

ABSTRACT

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WOMEN'S POETRY, SKEPTICISM, AND
EPISTEMOLOGY.

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Recent scholarship on Romantic women's writing has frequently been preoccupied with the loss, suffering, and sensibility central to women's poetry. My dissertation investigates how four women poets after the French Revolution eventually react against the cult of emotion that trapped them as primarily feeling subjects. Rather than passively depicting absence, they employ various figures of vacancy, a poetic tactic that productively and actively empties out habituated language and the regnant ideologies of the day. In vacating reified thought, women poets more importantly reconceptualize the Enlightenment thinking subject, rejecting two dominant modes of thought—sensibility and progressive reason—instead experimenting with anhedonia, non-meaning, and counterfactuals.

Because these women poets view language as necessarily imposing structures of thinking, their varying poetics propose home-grown epistemologies, in dialogue with English and continental philosophy as well as Romantic theories about the revolutionary potential of language. Moreover, since these poets all share a belief in the intimate connection between poetic form and cognition, my chapters reveal how the poets' formal

techniques reify, alter, and create ways of thinking. Though they often work from traditional forms, they make use of repetition, caesura, and footnotes to alter the way poems make and unmake meaning. Even more broadly, these poems about thought do not fall prey to Romanticism's tendency to escape from history into the imagination, yet neither do women poets allow themselves to be confined by either their historical place or their embodied identities. Instead, Romanticism might be defined as a movement that employs non-understanding as a means of keeping ideology, and the history that ideology presupposes, at bay. My first chapter defines vacancy as a trope for linguistic or cognitive breakdown, and my next two chapters on Charlotte Smith and Mary Robinson explore how these writers engage respectively with Kantian ideas of free beauty and empiricist epistemologies about idiots. My chapter on Felicia Hemans discusses her use of brain-based models of the mind to create perceptual overload that challenges imperialist thinking, and the final piece demonstrates how Maria Jane Jewsbury uses images to dislodge reified visual representations of gendered or colonial landscapes and bodies.

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EPISTEMOLOGY.

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Dedication

For Damien

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Chapter 1. Women's Poetics and Representations of Vacancy: An Introduction

In the years following the South American and Spanish rebellions, Felicia Hemans penned an epic poem, for the most part dismissed in the periodical press, about the uses of skepticism to incite revolution. In *The Forest Sanctuary*, an unnamed Spanish Catholic protagonist witnesses some of the horrors of the inquisition and eventually utters these lines:

There are swift hours in life—[...]

They shake down things that stood as rocks and towers

Unto th' undoubting mind (I.658, 660-61)

Hemans evokes tumultuous times that not only engender doubt in the mind but even more dramatically have the power to topple such ideas that stood as rocks and towers—material reality and phallic institutions. These “tempests” uproot “oaks” and sweep away metaphorical “mists” clouding the sight with Catholic idolatry, and more generally, with limiting views and ideologies. Finally, the Spaniard says, “They touch with fire, thought's graven page” (665). As a figure for desolating mental revolution, the chastening fire goes so far as to erase writing and those signifying systems that bolster personal credos, concepts, and national ideologies.

The passage may seem quite uncharacteristic of Hemans, a poetess who is now widely read under the aegis of domestic patriotism. Rather than describing affect or domesticity, however, these lines and many others in women's poetry of the period represent moments of breakdown that create productive kinds of doubt. Vacancy, or figures, tropes, and rhetoric of cognitive pause and breakdown, actively empties out

hackneyed thoughts and feelings, taking particular aim at patriarchal sign systems. The tempests Hemans describes grow out of the discourse of sensibility, which has dominated critical work on women writers, but scholars have yet to address how sensibility, like its counterparts the sublime and transcendence, ends up as a skeptical epistemology. Seen through this perspective, women poets not only generate a self-reflexive poetics but one that meditates on the doubting mind: how cognition operates and how altered perception might in turn evince social change. This dissertation aims to demonstrate the hard thinking women poets did about epistemology, cognition, perception, and ultimately the revolutionary potential for the Romantic imagination.

As a figure for ideological and linguistic evacuation, vacancy is found in much of the women's and men's poetry of the period, and, in fact, it emerges through an interesting web of conversations among all these poets. Ever since Anne K. Mellor's well-known delineation of male and female Romanticisms, critics have assumed that women poets were less interested in philosophy and perception than they were in psychology and social relationships.¹ And though scholars have spent much time debating male poets' use of self-reflexive or deconstructive language inherently tied in the Romantic period to political reform, we have yet to explore how women writers uniquely contributed to this political, philosophical conversation. While the bulk of this dissertation discusses the intrepid and diverse models of vacancy that women developed, Percy Shelley most fully and explicitly articulates a prose explanation of this idea, and his definition can help us initially flesh out the concept. Just he was finishing *Prometheus Unbound*, late in 1819, he writes a fragment of an essay entitled "On Life,"

¹ See the introduction to Mellor's *Gender and Romanticism*.

where he talks about the creative capacity of the poet—a power that paradoxically rests in what he calls vacancy.

Philosophy, impatient as it may be to build, has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step toward this object, however; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation. (507)

The poet attests to the idea that over time words become misused, lose their flexible metaphoricity, and retain only habituated meanings. Yet, it is also the duty of the poet-philosopher to root out error and “reduce the mind to that freedom” which composes a new ground of knowledge. When Shelley’s pioneer stamps out the error of its ways, it does so to clear the space for a mind concerned, above all else, with social change. 1819 was also the year of the Peterloo massacre, a public meeting of thousands of people demonstrating voting rights in parliament that ended in a bloodbath, and it is no coincidence that Shelley depicts vacancy in a revolutionary mode, instigating ethical and political reform that must likewise happen in the mind. In rehashing language as a means of reform, he reaches back toward episodes during the French Revolution, such as the revolutionaries’ rewriting of the Calendar of Reason to begin with the Year 1, an act that cast aside the past by renaming years, months, and days.

The idea of vacancy formulated by women writers acquires many of the same characteristics as Shelley’s but is particularly aimed at stopping the habitual use of two

dominant modes of thought during the period: reason and affect. That the solution rests in reforming language lies at the heart of works such as Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* when Marianne complains, "I detest jargon of every kind, and sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning" (82). Though usually taken to be the novel's epitome of overwhelmed and hackneyed sensibility, Marianne actually refuses both overwritten feeling and "sense," or rationality. Her reaction depicts what happens when hackneyed language makes new ideas or meaning impossible. Women poets of the Romantic period do not only ironize sense and sensibility as Austen does but go so far as to write models for thought other than affect or rationality.

By routing the twinned pillars of Enlightenment subjectivity, they aim to recreate the thinking subject as one that will allow women (and sometimes "others" such as the poor or the colonized) to lay claim to the French Revolution's promises of equality, freedom, and universality without absolutes. That this occurs on the level of discourse is in part a symptom of the meta-discursive revolutionary environment that pervaded the French Revolution. Women writers were quite alive to the idea that the French Revolution in Britain was in part played out through the manipulation of increasingly partisan language.² While Mary Wollstonecraft argued that equal education must be extended to women if for no other reason than to create intelligent, useful wives, women poets, who already had given themselves some semblance of learning, wrote literature to intervene into modes of representation and attendant political discourses.

² A good set of arguments addressing this question is the Romantic Circles' praxis volume, *Romanticism and Patriotism: Nation, Empire, Bodies, Rhetoric* edited by Orrin N. C. Wang.

Women's Poetry: Sensibility and High Romanticism

As opposed to the loss of meaning and knowledge that vacancy instigates, scholarship on women's writing has frequently discussed the loss associated with suffering and sensibility. In large part, the recovery of women's writing occurred in conjunction with the historicist turn to affect and domesticity as important categories of history, experience, and literature. Stuart Curran's groundbreaking essay, "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered" intended to reframe Romantic poetry as a whole by pointing out two important poetic innovations initiated by women poets: the turn to quotidian details, often amassed from domestic spaces, and the creation of the cult of sensibility, or high feeling. Women poets, composing lyrics of domestic emotion, posed a challenge to the Romantic imagination's feats of transcendence. As Sonia Hofkosh, Alan Richardson, and Margaret Homans later suggested, male poets, in their anti-Enlightenment manifestos, stole fellow-feeling from women, even as they anxiously derided feminine poetic prowess.³ Following in Curran's footsteps, Judith Pascoe argued that women's use of material nature, such as Charlotte Smith's extensive botanic cataloguing, helped poets create a material, historically grounded, responsive poetics, opposed to the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime. Jacqueline Labbe's important book on Smith, along with Pascoe's study on Romantic performance and theatricality, subsequently explored a more postmodern version of sensibility and sympathy, arguing that women such as Smith performed a number of shifting identities in order to portray the sad state of women at the

³ See Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author*, Homans's *Bearing the Word*, and also Alan Richardson's, "Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine" in Anne K. Mellor's collection, *Romanticism and Feminism*.

turn of the eighteenth century. Similarly, critics of Felicia Hemans's poetry argued that her numerous poems documenting women's deaths, murders, or suicides revealed the violent terrain of feminine loss.⁴ For this generation of feminist Romanticists, women's poetry was one of protest, lodged through authentic feeling and the depiction of women's tragic biographies. Both Catherine Gallagher and Isobel Armstrong provocatively, and counter-intuitively, demonstrated that women often used this kind of loss to critique society. In particular, Armstrong showed that the pattern of affect and loss might be read as a larger, figurative description of women's grappling with aesthetics and social reality. Most recently, Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson have begun to theorize the "poetess" figure of the nineteenth century less as a biographical depiction than as a self-conscious, abstract historical category used by both women and men in their poetic representations. Finally, while Romanticists such as Elizabeth Fay have touched on the influence of the philosophically-minded Bluestocking circle on Romantic women writers, her essay on "Women and Thought" mostly centers on their intellectual interests in sexual relations, marriage, and pedagogy.⁵

For these reasons, women writers have served an exceedingly useful role in critiquing that ever-dissolving, ever-emerging, conflicted concept of Romanticism. Their work reveals the embodied, historical, economic, and emotional realities that played such a large part in a rich and complicated literary culture. There was room for both elite

⁴ See Pascoe "Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith" in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers 1776-1837* and *Romantic Theatricality*, Labbe *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender*, and Lootens, "Hemans and Home." Jackson and Prins make their argument about the poetess in "Lyrical Studies."

