this country to keep the shreds of morality together?" ("Apology" 561). Just as the church serves as a constant, with its "strength of old association," to variable modern life, poetry is the literary form that connects a history

full of tradition to a contemporary moment that may, with its "scope for transmutability," renew culture through ancient, longstanding spells.

The case of *Jude* is crucial for reading how Hardy bears the mantle of Romantic asceticism. This novel critiques the systems of religious feeling that keep people ensnared as political subjects, for religion works in *Jude*, as in Marx, as an opiate for the masses. *Jude* is the tragic tale of a young man lacking the socio-political freedom to pursue what he loves. This critique of the socio-economic circumscription of fin de siècle British subjects is full of architectural figures for ideological forces. The town of Christminster is the primary setting of the novel and a spectre that looms even over the action that takes place elsewhere. Where, as I have argued, architectural figures in Keats's poetry are suggestive of the human creative faculty building up a poetics in service to a real, tangible world of men, these architectural figures in *Jude* signify ideological and socio-political entrapment. Christminster is a figure for the old poetry of the academic and religious traditions of England from which Jude is continually excluded. The narrator says of Jude that,

> He took it as a good omen that numerous blocks of stone were lying about, which signified that the cathedral was undergoing restoration or repair to a considerable extent. It seemed to him, full of the superstitions of his beliefs, that this was an exercise of forethought on the part of a ruling Power, that he might find plenty to do in the art he practised while waiting for a call to higher labours. (135)

In this moment, "full of the superstitions of his belief," Jude is able, through his intense affective attachment to the old structures of the church, to convince himself that the

reconstruction of the cathedral is symbolic of a new stability in his life, between finishing the noble labor of building up the church and receiving "a call to higher labors." At this point in the novel, Jude imagines that the impediments to his happiness are cleared away, that he is about to see his thwarted love for Sue give way to their being together and to his being in happy fellowship with her on a higher sympathetic plane.

Yet, when Jude asks Sue, as they stand symbolically at the brink of their destructive relationship, whether she would like to sit in the cathedral, Sue replies, " 'Cathedral? Yes. Though I think I'd rather sit in the railway station…That's the centre of the town life now. The Cathedral has had its day!'"; Jude exclaims, " 'How modern you are!'" (139). Jude, who cannot admit of the fading away of the power of the church to provide stability in a world where his position and his value are uncertain, here associates Sue with the modern. Her resistance to his desires puts her at odds with anything orthodox, with any governing principle that might anchor Jude's own emotional and social life. Jude tells Sue that she does not have " 'ordinary passions…But you, Sue, are such a phantasmal, bodiless creature, one who—if you'll allow me to say it—has so little animal passion in you, that you can act upon reason in the matter, when we poor unfortunate wretches of grosser substance can't.'" (266). At one point Sue makes a rejoinder to these criticisms of her Shelleyan rejection of bodily struggles: " 'People say I must be cold-natured,—sexless—on account of it. But I won't have it! Some of the most passionately erotic poets have been the most self-contained in their daily lives'" (154).[51]

[51] Phillotson exchanges "Platonic" for "Shelleyan" as a descriptor for the bond between Jude and Sue, for "an extraordinary affinity, or sympathy…which somehow took away all flavour of grossness. Their supreme desire is to be together—to share in each other's emotions, and fancies, and dreams. Hardy's characterization of true sympathy helps to clarify Romantic ascetic practice from the critical distance of the seventy-odd years

Here we see how strikingly ambivalent Sue is as a representation for the "women's question" of the late nineteenth-century, for her modern sensibility does not lead her to a superficial sexual liberation, but she does seem to find a sense of agency in her sexual choice through recourse to these "erotic poets" who are "the most self-contained in their daily lives." Sue represents a poetic religiosity, a Romantic asceticism, that, despite Jude's inability to comprehend a spiritual life not sanctioned by the state, transcends the religious status quo.

Poetic religiosity transcends a corrupt society—transcends, even the institutional church as an insidious disguise for prescribed moral behaviors—for Hardy as it does for Romantic ascetic poets. Hardy's final novel, poetry's potential for resistance to modernity results in a narrative of disaster in the figure of Sue. Her narrative function is to propel Jude into an even more tragic ignominy than he might have expected from his rude beginnings, for Sue is a glimmer of true affection in Jude's lonely obscure life, and without her he is bereft of sympathy as well as reputation. Her going is a punishment for a character seeking to conform to the fitness of a social order that does not admit of a sublime feminine spirit. In this way, Sue resembles the female phantom figures of Romantic poetry, who appear to chasten and subjugate the poet figures who exercise too extreme a discipline on poetry. Sue, as a figure for ungovernable sacred poetry, appears in a novel that condemns the institutional church, in a novel that paves the way for Hardy to give his life over to poetry.[52]

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following Shelley's death, for it is this desire for true communion, given voice in Romantic verse, that resists "grossness," that transcends base human social arrangements.