⁵ See Gallagher's *Nobody's Story*, Armstrong's *The Radical Aesthetic*, and, Fay's *Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*.

poets of the imagination as well as popular writers in the periodical presses—and just as men often took on both roles, so did women. Not content to be merely popular writers, women had dreams too about reforming the world through language. They repeatedly developed classic Romantic tropes and fitted them to their own uses. In fact, since they often couldn't actually go out questing for the philosopher's stone, it makes sense that they did so through their writing. Mary Robinson, for example, spins out the internalized quest for the Romantic object into Sappho's desperate search for her own worth in the lost object of Phaon's affection. From the start, Sappho's quest is doomed, but by beginning with an already defunct trope, Robinson can start down a path other than the Romantic need for unified subjectivity or fusion of the subject with the objective world.⁶ Women's poetry begins not outside the purview of classic Romantic tropes but at the moment that these tropes break down, at the point of skeptical, testing curiosity about the powers and pitfalls of the Romantic imagination. Paul de Man's point in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," that the Romantic symbol deconstructs itself into an allegory that undermines the authenticity of a transcendent relationship with nature, already has precursors in women's poetry, as I suggest in my discussion of Charlotte Smith's uses of aporia in chapter two.⁷ The Romantic symbol, which naturalized relationships like women's unthinking, sensory association with the landscape, was one of the first literary habituations that women actively set out to rewrite.

⁶ Two classic studies dealing with these classic romantic tropes are Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest Romance," and Earl Wasserman, "The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge."

⁷ See de Man's classic "The Rhetoric of Temporality" in *Blindness and Insight* for his deconstruction of the Romantic symbol in Wordsworth.

The New Aesthetics

Beginning with de Man, Romanticism has had a lengthy, if conflicted, relationship with deconstructive criticism, which decisively posited language as a skeptical mode that disrupted Romanticism's authentic affect and its use of nature as a model for self-conscious self-knowledge.⁸ Following Jerome McGann's call for a historicized approach to Romantic texts in *The Romantic Ideology*, both the Romantic imagination and deconstructive criticism—as well as criticism strictly about aesthetics—have come under fire for seeking an escape from the historical, economic difficulties of the modern, industrialized world. Recently, Romantic scholars have sought a middle ground between on the one hand the escapist lyric and the “close reading” of deconstruction and on the other an embodied, historicized poetry. Forest Pyle, in an essay on Keats entitled “Kindling and Ash” locates a “vacating radical” in certain works of both Keats and Shelley: “a radical aestheticism is the experience of a poetics that exerts such a pressure on the claims and assumptions of the aesthetic that we encounter through these works something like auto-immolation” (431). He is admittedly working from de Man's aporetic aesthetics, a crisis of representation that marks a desolate state of self-reflexivity only the aesthetic attains.

Robert Kaufman has likewise developed a version of what he calls “Negative Romanticism” by reading Keats and Shelley through Kantian-inflected, aesthetically-minded Adorno (“Legislators” 709). By using Adorno's Kant, Kaufman can rescue Marxism, Romanticism, and Kantian aesthetics from reified concepts and

⁸ See de Man's “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. For other Romantic-deconstructionist criticism in this vein see Rajan's *Dark Interpreter*, Chase's *Decomposing Figures*, and Marc Redfield's *Romantic Circles Praxis* volume, “Legacies of Paul de Man.”

instrumentality: “The Kantian, romantic, and Adornian-modernist aesthetic undertake temporarily to negate conceptual/instrumental thought, enabling present construction of new concepts and the new social dispensations that may spring from them” (“Negatively Capable Dialectics” 372n36). Kaufman implicitly sides with Derrida’s own deconstructive reading of Kantian “free beauty,” as I do in chapter two, insisting that it is through aesthetic free play that instrumental (ideological, habitual) thought is rerouted: “The aesthetic is ‘free’ (as concept-based thought cannot be) from preexistent concept, purpose, law, or object. [...] The aesthetic is thus both a boot-up disk for conceptual thought as such ... and, as Adorno and others will stress, the engine for new, experimental—because previously non-existent (and therefore, free of status quo determined)—concepts” (“Red Kant” 711). Finally, for Kaufman, “aesthetic experience has political value because of its potential to generate critical (or at least proto-critical) thought” (“Legislators” 709). Both Pyle and Kaufman stress the degree to which the aesthetic demands not agreement or consensus but impasse, a crisis that does not flee from the problems of reality but creates a space for new kinds of thought that might transform the capitalistic structures of society and the mind.

If Kaufman emphasizes the extent to which Shelley’s sympathetic imagination, Keats’s negative dialectics, and Kant’s purposiveness without purpose “tease us *into* thought,” then women’s writing actively courts a similar goal for aesthetics but concentrates on generating those moments that first interrupt thought. Women writers are largely skeptical of the creation of new concepts, which themselves have the potential to become ideologically charged and ultimately tyrannical. This formulation perhaps comes closer to Pyle’s radical aesthetic that returns to the aporias between perception and

sensation, cognition and conceptualization (432), yet women's writing offers us other models for rethinking cognition in addition to the scandal of thought that is aporia. As women steer clear of both reason and sensibility as their main modes of thought, they experiment with other figures of vacancy: anhedonia, idiocy, counterfactuals, and simulation as they hash through contemporaneous philosophy. Romanticism, as read through these women writers, might be defined as a movement that courts non-understanding as a means of keeping ideology, and the history that ideology presupposes, at bay.

Women Thinking Philosophically, Thinking Historically

Women's poetry of the period consistently approaches these questions of history, aesthetics, and perception. Reinscribing women poets back into high Romanticism does summon a certain kind of historical effort in investigating the various models of the mind that women sought to vacate. Many women poets were voracious readers and participants in the exploding periodical culture of the day, so even if Hemans did not have the opportunity to attend one of Spurzheim and Galt's lectures on the material brain, she almost certainly read about it in the pages of the journals she frequently perused. My readings place women in the context of empiricist epistemology, Kantian aesthetics, or brain science, and work through an underlying assumption that women were well aware of current philosophic debates. Although Charlotte Smith most likely did not read Kant's third *Critique*, her poetry reveals that she was working through the problems and limitations of empiricism in a remarkably similar way. To demonstrate these close connections between philosophy and women's poetics, each chapter examines a woman

writer in the context of a contemporaneous philosopher or a set of philosophical ideas dealing with vital epistemological questions.

What they did with these paradigms, however, often extends or stretches contemporaneous thinking in ways that are best explained, evoked, or compared with high theory's own rereadings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy. In part, this manipulation of women's poetry into the spheres of high theory stems from a provocation—why shouldn't women's writing sustain theoretical investigation? Though women were not philosophers, their theoretical inquiries seem especially intriguing and appealing because of the way they strive to elude formalization. As Simon Jarvis has recently discussed Wordsworth's "philosophic song," poetry's formal dynamics can be especially useful in fashioning a type of philosophical thinking, particularly about cognition.

Women's poetics of the period also suggest the limitations of historicism. The first generation of new historicist critics has granted women a privileged role as representative poets especially sensitive to facticity. But scholarship on Romantic women's writing has perhaps suffered the reverse fate of being over-historicized. Women writers indeed did have bodies and socio-economic relationships that influenced their perceptions and their poetry. Yet it is not out of the realm of historical possibility that women sought to change how these perceptions might be constructed in their own heads and the minds of their readers. Charlotte Smith's work was greatly admired by even Wordsworth for its sensitivity and sensibility, but we are in danger of repeating history's own neglectful approach to her poetry when we use the paltry evaluations of contemporaneous critics to characterize her work. Our current fashion for sensibility has

aided tremendously in the recovery efforts of women's writing, but it has also obscured more complicated ideas in these poets' work. For instance, Smith's uses of anhedonia, or the absence of feeling, reveal her to be rejecting sensibility even as she works through how non-knowledge might complicate both embodied and categorical ways of knowing the world. It may behoove us to think beyond women's contemporaneous reception and reputations, especially given the dearth of paratextual materials such as manuscripts, journals, and lengthy correspondence. We can do so ethically, without assuming that women did not have lofty, journal-worthy thoughts. Likewise, we can rethink women's home-grown epistemologies without reaching outside the bounds of history.

Even more drastically, women writers may offer us other models for history.

Opposing historicism's focus on the recovery of differences with the past, Marc Redfield, Ian Balfour, and Orrin N. C. Wang have all plotted other, more post-modern models for history's temporality.⁹ Smith's hermit of *Beachy Head*, situated as he is on the precipice of the English Channel during the Napoleonic Wars, offers an ethical, transnational figure who is both aware of history and yet lives his life outside its exigencies. Acting with disregard for French and English animosity, he represents what Smith acknowledges to be an impossible futurity. Hemans's Spaniard likewise offers a version of counterfactual history, where history is not composed of differences between then and now but the contemplation of how what might have been could offer other models for what might be in the future. All these women writers think critically about the dangers of nostalgia but

⁹ Each of these scholars has been influenced by de Man or Derrida's interventions into temporality, in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and *Specters of Marx*. See Balfour's "History against Historicism," Wang's "Ghost Theory," and Redfield's *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

more importantly contemplate the constructed nature of the past, unreified futures, and the complicated interrelation of the two.

Finally, since vacancy most ardently aims to empty out hardened ideologies, a word should be said about the concept of ideology with all its varied Marxist baggage. Most of these writers, but Smith and Maria Jane Jewsbury especially, critique not simply the consumer culture that dominated both British imperial prerogatives and daily life but also the ideologies such commodity exchange produced and exacerbated. I have used quite different accounts of ideology, however, depending on the specific preoccupations of each writer. Smith, with her drive for a more elite notion of free beauty, veers close to Adorno's support of high art to route ideology. Hemans, with her constant use of paratextual materials that deconstruct the aura of her popular poems even as they reproduce its content, at times seems close to Benjamin's more populist notions for ideology critique. Her Spaniard's attempts to be "included out" of the imperial system, however, appear much like Zizek's ticklish subject. Finally, Jewsbury participates in the construction of images that critique the sign systems and visual power structures of a culture increasingly fascinated with visual markers such as phrenology. She ultimately provides a model to stem and neutralize Althusser's interpellation, much like Natalie Melas' idea of "dissimulation."¹⁰ This exceedingly varied spectrum attests to the wide-ranging scope and perhaps desperation of women's ideology critique. What all of these models have in common, however, is the trope of vacancy, the figurative possibility of circulating signs that in some sense bar signification. They do this by creating a gap between representation and understanding or meaning, a pause that might

¹⁰ See Melas's chapter in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in *All the Difference in the World*.

be enough to expunge or let go of the hardened meanings that representations often bring with them.

A Closer Look at the Dialectic of Skepticism & Sensibility

The vacating of history and ideology begins in large part with women's refusal to be seen as merely embodied subjects, and this reaction occurs perhaps not surprisingly as sensibility, with its emphasis on embodied emotions, is at its peak. I would like to flesh out a broad interrelation between sensibility and skepticism that dominates much of Romantic thinking to complicate current accounts of the eighteenth-century context for women's writing. Just as the empiricism of Hume and Locke produced drastic doubt about experiential knowledge, the cult of authentic feeling was actually always in dialectical relation with a radical skepticism about embodied ways of knowing. This dynamic, yet to be fully discussed in histories of sensibility, helps to explain why women became drawn to epistemological issues.¹¹ This relationship, moreover, can further help us understand women writers' complex reactions and resistances to the allied concerns of materiality, sensibility, history, and consumer-commodity culture.

Both Locke and Hume after him argued that people came to knowledge from sensation later converted into memorable experiences. As G. J. Barker-Benfield has persuasively argued in *The Culture of Sensibility*, sensibility sprang up as a subsidiary discourse of empiricism, in particular from medical experimentation and scientific

¹¹ A good discussion of this dynamic between sensibility and skepticism occurs in Charlotte Sussman's essay, "The Art of Oblivion: Charlotte Smith and Helen of Troy." Sussman argues that through the figure of nepenthe (and its relative, opium), Smith dramatized how the demands of sympathy often require a dose of forgetting or selfish escape.

observation that was part and parcel of the fascination with sensation and material experience. More sensitive people—particularly women—would often become overwhelmed with feeling, a state that at times led to hysteria but was also thought to provide an abundant and authentic source of knowledge. On a larger scale, sensibility eventually became a way of changing public discourse about gender. Men were encouraged to become “men of feeling,” which raised their sensitivity to women even as they allowed women a safe point of entry into the public sphere.

Under the aegis of sympathy and exquisite feeling, women writers found a unique way of entering into literary discourse, since their sensitivity arguably granted them greater access to authentic experiences, which they could then write about with some modicum of authority. Helen Maria Williams offers perhaps the most dynamic use of radical sensibility in her *Letters Written in France* as a dramatic effusion of sublime emotion with the power to usher in social change and create wider, affective communities immune to rank.¹² Increasingly, however, the literary-political battle over the uses of affect led commentators and critics to turn against the “cult” of high feeling. By the end of the century, sensibility became an extraordinarily contested term, used by both radicals as a rallying cry for revolutionary fervor, as Chris Jones argues, and by Edmund Burke as a conservative call for civility, as Claudia Johnson and Barker-Benfield both demonstrate.¹³ Sensibility was not simply a domesticating force, but a discursive construction of sentimentality and domesticity, available for both conservative and radical agendas.

¹² See Neil Fraistat and Susan S. Lanser’s introduction to *Letters Written in France*.

¹³ See Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility* and Claudia Johnson’s *Equivocal Beings*.

Women too reject sensibility's trite aura, as Austen does in *Sense and Sensibility*, and as Adela Pinch argues Smith does in her *Elegaic Sonnets*.¹⁴ But women writers also had two other bones to pick with this discourse. First, they quail against the way sensibility especially trapped women in only embodied ways of thinking. As John Barrell has argued, Wordsworth pits his own self-conscious understanding against Dorothy's merely sensory, immediate connection to nature, a poetic moment that epitomizes the kind of paradigm women eschewed through their poetry.¹⁵ Blake's invective against empiricism's tendency to confine people in hysterical, limited bodies—in the feminine underworld of Beulah—most closely resembles how women writers would eventually resist empiricism.¹⁶ Mary Robinson's "oblivion," which bears striking similarities to Locke's images of dark abysses, blindness, and *tabula rasa*, seems especially aimed at Edmund Burke's insistence that prejudice and sensibility were necessary to society's survival. Both Robinson and Hemans lodged critiques of the way embodied habituations led not only to hackneyed sentiment but gendered ideologies that installed wide-ranging social inequality.

Second, women's poetic explorations of affect often reveal the way in which copious emotions paradoxically produce skepticism about emotive forms of knowledge. This tendency in part stems from the problems inherent in empiricism's epistemology.

¹⁴ See Pinch's *Strange Fits of Passion* and Peter Knox-Shaw's chapter on *Sense and Sensibility* in *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*.

¹⁵ Barrell's seminal "The Uses of Dorothy" spells out this argument.

¹⁶ Mary-Kate Persyn argues that Blake, working from Wollstonecraft, argues that this male Romantic connects sensibility to chastity as a bad form of feeling, opposed to sexual liberation. See her "'No Human Form but Sexual': Sensibility, Chastity, and Sacrifice in Blake's Jerusalem."

As historians of skepticism have duly noted, the use of the body or individual experience to derive knowledge presented a perceptual quagmire, which Hume tried to solve by resorting to common sense.¹⁷ Not only did humans become trapped in their own perceptions and ideas, distinct from the objective world, but they also became irrevocably disconnected from knowledge of God and subjectivity beyond those sensations immediately present to the body. This doubt provoked Kant to formulate his *a priori* theories, including the faculty of aesthetic judgment constructed to bridge pure and practical reason. As Donald Reiman long ago delineated, moreover, most of the high Romantic male writers turned to some form of skepticism that took from both the revival of Greek philosophy but also empiricism's own nagging doubts. In large part, the failures of the French Revolution transformed the revolutionary zeal for Enlightenment philosophies into a disappointed, disillusioned skepticism about rationalism.¹⁸

While male writers could turn to a kind of quasi-religious emotive transcendence, women were in fact much more skeptical about the uses of affect, and a previous generation of eighteenth-century women writers, such as Anne Finch, along with other contemporaries, including Hannah More, duly explore a more celebratory turn to feeling. For women Romantics, skepticism often appears after they have glutted themselves sick on feeling and found its answers wanting. Each poet tends to characterize, in one way or another, the way too much feeling often leads to numbness or cognitive confusion. These

¹⁷ A good place to start would be Richard Popkin's *The History of Skepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*.

¹⁸ A few good studies of Romantic male poets and skepticism include Reiman's *Intervals of Inspiration: The Skeptical Tradition and the Psychology of Romanticism*, Andrew Cooper's *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry*, Ben Brice's *Coleridge and Scepticism*, Pulos' *The Deep Truth*, Hoagwood's *Byron's Dialectic and Skepticism and Ideology*, and finally Wayne Glusser's *Locke and Blake: A Conversation across the Eighteenth Century*.

periods of cessation in sensation result in an experiential blanking out that make full knowledge problematic, yet this kind of feminine lack works in women's favor to produce thinking subjects who can create their own ways of being known.

The doubt about strictly embodied forms of knowledge pairs nicely with other kinds of material representation women sought to critique such as commodity culture and the scenes of feminine consumption and gluttony that were set pieces in eighteenth-century poetry.¹⁹ Adam Smith, working off Hume's theories of empiricism, created the philosophical underpinnings that connected sensibility, sympathy, and capitalism. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that fellow-feeling for mankind springs from putting another in one's own position, essentially exchanging the other with one's self or the other's desires with one's own. These structures of interest and exchange form the early vocabularies of sympathy as well as Smith's later capitalist tomb, *The Wealth of Nations*, and Hume similarly translates his empiricist ideas into imperatives for bourgeois trade in essays "On Taste."

While Pascoe and others have argued that writers like Charlotte Smith embraced the materiality of nature, in my discussions of Smith and Jewsbury, I suggest that these writers play with the ideas of speculation and exchange as a way to distance themselves from natural, pastoral symbols and representations of women as mindless, consuming subjects. As early as Finch, women writers begin troping the bower or the landscape as a melancholy space, which Susan Stewart has argued is evidence of a material, sensory

¹⁹ Laura Brown first made the point that women bore the brunt of consumption in *Ends of Empire*. Even as Addison and Steele often summon women in their remarks to showcase good consumption, poets like Pope had already stigmatized the "fairer sex" for their addictions to make up, coffee, tea, silk, and other domestic and consumer items. Romantic women poets finally take a stand not just against consumerism but against the constant portrayal of women as primarily consuming subjects.

lyricism.²⁰ Increasingly, however, in the later eighteenth-century, women writers become quite aware of the pastoral's own dual nature, as a retreat always already disrupted by modernity. Beginning with Smith's poetry, ideas connected to taste and commodity culture help to sell the pastoral even as they evoke altered states of thought that might combat materiality and embodiment—evidenced by the frequency with which drugs like nepenthe, sleep, or hallucinations enter the picture. Moreover, with the return of the early modern poetic and pastoral tradition, women must wrest representational control of the pastoral from its roots as a poetry of seduction that figured women as unthinking, beautiful prey on the run from eloquent, male pursuers. Thus for women writers, the pastoral has always been a problematic site that warrants a lyrical pause for meditation.