[52] Hardy and Emma were estranged for much of their marriage before Emma's death, and the publication of *Jude* exacerbated the coolness between them, for Emma was concerned

Hardy's elegies for his first wife, Emma Lavinia Gifford, make a significant departure from Romantic ascetic verse that extols the virtue of a phantom figure who brings balance to the poet figure's will to power. Dorothy, Lucy, *Alastor*'s veiled maid, and Keats's many uncontainable goddesses are all granted the full power of the poetry in which they appear; these ghostly figures *take* that power, and the Romantic poet figures do not struggle. Emma has a very different verse afterlife, for her mortal reality, her material traces still linger in Hardy's poems in a way that allows Hardy's poet figure a degree of anti-Romantic influence over her. Jahan Ramazani notes that "Hardy's obsessive elegizing distinguishes him from materialists who forsake the dead because of their uselessness. But…in his connubial elegies he berates himself for making poetic use of his wife's death, for profiting aesthetically from her loss" (957). Ramazani's argument situates Hardy's elegies in a long tradition of melancholic verse that requires something to be lost so that art can be found, but I suggest that Hardy's Emma poems are different from earlier English elegies in which poetic speakers want to overwhelmed by the thing they have lost. Hardy's poems remain stubbornly opposed to the beloved's transformation into power that moves verse. In the intensity of his poetic devotion to Emma, Hardy demonstrates a poetic religiosity that is a lingering trace of Romanticism a century after its apogee, but Hardy's practice of ascetic verse seeks to undo the fatal effect of the Romantic sacred by rejecting its tenet of self-immolation.

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that readers would take the novel for a semi-autobiographical account of their relationship. Underlying my argument about Hardy's dedication to poetry in the second half of his career is a sense that Sue's chastening of Jude in Hardy's last novel is analogous to Emma's role in Hardy's real life as a reminder of how sympathy must be fed by poetry if it is to flourish. Hardy's elegies for Emma are among his finest poems—his poetic sympathy with her (with her phantom presence) is what transfigures him into a poet figure.

Hardy's lyric "The Shadow on the Stone," though it was published with *Moments of Vision* in 1917, was begun in 1913, during the period Hardy compulsively composed his Emma elegies. This poem returns to the embattled ground of belief and superstition on which *Jude* is staged, and carries the themes of Hardy's novels into the domain of poetry.

> I went by the Druid stone
> That broods in the garden white and lone,
> And I stopped and looked at the shifting shadows
> That at some moments fall thereon
> From the tree hard by with a rhythmic swing,
> And they shaped in my imagining
> To the shade that a well-known head and shoulders
> Threw there when she was gardening.

In the first line of this poem, the poet figure's memory of Emma attaches to the "Druid stone…lone and white," interring her among the bedrock of ancient England and aligning her with a source of old magic, but by the last line of this stanza, the poet figure remembers her in the act of gardening. In the course of this stanza, Emma is variously associated with an ancient spirit, and engaged in the domestic occupation of gardening. Her essential quality is difficult to discern in this poem, not because she is defying a symbolic order, but because the poet figure cannot decide where to place her. In making the Druid stone the focal point for this entire reflection, the poet figure seems ready to imagine his lost wife as gone from any context in which he could be personally familiar. Though Hardy's work on the whole is preoccupied with druid customs and figures as a

symbolic means of retaining the native virtue of the English even in his present moment, the Druid stone in this poem seems unreachable for Hardy's poet figure. The description of the stone as "lone and white" suggests that the stone has no life in the domestic context of this garden beyond what Emma had given to it. Yet she seems, almost, to return to give the stone a life here, for the poet figure imagines that the shadows falling from "rhythmic swing" of the "tree hard by" are moved by her, that she is part of the moving force of nature. The tree's mediation of this shadowy impression aligns Emma with Lucy's "rocks and stones and trees," and this first stanza lends a definite organic quality to Emma.

But the poet figure disrupts that rhythm, ingratiates himself into Emma's apparition when he says, "And they shaped in my imagining / To the shade that a well-known head and shoulders / Threw there when she was gardening." In these lines the "shifting shadows" with their "rhythmic swing," their overwhelming, synesthetic indeterminacy, conform to the poet figure's imagination, to Emma as she exists in his memory of her material life. She loses, or rather he takes, her potential to exist as an unfamiliar spirit the moment he assigns her the form in his mind. In the second stanza, the poet figure must impose his confidence in reason as the precondition for his belief:

> I thought her behind my back,
> Yea, her I long had learned to lack,
> And I said: 'I am sure you are standing behind me,
> Though how do you get into this old track?'