Finally, women writers had other sources for skepticism other than the empiricists and the discourse of sensibility. It is clear that Robinson knew of Locke and Newton's theories, Smith read Hume, and Hemans was steeped in German literature's encounter with idealist philosophy. These encounters with philosophy culled from allusions in literary texts remain circumstantial at best, without the corroboration of letters or prose works documenting women's reading of these sources. Yet skepticism was rife in other literary sources that women no doubt read. As James Noggle has argued, the Tory satirists engaged in a skeptical tradition that created a proto-aesthetic of the sublime where reasoning turns on itself into a dizzying defiance of ratiocination. Augustan poetry's numerous satirical turns reprise a classical skepticism that refutes philosophy and rational thinking altogether, effectively drawing a line from Pope to Robinson and Byron. As Noggle writes, "The recurrent sense in Augustan satire that thinking itself is a

²⁰ See her chapter on Finch in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*.

kind of trap reveals their commitment to viewing their own thought as ideology, placed at an always mediated, dissatisfied, subjugated remove from the truth” (32). Recently J. T. Parnell has written about a more fideistic skeptical tradition in Swift and Sterne, taken from Erasmus. Both writers use satire and skepticism as a means of undermining their religious opponents even as they preserve faith and the transcendent realm as something beyond human understanding.²¹ This type of skepticism that undermines ideologies created by perception and language yet preserves religiosity finds parallels in Locke’s and Kant’s religious piety. Even more, it bears comparison to Hemans’s and Jewsbury’s rejection of Byron’s and Shelley’s atheism, as they develop their own, pious forms of skeptical inquiry. Finally, the great revival of Shakespeare offers another wealth of skepticism. In *Disowning Knowledge*, Stanley Cavell discusses *King Lear* and *A Winter’s Tale* among others as part of Shakespeare’s overall effort to overcome the skepticism that plagues early modern culture. Lear was Smith’s Shakespearian persona of choice and Robinson donned the Perdita character on stage and in real life when she pursued her affair with the Prince’s Florizel. Both writers may very well have imbibed some lessons on doubt and skepticism from reading and inhabiting these plays.

A Taxonomy of Vacancy

But what *is* vacancy? Though this trope generally creates moments of cognitive breakdown that lead to altered states or altered ideas about perception and understanding, my discussion so far has most likely revealed how vacancy involves a large amount of slippage moving from one use of the term to another, even during the course of a single

²¹ See Noggle’s *The Skeptical Sublime*. Parnell’s essay, “Swift, Sterne, and the Skeptical Tradition” appears in *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy: A Casebook*.

author's career. In part, this variation comes from the nature of skepticism itself, with its commitment to root out systematic philosophies and false knowledge and to rethink, continually, the methods for doing so. At the same time, different types of vacancy are naturally generated by the large confluence of models about the mind and brain during the period. Empiricist and Enlightenment philosophies are still popular and circulating when Immanuel Kant publishes the third *Critique* in 1790, which propels German idealism to Goethe, Schiller, the Schlegels, British writers such as Coleridge, and eventually post-Kantians like William Whewell. In the meantime, as Alan Richardson has demonstrated, Spurzheim and Galt's materialist notions of the brain penetrate much of Romantic thinking.²² Finally, proto-cinematic technologies such as the phantasmagoria engender new relationships between the image, commodity culture, and technology, which create epistemological questions about perception and vision.

At this point, I would like to further discuss several issues Romantic poets struggled with as they attempted to construct their own models of vacancy as a way of thinking about the mutual forms that can be found in both men's and women's poetry of the period. These problems include but are not limited to: the kinds of habituations vacancy attacks—hardened language or embodied perception; vacancy's ability to stay open or suspended; the agency, violence, and addiction that play a part in altered states of mind; vacancy's status as a feminine or gendered trope; and its relationship to budding nationalism in the nineteenth century. If Romantic writers were interested in finding new ways to change the mind's relationship to the world, they also diverge—sometimes along

²² Richardson ushered in the cognitive or brain-science model of the mind with his book, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*.

gender lines and sometimes due to the radical nature of their vision—regarding just how vacancy works.

Both Shelley and Charlotte Smith circle around vacancy as a manipulation of language, and both eventually arrive at aporia as perhaps the most radical means of stopping thought. Shelley's plan to "destroy error" instigated by misused words and signs comes to fruition in *Prometheus Unbound*, when Prometheus must revoke his curse against Jupiter, which replicates Jupiter's tyrannical acts. In Act II, Asia discovers how to get out from under the language and history that instantiate patriarchal mental and social structures. The poem ends with Act IV's sublime and radical revolution in syntax alongside the Earth's physical rejuvenation.²³ Shelley depicts the expurgation of bad language from the mind, which later flushes dangerous toxins from the earth.

This vacancy has another, much bleaker aspect, which Shelley reveals in his last, unfinished fragment, "The Triumph of Life." As de Man argued in "Shelley Disfigured," the poet attempts to root out ideological ways of viewing the parade of world leaders and thinkers that passes him. Instead, he finds himself in a desolating aporia, where meaning is entirely suspended in a no man's land of signification. If, in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley depicts the sublime unification of reason and affect to create the revolutionary sympathetic imagination, in his final poem, the poet is left in a vacuum of non-knowledge, outside the bounds of thinking and feeling.

²³ C. E. Pulos first studied Shelley's intense study of Greek skepticism in *The Deep Truth*, which Hoagwood updates in *Skepticism and Ideology* by contextualizing by putting Shelley in the context of contemporaries such as Thomas Reid and William Drummond as well as Karl Marx. Timothy Morton in *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* and Nora Crook in *Shelley's Venomed Melody* demonstrate how Shelley's idealism necessarily extends to rejuvenation of both the personal and social body.

Though Shelley certainly took from both Mary Wollstonecraft's dialectical and aporetic thinking as well as Mary Shelley's allegories about destruction, it is in Charlotte Smith we find Shelley's match.²⁴ Smith likewise uses the contingent nature of language to develop vacancy as an aporia of thought. At first she poses the critical paradox as one between embodied notions of taste and Kantian quasi-conceptual aesthetic judgment in *Elegiac Sonnets*, but eventually this becomes writ large in *Beachy Head* as an aesthetics about a quasi-conceptual ethics, or a universal hospitality that is not bound by codified, strictured law.

Robinson delineates a much different version of vacancy when, rather than rhetorical paradox or syntactic revolution, she offers a model of physical, cognitive blankness. Working from the empiricist theory that new sensations lead to new ideas, Robinson argues against those forms of feminine affect, such as melancholy and sensibility, which promote monologic sensation and cognitive stasis. Her poems provoke moments where the mind is emptied of all sensation, creating a vacuum that might pull in new perception and eventually new ideas. Rather than only seeking to change linguistic structures, Robinson takes special aim at habituated memory and feeling, or types of embodied perception. Felicia Hemans works with a brain-based model but to similar ends when she depicts vacancy as the overloading of the mind with too many perceptions in "The Widow of Crescentius." The shock of these physical moments goes a long way to help Robinson and Hemans shake those conceptual towers of thought that dominate

²⁴ See Wang's "The Other Reasons" in *Fantastic Modernity* for his argument about Wollstonecraft and radical aporia.

women during the period.²⁵ Moreover, both reveal how language might change embodiment or at the very least the physical aspects of thought.

Many writers, perhaps women more than men, ultimately concern themselves with the ends of vacancy—what happens after the revolutionary ground-clearing? They ponder how to keep ideology at bay as long as possible and how to reinvent it once ideology inevitably forecloses on vacancy's intervention. Smith deals with this problem by focusing on the trope's ability to stop thought and keep it suspended. Smith's *Beachy Head* ends with the hermit's unwritten epitaph, poised just before both the moment of writing and the construction of understanding. In "The Oceanides," Jewsbury develops a similar form of unreified futurity with her final image of an infant who remains outside of interpellated institutions or structures, freed from those codified ways of viewing the English self and the colonial other. Much more tragically, Hemans's early examples of vacancy in "The Widow of Crescentius" depict vacancy as the necessary destruction of the widow's mind as the only way to shock her brain out of long-held ways of understanding the world.

The only male writer that depicts such a permanent cognitive breakdown is Keats. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the irascible nature of the urn teases the speaker out of thought, just as Mnemosyne confronts both speakers of the *Hyperion* poems right before those texts break down into fragments, arriving at vacancy with a grinding halt. In *Hyperion*, Apollo begins his transformation into an immortal god by drinking the peerless, bright elixir as he looks into the face of Mnemosyne. Convulsing and flushing,

²⁵ Jason Rudy argues that the use of electrical shock in Robinson and Hemans helps these poets to compose a poetics that provides access to universal, bodily sensation and ultimately helps to create new versions of universality in the social realm. See his *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics*

he attempts to “Die into life,” yet the poem only ends with a glimpse of his “limbs/ Celestial” (130). Looking into her face filled with the chaos of past memory or history, Apollo cannot transcend himself. Though the goddess enflames him, effectively leaving him forever tumescent, he is also eternally barred from transforming into something else. Like Hemans’s heroines, Keats’s aspiring gods gaze at something they cannot comprehend and fall silent. Both *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* end this way, with the dashed lines of vacancy and the tragic failure of the Romantic imagination. While Keats’s male characters stare down vacancy and lose their ability to think or to function in society, Smith, Jewsbury, and Hemans devise this suspension of thought as an important means of exiting those social structures that did not include them.

In large part, these women writers were all responding to Wordsworth’s poems, especially his tendency to *fill in* vacancy with some form of either male transcendence or feminine feeling. *Beachy Head* especially seems written in reaction to “Tintern Abbey,” a poem that suggests the recompense for great loss comes by way of the “sad still music of humanity.” For Wordsworth, poetry reconnoiters a unified subjectivity against the ravages of industrial modernity but also vacancy. His explicit attempts to formulate a kind of vacancy, however, occur in “Lines Written Upon the Seat of a Yew Tree,” as well as his idiot boy poems, “There was a boy” and “The Idiot Boy.”²⁶ As I discuss at greater length in chapter three, Wordsworth’s idiot boys present blank minds, free from theories of the picturesque or the disruptions of history, ready and waiting to be filled with something else. Critics have argued whether this something else represents a kind of anti-Enlightenment quasi-religious feeling or something akin to the dialectical dynamic

²⁶ See Viscomi’s argument about Wordsworth’s vacancy in “Wordsworth, Gilpin, and the Vacant Mind.”

sublime that reinstates the subject's rationality.²⁷ Different versions of Wordsworth have differing degrees of success with leaving vacancy open for pedagogical purposes or filling it in with a new kind of Romantic instruction, and it is difficult to decide whether he finally ends up with a troubled mind that "broods/ Over the dark abyss" (*Prelude* XIV.71-72) or "on the edge of vacancy" composing a "unity sublime" (*The Excursion* IX.608).²⁸

Like Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge also resorts to sympathy and to transcendence as an antidote to vacancy's uncomfortable suspension in non-knowledge. For example, in "Frost at Midnight," he depicts Hartley's breathing and his exuberant shouting as an affective bond and fellow-feeling that "Fill up the interspersed vacancies/ And momentary pauses of thought" (51-52). In *The Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge attempts to define the Romantic imagination as that which unifies the Romantic symbol. He inadvertently describes vacancy, however, when he constructs the secondary imagination as an ultimately unifying force that first stops along the way to deconstruct: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create" (304). This dialectic becomes clear in "Kubla Khan," a poem in some ways about the poet's inability to stem the tide of imaginative dissipation, as I discuss in chapter three.

As opposed to these strict attempts to keep vacancy open or find a new ideology to replace its uncomfortable skepticism, Robinson and Hemans later in their careers both

²⁷ See Bewell's *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*.

²⁸ Mary Jacobus in *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* and Avital Ronnell in *Stupidity* capitalize on this indecidable or unreadable Wordsworth. One point to be considered here is that if Wordsworth in the *Prelude* or his idiot boys in *Lyrical Ballads* end up in a chaos of non-meaning, he does not see this as the means to a new community but an unfortunate by-product. My argument is that Shelley and the female poets actively cultivate these moments.

attempt to find a form of thinking where vacancy inheres in a procedure that periodically resets thought. Robinson especially tackles the Wordsworthian dialectic (of vacant or unified) by finding a structure for vacancy that produces an open-ended mechanism for thought, rather than simply pausing cognition or perception. In rewriting *Lyrical Ballads* into *Lyrical Tales*, she composes her version of the idiot-savage whose stuttering utterances generate a range of disparate perceptions and linguistic options. This model also has its counterpart in Byron's immanent, revolving voice that explodes any one philosophy or identity with a host of satirical voices. Unlike Byron, however, Robinson's language of potentiality is always connected to and created from the flux of embodied realities.

Though like Smith, Hemans initially focuses on simply retarding thought, by the time she writes the wandering Spaniard in *The Forest Sanctuary*, she works with ways to instigate vacancy on a repetitive, permanent basis through mind-emptying meditation. Similar to Robinson's later model, she eventually looks to a mechanism that continually produces moments of vacancy as a means of repeatedly stemming the tide of conceptual and linguistic habituations. Shelley takes the opposite route from Hemans, beginning with a more repetitive model of vacancy in *Prometheus Unbound* but eventually ending in the non-knowledge of aporia at the end of his life. His idealist closet drama culminates with the idea that revolution must be constantly recreated in the mind. In Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*, Demogorgon explicitly warns the new utopian family of the

danger in resorting to old ways of thinking, and the entire act is engaged in reimagining the syntax of language as flexible, non-determinate, and constantly open to change.²⁹

Alongside these questions of how to keep vacancy open, some poets ponder the problem of how vacancy inhibits or provides opportunities for political agency. Though we could discuss many of the poets, Shelley and Hemans provide the most interesting contrast. In Hemans, cognitive overload occurs only with the prodding of outside stimuli, such as drugs, social trauma like the death of a husband, or intoxicating poetry. After women like the widow of Crescentius fall prey to vacancy, they then disperse it to the public at large, becoming agents of revolution even as their victims lose their agency in the process. In “The Forest Sanctuary,” Hemans does away with the reliance on outside influences such as drugs when she finds a self-reliant, self-instigated process for vacancy. These motifs also have interesting parallels in Shelley, who also depicts women either ingesting or dispensing mind-altering drugs. In *Prometheus Unbound* and the “Triumph of Life,” Asia and the feminine “shape all light” dose compatriots with nepenthe in order to grant them the necessary forgetfulness that will blot out past tyranny and allow them to reconceptualize social and political organization. Shelley’s women play important roles in the revolution, though the nepenthe they offer acts to mute potential violent or vengeful side effects from fellow travelers.

If vacancy is often portrayed as a revolutionary force, there is some argument between poets as to whether vacancy offers a violent or peaceful form of social change. Smith’s hermit has been subject to violence, but the vacancy he exemplifies is a form of peaceful hospitality. Similarly, Jewsbury offers a form of friendship that attempts to put

²⁹ Linda Brigham makes this argument about Shelley in “The Postmodern Semiotics of *Prometheus Unbound*.”

an end the hostility of colonial prejudice. Perhaps not surprisingly, both Hemans and Robinson, whose vacancy is already more embodied, depict jarring, painful mental shocks that produce oblivion or overload. Although Hemans eventually writes of the peaceful Spaniard who flees the inquisition, throughout her career she depicted a number of revolutionary women toppling patriarchal structures by inciting violence. As Tricia Lootens first noticed, “The Widow of Crescentius,” “The Bride of the Greek Isle,” and “The Wife of Asdrubal” all spill blood either to murder a tyrant or protest his ascendancy. More cerebrally, they do so after experiencing a painful cognitive breakdown. These poems ponder to what extent women imitate tyrannical power-mongering when they plot regime change and to what extent violence may be the only and necessary means of affecting women’s positions.

Shelley also explores the question of violence when he stops work on *Prometheus Unbound* to write *The Cenci*, a gothic drama about the daughter of a sixteenth-century Italian Count who is raped by him and then plots his death in revenge. Her refusal to speak the crime indicates how withholding—as opposed to feminist writing—might also be claimed as a revolutionary vacancy. In the introduction to the play, however, Shelley specifically excoriates Beatrice’s violent actions because they initiate another cycle of tyrannical violence. The persistence of violent women in Hemans’ *oeuvre* suggests that this form of vacancy may serve only as a critique and cannot truly enact a revolution that alters anything on a more permanent basis.

Vacancy clearly has implications for how gender might be reconceptualized as a part of revolutionary change, as Hemans and Shelley attest when they question the ethics of vacancy as a performance of masculine aggression. Both Smith’s hermit figure, who

ends *Beachy Head*, and Robinson's idiot boy-savage in "The Savage of Aveyron" may be universal figures deracinated of gender, or they may be male figures feminized by masculine aggression. Robinson's idiot, however, seems to manifest gender as only one of many alterities, in an attempt to undermine the male-female duality. Whereas the widow of Crescentius or Beatrice Cenci literally or figuratively don masculine attire, Asia and Prometheus combine to form a single, androgynous consciousness, though one that has been tutored in feminist critique. Hemans's Spaniard likewise represents a conquistador who is vacated of his masculine aggression and, in the new world, becomes somewhat androgynous, as Gary Kelly has argued.³⁰ His wife, who cannot tear herself away from the rooted domesticity of her home country or its symbolic, idolatrous religion dies during the oceanic trip, leaving the Spaniard to become both mother and father to their young son. Finally, when the speaker of Jewsbury's *The Oceanides* adopts the figure of infancy as her final gesture at the end of the poem, she summons another representation of androgyny, or an imago created before gender is instantiated through language. Each of these models plays differently with admixtures of masculine and feminine on a discursive level, and a large part of this effort seems wrapped up in the possibility of rethinking femininity beyond the over-sensible domestic feminine body. At other times, many of these writers seem to aspire to a non-gendered mind, and they certainly hope to explode the language that overwrites existence with pre-patterned gender dichotomies.

Though all of the male writers associate vacancy in some way with feminine affect or receptivity, for Shelley vacancy seems especially tied to women's intellectual

³⁰ See Kelly's essay on Hemans in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Julia Melnyk and Nanora Sweet.

development. Asia becomes a particularly feminist figure through her drug trip and confrontation with Demogorgon, the spirit of the deep, when she comes to consciousness about her place outside the patriarchy and, more importantly, her ability to critique it. Rather than becoming silent and taking back tyrannical language as Prometheus does, Asia must execute a feminist act of writing, when she regurgitates a history of the patriarchy precisely so that she may understand herself as a historical actor who has the power to reframe tyrannical discourse. As Demogorgon says to Asia afterwards: “—If the Abyss/ Could vomit forth its secrets: —but a voice/ Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless” (II.iv.114-16). Asia supplies this voice, and through her, Shelley argues just how much the world needs women’s writing. It is no coincidence that he writes *Prometheus Unbound* just after Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is published, a novel very much about how women’s acts of creation are stamped out, especially by male geniuses. Seen from this perspective, Shelley presents vacancy as a feminine figure for revolution, which even Prometheus must learn if he is to be part of the new, utopian family.

For Keats as well, vacancy is gendered as feminine, and the agency his women figures possess—their ability to provoke cognitive pauses—appears quite aggressive. Keats often characterizes his male speakers as the unfortunate victims of vacancy. As Marlon Ross, Marjorie Levinson, and others have argued, Keats’s “cockney” poetry was lambasted for being both lower-class and effeminate.³¹ As he sketches out vacancy in his poems, beginning with the skepticism of negative capability, his masculine figures always appear to be assaulted by the seductions of confusing, ruthless female figures—those *belles dames sans merci*—and males’ lack of agency in this drama may mean that

³¹ See Marlon Ross’s chapter on Mary Tighe and Keats in *The Contours of Masculine Desire* and Levinson’s *Keats’s Life of Allegory*.

they are victims of vacancy. On the other hand, Keats too seems to suggest that feminine figures hold a tremendous, if castrating, revolutionary power.

Finally, the exploration of vacancy almost always pushes poets past the boundaries of the national imaginary. Prometheus must physically and mental journey to the vale of Kashmir to reap the benefits of Asia's vacancy, and Shelley's metaphor of philosophy as the vacating "pioneer" has special resonance for women writers. Unlike the general tendency for Britons to define themselves against other nationalities, particularly the French, as Linda Colley has argued, women writers seek quite the opposite.³² Hemans and Jewsbury are both taking this lesson not only from Shelley's "Alastor" and "The Wandering Jew," which influenced them, but also from Madam de Staël's *Corinne*, a novel about the impossibility of a woman being a poet and living by English values.³³ Smith and Robinson plot their vacant figures of the hermit and the savage on the edges of the nation, Hemans relocates vacancy to early sixteenth-century North America, and Jewsbury's vacancy becomes entirely groundless when she sketches a transnational journey from England to India that effectively deracinates English national signifiers. In this way, vacancy is already a transnational trope.