The poet must introduce skepticism into the encounter and declare "I am sure you are standing behind me," while asking how such a thing is even possible ("Though how do

you get into this old track?") He is so strongly compelled in the different directions that he cannot turn his head to confront the spiritual truth. In this ambivalence, the poem offers a glimmer of the Romantic phantom figure's potential to undo whatever sure sense of the world the mourning male poet figure still holds. He cannot be certain that she is not there, but neither can he be certain that she is. The veil between his belief and skepticism is momentarily parted. But the poet figure again asserts his will in this encounter by saying that "to keep down grief / I would not turn my head to discover / That there was nothing in my belief" (14-16). To gain control over his feelings, "to keep grief down," he refuses to move; he is *immovable*. He exercises a discipline that represses his sympathy. The poet figure repeats this will to comprehend the situation in the final stanza, this time more firmly: "But I thought once more: 'Nay, I'll not unvision / A shape which, somehow, there may be.' / So I went softly from the glade…" (19-21). In this passage, the poet figure insists on being the first interlocutor to leave the scene of an argument. This is not a real conversation, not a real meeting, for even the ghost of Emma that he imagines is full of a hysterical energy that he refuses to engage.

The poet figure in Hardy demonstrates a will to power that in Romantic ascetic poetry is entirely forestalled by the ungovernable appearance of phantom figures. Hardy's struggle in giving Emma a life of her own, even in verse where such unadulterated spiritual energy is more possible than in other literary forms, is especially clear in "I Found Her Out There," one of his *Poems of 1912-1913*:

> I found her out there
> On a slope few see,
> That falls westwardly

To the salt-edged air,

Where the ocean breaks

On the purple strand,

And the hurricane shakes

The solid land.

--

I brought her here,

And have laid her to rest

In a noiseless nest

No sea beats near.

She will never be stirred

In her loamy cell

By the waves long heard

And loved so well. (1-16)

When the poet figure "found" Emma, she was among the wild, rhythmic scene of the stormy seaside. She is a part of a force of nature that "shakes / The solid land." Emma's natural context is one that terrifies Hardy, the builder of firm literary ground. Why does he refuse to let Emma become part of the scene she "loved so well"? There is the simple biographical answer in that Hardy brought her to live at Max Gate, where she was buried, which was at some distance from this violent seaside spot. But the poet figure here gestures toward the spiritual implications of modern zoning and partitioning by again insistently drawing attention to the control he has over her even after her death.

Though the poet figure "found her out *there*," he says that he "brought her *here*." He has removed her from where she would be, left to her own devices, and brought her to where he is, and thus encountered the loss on his own terms. His description of her resting place is a list of oppositions: "a noiseless nest / No sea beats near", a place without the sounds of the ocean breaking or the hurricane shaking the land; a place where "She will never be stirred." He pesters the reader with his need to say that he has boxed Emma in, even in death. The third and fourth stanzas go on to associate an Emma long past with the ancient history of Cornwall, with "Dundagel's famed head" on which "she often would gaze" (21-22), and the tale of "sunk Lyonnesse," the home of Guinevere in Arthurian legend. The primitive power of Cornish myth, like the wildness of its bleak landscape, are Emma's province, but this, too, the poet figure takes her from, takes from her. He castigates himself for a kind of sacrilege in reducing Emma to a creature in his keeping where she is heir to hurricanes and legends and all the wild power of ancient England.

But the poem itself is the record of his atonement; it is the poet figure's confession. He says, in the final stanza,

> Yet her shade, maybe,
> Will creep underground
> Till it catch the sound
> Of that western sea
> As it swells and sobs
> Where once she domiciled,
> And joy in its throbs

With the heart of a child. (33-40)

When Emma is named a "shade," a phantom, she gains to power to spread through the earth ("creep underground") in pursuit of her wild home, "Where once she domiciled." The poet figure here sets Emma free from his will, allows that "maybe," though he cannot be certain, Emma's shade will come to be where she alone wills. Regardless of the discipline and control the poet figure has tried to enact on Emma, and regardless of the shame he feels in this sin against her, the elegies to Emma constitute a repeated act of contrition. The *Poems of 1912-1913* sequence is the poet figure's penance for the ways in which he has fallen for worldly temptations to the downfall of true love and sympathy. By this poetic act of expiation, Hardy's poet figure does find redemption; he does make Emma live on and he does produce some of the finest elegies in English literature.

Though Hardy pledges himself to poetry, and writes a body of verse that adapts the model of *Lyrical Ballads*, his poet figure's relationship to the phantom Emma proves that the lure of the modern is not entirely dispelled for Hardy during his life. Yet Emma, though the poet figure goes to such pains to contain her, still bursts forth as the primary force of his poetry. Though Hardy's body is divided at his death, it is his heart buried with Emma that creates the conditions for ashes so poetic that Hardy becomes an English poet worthy of interment in Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner. His heart lies with her, even if his social body never does, and their affinity becomes the cornerstone for poetic work that is eventually canonized. As with the Romantics, the failed ascetic practice of Hardy's poet figure is still redeemed by the figure of sympathy lost in the violent storm of high modernity. Poetic spirit has still has the power to bring the word of poetry into the

lives and hearts of the English flock, and this is a rite perfected by Romantic ascetic poets—their lasting offering.

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