Vacancy & Genre

If vacancy crosses gender and national boundaries, it is often located at the intersection of lyric and narrative modes—but particularly as they are formulated in the

³² Colley makes this well-known argument in her book, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*.

³³ In Wolfson's edition of Hemans' poetry, she comments prolifically about Hemans' borrowings from "Alastor." Jewsbury has a tongue and cheek piece in her *Phantasmagoria* that partly imitates and partly satirizes the poem, and she also published a review of "The Wandering Jew" in *The Athenaeum*.

genre of Romantic poetry. Although it is possible to discuss vacancy in novels of the period, this dissertation gives great credence to the poetry of women writers. Both women's and men's poetry were exceptional in their pervasive and intense exploration of perception and cognition through the particularly self-reflexive forms poetry offered. Perhaps the novel exerted too much consumer pressure, as opposed to poetry, which still remained a somewhat elite art form with audiences that might be more amenable to philosophical thought. As I have already mentioned, however, Jarvis has recently argued that poetry is especially suitable for philosophical contemplation. Its inherent play with repetition, rhyme and caesura provides forms suited to the exploration of different models for cognition other than reason or affect. Women play with these all these techniques as they think through how formal constraints might spur the mind's ability to stop itself mid-thought.

Many women poets also wrote prose, and they often transpose similar concerns into their novels, yet the structure of these works often requires a romantic solution to vacancy's doubts and ideology critique. As Andrew H. Miller has recently suggested, in nineteenth-century poetry, marriage—as a state of perfection—is often posed as a solution to skepticism. Romanticists would easily view this literary history as the continuation of the Romantic struggle of the subject alienated from the outer world.³⁴ If novels solve this problem by unifying the subject to one other subject in his or her outer world, then novels present marriage as a foil for skepticism. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the teleological nature of romance novels tends to subvert vacancy's

³⁴ He makes this argument in *Burdens of Reflection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* as he discusses skepticism in Tennyson and Browning (35-43).

relish for pauses and uncertainty, even if there is some room for doubt along the way. As I argue in chapter three, Robinson's use of poetry interpolated into novels suggests that it is up to the genre of poetry (or structures in novels that mimic it) to stem the tide of romance's teleologies and the novel's romantic tendencies. The pastoral-poetic scenes in Charlotte Smith's novels are a good case in point. In both *Desmond* and *The Old Manor House* protagonists Geraldine and Monomia both wander unsettled and unsure through the woods magically to find and reunite with the objects of their affection. At times these novels appear to transform the deconstructive pastoral of Smith's poetry into unifying Romantic lyrics.

Austen, with her own brand of skepticism cultivated through the irony of indirect narration, was also certainly thinking through these issues. Her narrators, of course, have the propensity to articulate moments of skepticism, particularly at the end of novels. She often pits reason and feeling against one another in *Sense and Sensibility* and frequently writes two opposing characters whose seeming difference eventually collapses.³⁵ Moreover, the irony of her indirect narration builds on a suspicion regarding happy endings and characters who are blind to their own meanness, avarice, sexual desire, or conservative ideologies. One could cite any number of endings in Austen, though

³⁵ In *Unbecoming Conjunctions*, Jill Heydt-Stevenson makes this kind of argument about James Thorpe and Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*. While James at first appears to be a middle-class braggart hungry for horses and women, uncouth compared to Tilney's gentrified figure, when Catherine Moreland finally arrives at Tilney's abode, we see just how enmeshed Tilney is in the comforts of consumer culture. Austen effectively reveals Tilney as one who is able to paint his consumption with the ideological veneer of class.

Emma's experience at Box Hill and her subsequent capitulation to Knightly have become paradigmatic.³⁶

I have not yet had the opportunity to think through Austen's position, but at the very least it seems clear that her endings often serve as a pause for contemplation about the propulsive marriage plot that has just been recounted. In this sense, the irony of her endings creates a lyrical moment that adjoins the narrative similar to the way women poets envision vacancy as a gap or crux in narratives of linguistic inheritance, or those habitual meanings words import. In their works, the tension between the lyric and the narrative becomes dramatized as a dialectic inherent to cognitive pause. In almost every example, vacancy presents a lyrical moment outside of thought, ideology, or even rich, meditative subjectivity. At the same time, this pause in the chain of signification is always contingent on the resumption of understanding or narrative that comes to fill that void. Thus the lyrical aspect of vacancy does not aim to erase history or time but to place a referendum on traditional histories or narratives that insist on things like teleological trajectories and domestic ideologies. Their goal is not to proffer the lyric as superior to narrative but to find types of lyricism that circumvent narrative teleologies or ideologies by literally providing other ways of thinking.

Chapters

Not all women poets are interested in this skeptical approach to epistemology, of course, and even those that form the main focus of this study at times do value sensibility, affect, reason, and other Enlightenment modes of thinking. Yet these four poets represent

³⁶ See the Romantic Circles praxis volume on Box Hill, *Re-reading Box Hill: Reading the Practice of Everyday Life*, edited by William Galperin.

four different and prominent ways of thinking differently. The body of this dissertation begins with Charlotte Smith, who in some ways is “the mother” of Romanticism but even more strikingly presents the most idealistic and aporetic version of vacancy. Chapter two, “Charlotte Smith and the Enlightenment to Come,” looks at how Smith rejects the aesthetic position often allotted to women of the eighteenth century, who were frequently depicted as rabid consumers of new market goods and services. Smith attempts to vacate bourgeois ideas of taste and instead imagines aesthetic judgments formed not on feelings or material desires but based on formal and immaterial ideals close to Immanuel Kant’s notion of free indeterminate beauty. I argue that Smith self-reflexively employs a Kantian kind of aporetic thinking about the possibilities of Enlightenment reason. This happens through the quasi-conceptuality offered by the radical aesthetics of free beauty and the free play of the mind. Her epic poem, *Beachy Head*, extends the possibilities found in aesthetics to ethics, the law, and nationality. Written during the height of the Napoleonic wars, the poem looks for a way out of England’s imperialistic history by imagining a cosmopolitan future through the figure of a hermit. Living on the shores of England but constantly looking onto the English channel, the hermit saves those mariners who are washed ashore. As a figure of unconditional hospitality who defies national borders, the hermit represents a kind of lawfulness outside the rigid confines of the law, or a justice beyond the juridical order.

If Smith’s hermit allegorizes a futurity that remains open to whatever and whoever might come across England’s shores, Mary Robinson’s poetry is occupied with the multiplicity of sensation and thought that poetry might produce. In chapter three, “Mary Robinson’s Diverse Mind: from Oblivion to Idiocy,” I argue that Robinson

engaged in quite a radical use of empiricism, using Locke's ideas about oblivion and *tabula rasa* as a means of vacating the mind of hackneyed sensations and reflections. For the poet, the worst of these are stale poetic habituations, and Robinson demonstrates this most fully in her sonnet sequence *Sappho & Phaon*. Unlike other commentators who aver that the poet's use of sensibility is a substitute for reason, I argue that the sequence in fact highlights Robinson's rejection of sensibility and the 1790s lyric of feeling precisely because it tends to get caught up in decades-old emotional and intellectual content. By the end of her career, Robinson turns simultaneously to the ballad and the Enlightenment trope of *idiocy* as a means of generating textual and intellectual multiplicity. Through the ballad's refrain and its tendency to proliferate textual variants with each printing and performance, this popular poetic form figures a kind of textual idiocy that does not idly repeat poetic content but instead generates repetition as difference and the plenitude of non-linear thought. This plenitude of the "open text" focuses on the potentiality of poetry to find a flexible materiality outside the body and to pose solutions to the radical politics of the 1790s beyond either Paineite intellectual individualism or Blakean communitarianism.

The next two chapters deal with vacancy during the Regency period and beyond, in the poetry of Felicia Hemans and her close friend Maria Jane Jewsbury. In chapter four, "Felicia Hemans's Ruined Minds: Cognitive Overload and the Blows of Freedom," I show how Hemans uses notions from both nineteenth-century brain science and philosophies of the mind to write about vacancy as cognitive and conceptual overload. Though contemporary scholars have often read her characters as manifesting instances of hysteria that underwrite the need to secure patriotic, imperialistic domesticity, I read

these moments as paralysis stemming from the brain overloading with perceptual data, which in turn shatter long held concepts such as the belief in English imperialism. Hemans triangulates between brain science, with its mind-brain quandary, and Whewell's versions of continental philosophy, with its mind-world problem, postulating that the overload of the brain might create new possibilities to change the mind's abstract conceptualization and understanding of the outside world. In earlier poems, individuals transfer their cognitive paralysis virus-like to the conservative tyrants they topple; in later works, such as *The Forest Sanctuary*, characters emigrate to the empty cognitive space of America. In this epic poem, the protagonist Spaniard eventually learns a method of thinking vacantly by practicing mind-emptying meditation that helps him continually outrun the increasingly ideological American imaginary. Both the vaginal space of the New World and the Spaniard's empty mind present feminine lack as an intrepid and active countermeasure to phallic church and state institutions. Moreover, Hemans performs these modes of vacancy formally through both her propensity to overwork a given text with footnotes as well as her rampant use of dashes to emphasize the mind's natural pauses. This chapter ultimately helps us to understand Hemans neither as a political conservative nor a supporter of liberalist ideology, but as someone attempting to resist ideology outside all available political structures.

The final chapter, "Maria Jane Jewsbury's Childlike, Ethical Vision," plots an escape from grounded, pastoral, national imaginaries altogether. In "The Oceanides" the poet describes her trip from England to India as a journey of liberation, as she floats amid a non-signifying sea. Jewsbury takes Hemans' rejection of Catholic idolatry one step further when she builds her models of vacancy as an interrogation of visual sign systems.

Rather than using a single philosopher to contextualize the poet's approach to epistemology, I look at several developments in popular culture that produced doubt about ways of seeing and consequently about methods for knowing the world in an increasingly visual culture. Working from both the phantasmic quality of commodity culture and contemporaneous visual technologies such as the phantasmagoria, the poet's pictorial representations separate image from reality, vacating visual markers of embodied identities that increasingly served to assign women and racialized groups to biological and evolutionary inferiority. By concentrating on the partial immateriality of verbal or poetic images, Jewsbury is able to put visions of British and Indian landscapes into conversation. More importantly, this version of vacancy allows her to model British-Indian relations as the superimposition of one landscape over another that always preserves a certain amount of non-coincidence. This representational gap preserves the unknowable qualities that inhere in the Other, which ultimately insures the ethical treatment of the Indian Other. This visual blind spot is best represented in Jewsbury's final figure of an infant. As a visual provocation, this picture of childhood argues with classic Romantic depictions of idyllic youth by presenting an imago that is not fully codified and thus figures the cut before knowledge, narratives of development, or interpellation. Not unlike Robinson's savages, Jewsbury ends her long poem with an image of non-knowledge, whose visual representation perhaps offers the most drastic disruption of language even if it only temporarily suspends the ideologies that images project.

Chapter 2. Charlotte Smith and the Enlightenment to Come

More often than not, the speakers in Charlotte Smith's poems find themselves sitting on a cliff, looking out on the coastal waters of the English Channel, and wishing they were somewhere else. Though they may attempt to take refuge from despair in the earthy pastoral landscape that Smith has become known for, her speakers never manage to gain solace by imaginatively bonding with the beauties of the landscape. Instead, they wish for something outside material reality, as in this well-known sonnet where the speaker goes so far as to envy bones uncovered in a seaside graveyard:

Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent waves;
But vain to them the winds and waters rave;
They hear the warring elements no more;
While I am doom'd—by life's long storm oppress,
To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest (44.10-14)

What the speaker desires is not quite death itself but a release from feeling, sensation, and embodiment altogether. Smith's seascapes consistently dwell on moments where sea meets land, where the waves carve out a space beyond the tranquil bowers on the shores of her childhood home, the national boundaries of Britain itself and materiality altogether. Nihilistic as poems like these might sound, it is important to understand how Smith repeatedly returns to the language of numbness or spaces white-washed by waves as a figurative gesture. In doing so, her poetics seek possibilities for thinking about women outside the late eighteenth-century discursive field that almost always located women and their aesthetics through their gendered bodies.

Recently Jacqueline Labbe has read Smith as attempting to shed the limiting identities of mother and distressed woman, yet Smith's poems about vacancy reveal that she was engaged in a much larger project positing women not just as feeling but as thinking subjects entitled to freedom and universality—the unfinished promises of the Enlightenment.³⁷ Throughout her poems, Smith locates vacancy as a process of exploring a language beyond the body, sensation, and other kinds of material limitations. In later poems, Smith sets her sights on national and international waters in order to wash away the narratives of imperialism and nationalism that underwrote the Napoleonic Wars and at the same time relegated women to severely limited roles in the public sphere as affective rather than thinking subjects. Even as she attempts to find a way out of teleological discourses, Smith necessarily leaves language open and hospitable to contingency, conceptualizing a future like Derrida's "future to come," a future prospect made vulnerable to the shock of both conceptual and historical events.

To argue that Smith envisions an imaginative life outside the limits of the body is to set aside the reigning historicist view that situates the poet in various empiricist discourses. From the outlook of the long eighteenth century and recent feminist thought, in Smith's poems the body, like nature's material landscape, becomes a founding site for a feminist aesthetics that reinforces maternity and domesticity against failed reason and

³⁷ See also Rachel Crawford's section on Smith in "Troping the Subject: Behn, Smith, Hemans and the Poetics of the Bower." Crawford also views Smith's use of gender as performative, which helps to undermine the normalized alliances between nature and gender: "her choreography of gender relations suggest that the female inhabitant of the bower, with her feminine charms, is as inscrutable and enticing to the female poet as to the male. Femininity itself is revealed as an enchantment which is not automatically accessible by female poets, and is certainly not unproblematically identifiable with them" (256).

masculine, unfeeling law.³⁸ Moreover, Smith has often been aligned with those categories that define women as tied to sensation and sensory ways of understanding the world, including sensibility, luxury, the aesthetics of “taste,” and, underlying them all, empiricism. Like John Barrell’s critique of the distinction between the logic of sensation and reflection in reference to Dorothy and William Wordsworth respectively, Smith scholars have tended to link the woman poet to the cult of sensibility to the exclusion of reason or reflection.³⁹ More sensitive people—particularly women—were seen as more susceptible to physical sensation and passion, as well as to the novelties of new consumer culture. The discourses of sensibility and commodity culture, especially as authored by Adam Smith and David Hume, were forged together and later reified in discussions of taste. Empiricists like Hume suggested that taste was created in the subject through a series of educational experiences in the world. Good consuming subjects would propel the English economy by fueling a demand for imperial raw materials to be produced into goods by English manufacturers.⁴⁰ Taste became one of the foremost signs of the educated bourgeois subject, particularly chaste, “tasteful” women, who themselves were

³⁸ See for example, Maria Jerinic, “‘The mild dominion of the moon’: Charlotte Smith and the Politics of Transcendence,” Kathryn Pratt, “Charlotte Smith’s Melancholia on the Page and Stage,” Donnell R. Ruwe, “Charlotte Smith’s Sublime; Feminine Poetics, Botany, and *Beachy* Head,” Judith Pascoe, “Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith,” and Sarah Zimmerman’s *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* (39-72). Many of these studies take their cues from Anne K. Mellor’s identification of male and female Romanticisms in her *Romanticism and Gender*. According to Mellor’s formulation in her introduction to the volume, women writers foreswore the linguistic concerns of their male peers with the limitations of the language, or the use of language for political and spiritual salvation and instead looked to “the workings of the rational mind, located in the female as well as male body” (5).

³⁹ See Barrell, “The Uses of Dorothy.”

⁴⁰ Classic texts include Smith’s *The Morals of Sentiment* and Hume’s “On Taste” as well as many of his other essays on trade and consumerism.

valued for their ability to interpellate their English children into appropriate spending, dressing, and social habits. While Smith no doubt was privy to these arguments, if only through the pages of Addison and Steele, she dramatically challenges women's position in these discourses as well as the place of women's writing by rejecting bourgeois taste for something more like Immanuel Kant's competing notion of aesthetic judgment, which sought to locate beauty beyond the body in disinterested, somewhat conceptual formulations built around the object. Not unlike the development of Kant's own thinking, what begins for Smith as a meditation on how the aesthetic might enact and conceptualize freedom becomes, in her later poems, also about the possibilities for universal rights and justice.

It may be odd to speak of a feminist Kantian idea of beauty, particularly because his rejection of the body historically served his desire to ghettoize women from the sphere of philosophic, public thought. Yet it is not outside the realm of possibility that a writer like Smith, weighed down by so many discourses about the body, might try to imagine what it would be like to think outside the demands of sympathy and material needs that always served to remind smart writers that they were, in the end, needy women. Such a post-feminist stance, moreover, seems especially possible in the years surrounding the French Revolution, when universality seemed promising if illusive. Aesthetics would be an apt place to center any kind of universality, particularly because eighteenth-century women like Smith were educated in the arts. Additionally, Kant's brand of aesthetics, with its emphasis on judgments of beauty located in the object, could be theoretically available to any person, male or female, who could educate themselves in using reason to arrive at objective judgments. In the wake of the French Revolution,

women could be eligible particularly if they heeded Mary Wollstonecraft's injunctions to develop their reason and demand the equality proffered by the Revolution. Though Kantian beauty necessitated judges schooled in Enlightenment reason, his beauty was only quasi-conceptual, uniting *both* the understanding *and* the imagination. Thus, though an abstract universal, beauty was not beholden to a concept's strict laws and teleologies.⁴¹ Though *a priori*, Kantian beauty is always subject to the free play of the imagination—including a portion of formal indeterminacy and contingency, as both Adorno in *Aesthetic Ideology* and Derrida in *The Truth in Painting* have argued. This indeterminacy becomes a particularly apt way to categorize an aesthetics that might move beyond a number of norms that rest on conceptual rules—such as gender, nationality, class. In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant terms this formal indeterminacy “lawfulness without law,” and this quasi-conceptuality is an extremely useful way of describing Smith's complicated rejection of masculine law and simultaneous espousal of what Derrida has called justice beyond the law, a radical ethics that goes beyond individual sympathy and that obtains conceptuality but is not bound to its strictures. Smith's poetics does to Kant's ideas what Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* did to Tom Paine's “Rights of Man,” ensuring that the Revolutionary rhetoric of universality, reason and human rights did indeed include women.⁴²

⁴¹ For a thorough discussion of Kant's quasi-conceptual basis for beauty see Rodolphe Gasché's *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics*, in particular his chapter “Mere Form” as well as Robert Kaufman's “Red Kant” (710-12).

⁴² Orrin N. C. Wang's chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft in *Fantastic Modernity* sets the precedent for viewing a woman writer as attempting to be included in the radical, aporetic possibilities of the Enlightenment. My argument about Smith's use of aporetic thinking, however, demonstrates that for Smith Enlightenment reason is about the possibilities of radical *aesthetics*, in particular the possibilities of Kant's free play of the mind and free beauty.

Finally, though Smith's self-reflexive discourse ties together the promises of aesthetics and universal freedom, her meditations on taste and imperialism also worry over the elitist and ideological strains inherent in Enlightenment discourses. Recent critical commentaries on Kant suggest that the philosopher may have anticipated his own failures in transcending certain problems of language and of universalism,⁴³ and like Kant, Smith may be submitting to the reader her own failed attempts to create universal aesthetic judgment as precisely the point. This inability to imagine non-restrictive universality and Enlightenment ideals become part of Smith's constant striving, a characteristically Romantic trait. For this reason, she repeatedly turns to abstract, empty spaces that have all the possibility of as-yet-unfulfilled promises.

This chapter looks at the two works that bookend Smith's career—her great commercial success *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784) and her final, posthumously published epic *Beachy Head* (1807). Reading these two works together links Smith's earliest efforts at reconceiving aesthetics to her final, and most fully realized, attempts at thinking through language's role in the problems of trade, imperialism, and ethics. In her early sonnets she begins to measure the competing definitions of taste in the last decades of the eighteenth century and rejects the aesthetic position allotted to eighteenth-century women as rabid consumers of new market goods and services. She instead tries to imagine aesthetic judgments formed not on feelings or material desires but based on formal and immaterial ideals. The lyric beauty Smith works with in the *Sonnets* reappears at the end of *Beachy*

⁴³ See Robert Kaufman's "Red Kant: or, the Persistence of the Third Critique in Adorno and Jameson" (689n12) and David Clark's "We 'Other Prussians': Bodies and Pleasures in De Quincey and Late Kant." These accounts of Kant suggest that the idealist philosopher was not so blind to the logical problems his arguments entailed, for example, the problem that his universal aesthetics was, in the end, based on individual subjective judgments

Head as a space of possibility, England's southern coast vacated of the narratives of trade and conquest that represent Britain's imperialist history. *Beachy Head* finally seeks to find a way out of this history by contemplating the figure of a hermit who enacts one version of universal rights by living on the edge of the nation and imagining a future unallied to nationalistic concerns.

The *Elegiac Sonnets* and the Impossibility of Taste

Most accounts of Smith's wildly successful commercial venture, *Elegiac Sonnets*, agree that her first poetic foray sold the language of sensibility for some sorely needed cash. A destitute mother of numerous children, whose profligate husband had recently been thrown in debtor's prison, she marketed the autobiographical sonnets, hoping that chivalrous customers would pay to help end her tales of woe.⁴⁴ The sonnets at first appear as effusions, moments of high passion that leave the speaker no distance from her subject for reflection. Yet Smith's use of the language of taste, particularly in describing the pastoral landscape, reframes her sonnets as both reflective and self-reflexive poems about the possibilities of poetry and the redemptive qualities of nature. More than once in the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith longs for the pastoral retreats of her childhood, as she describes them, those "scenes could charm that now I taste no more!" (31.14). More than nostalgia for rural comfort or relief from poverty, these sonnets link the degraded position of women to debates about taste and aesthetics at the end of the eighteenth century. At a time when writers like William Cowper and later William Wordsworth capitalized on rejecting urban luxury and consumer culture for the rural beauties of nature, Smith

⁴⁴ See especially Labbe's "Selling Sorrows."

figures these attitudes toward consumption in her sonnets about female subjectivity.

Rather than representing women as good consuming subjects forming proper bourgeois taste, as many subsequent women novelists did, Smith uses her role as a woman poet to lodge an acute critique of bourgeois taste mediated through the feminine body and its metonymic associations with nature. She searches for a version of beauty located in reflective judgments of nature's formal qualities.

Smith accomplishes this aesthetic revolution not only through the language of the poems themselves but also through her savvy editorial practices. Her original 1784 volume went through at least sixteen editions during her lifetime, and in the process she added a large number of sonnets, eventually including an entire second volume in 1797. While the initial sonnets reject sensation and memory for a kind of numbness, the later poems introduce the language of "taste" and figures of open, abstract space that represent an aesthetics located outside the body and outside memory's narrative histories. These later poems insert new language about consumption and the body, and with each new set of additions, they refract or revise her *oeuvre* as a whole. Just as Smith disperses the speaking subject through her poetic personae, each new wave of sonnets destabilizes her body of work and performs the act of critical thinking by repeatedly reframing poems about sensation and numbness through the discourse of taste.⁴⁵ Though this new language develops a weighty alternative aesthetics, it is essential to remember that the original sonnets remain in the collection, as well as many others that almost neurotically repeat the move of painfully and unhappily languishing in sensation and sensibility. Thus

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the ways Smith's multiple poetic personae destabilize notions of identity and subjectivity, see Labbe's seminal *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender*.

the poet ends up in a dialectical struggle between her longing for an aesthetic that “refuses to matter in terms of human economies” as Karen Swann has put it, and the sensibility and pain of her position in a society that bars her from and forces her to question the exclusionary nature of that aestheticist fantasy (qtd. in Pyle 13). Smith perhaps never truly writes herself out of this quandary, yet she makes a valiant effort to stop resisting old discourses and imagine a space where new language might be created at the end of *Beachy Head*.

The word “taste” doesn’t appear in the sonnets until the third edition, but the particular tensions between embodied taste and non-embodied aesthetics are already present in the first two editions, which offered Smith’s initial germ of sixteen sonnets. Though these sonnets employ some stock tropes from the cult of sensibility so popular at the turn of the eighteenth century, the speaker too often ends up sick of her own feelings, pleading for anhedonia or numbness as a relief from such extreme, painful feeling. In sonnet five, “To the South Downs,” the speaker implores the pastoral countryside for a healing balm:

Ah! hills belov’d—where once a happy child,
Your beechen shades, “your turf, your flowers among,”
I wove your blue-bells into garlands wild,
And woke your echoes with my artless song.
Ah! hills belov’d—your turf your flowers remain;
But can they peace to this sad breast restore;
For one poor moment soothe the sense of pain,
And teach a breaking heart to throb no more?

And you, Aruna!—in the vale below,
As to the sea your limpid waves you bear,
Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,
To drink a long oblivion to my care?
Ah! no!—when all, e'en Hope's last ray is gone,
There's no oblivion—but in death alone! (5.1-14)

Since the South Downs represent Smith's childhood home and aristocratic upbringing, then her memories of this place should soothe and comfort her now, stuck as she is in a failed marriage with the son of a West Indies planter and merchant. Smith's visions of her childhood, Edenic pastoral, however, no longer hold the same charm. Her unhappiness may alienate her from the pastoral bower and its "artless song," yet it has compelled her to write a sonnet that is already self-reflexive about its impossibility to take in easy pleasure or sensation. Even in this early poem, the poet turns from a vision of the land to the river Arun for a draught she might consume, which rather than nourishing her would erase her memory altogether and numb her to the pain it brings. Through this erasure, the poet seeks a space beyond memory that neutralizes not only desire but also those personal and societal histories that seek to define her as a jilted woman, fallen from an aristocratic and then even a secure middle class existence. Though divorced from the unmediated, easy pleasures of aristocratic leisure or a shepherd's existence, Smith rejects communing with the landscape's "charms" through the avenue of consumption supplied by her (faltering) middle class status. Instead, she only figuratively ingests a substance that will block all sensations, memory and desire.

In an article on Smith and nepenthe, Charlotte Sussman notes how Smith uses Helen's draught of nepenthe to release herself from the painful, exhausting demands of sympathizing with others.⁴⁶ It seems important, moreover, that this anesthetic is taken in through the mouth. Even in the early sonnets, there is a turn from the eye to the mouth, as Smith refuses the eye, the "higher" order sense in the eighteenth century hierarchy, for the "lower" order mouth, only to reject that as well.⁴⁷ Rather than following Enlightenment tropes of vision as the reasoning sense, here both sight and taste are forms of sensation. To subvert either means of sensory consumption, these sonnets develop a liquid economy aimed at preventing sensation or feeling altogether. In the previous sonnet, the speaker desires to drink the draught of Nepenthe to stop herself from crying. The speaker similarly supplicates sleep's opiate in sonnet eleven: "But still thy opiate aid dost thou deny/ To calm the anxious breast, to close the streaming eye" (13-14). Ingesting nepenthe, according to the formula laid out in the couplet, would dry up the stream of tears from the eyes and slow down the flow of blood through the heart—or possibly stop it altogether.

These lines connect several viscous fluids together—blood, nepenthe, and tears—not simply as substitutions or metonymies for pain, but in a relationship of expenditure

⁴⁶ Adela Pinch also notes that Smith's quotations of Pope and others occur in places where the speaker expresses a dire sensibility. This move serves to critique the nature of sympathy, as if noting the already textualized nature of the cult of sensibility. These citations mark sensibility as an overly-cited affect that points to the failures of sympathy and the poem's own inability to call up authentic feeling, even as it attempts to evoke sympathy or feeling in its readers. A good example of this is the last line in the first sonnet, where Smith mentions "Pity's melting eye" as a manifesto of sensibility that "*those paint sorrow best—who feel it most!*" (14). Quoting the line from Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," Smith already puts distance between her speaker and that speaker's sensibility.

⁴⁷ For a good discussion of the relative values of the senses, see Gigante's introduction to her book *Taste*.

and exchange. Through this liquid economy, the speaker refuses the commodity culture of mere consumption and instead turns to the gift exchange of the aristocracy. Rather than simply selling her poems to buy something to eat, Smith depicts herself as giving tears and begging for relief—in the form of numbness or readers’ patronage. The poet must take in something besides food, something inedible, to transport herself to a state beyond bourgeois consumption. These poems, however, attest to the fact that Smith cannot permanently reside in this anesthetic position precisely due to the temporary nature of the cure—she must repeatedly dose herself with nepenthe. The drug’s status as both an inedible substance and a commodity helps the poet perform an exquisite awareness of both her physical conditions and the limitations of her body.⁴⁸

It is in Smith’s next poem about the Downs, sonnet thirty-one, “Written in Farm Wood, South Downs, in May 1784,” that she first uses the word “taste.” Appearing in the third edition of the sonnets (1786), this iteration refracts the liquid economy of the first two editions through the language of taste, which serves as a meta-discourse on the questions of consumption and sensibility already broached in the initial poems. Like sonnet five, this poem begins by attempting to recreate a visual memory of the Downs, which might serve as a balm but ultimately fails.

Spring’s dewy hand on this fair summit weaves
The downy grass with tufts of Alpine flowers.
And shades the beechen slopes with tender leaves,
And leads the shepherd to his upland bowers,

⁴⁸ Smith herself used opium occasionally with her friend Henrietta O’Neill, who ended up dying from an opium overdose. Her friend’s accidental achievement of quiescence further added to Smith’s pain in the loss of a dear friend and a wealthy benefactor.

Strewn with wild thyme; while slow-descending showers
 Feed the green ear, and nurse the future sheaves!
 —Ah! blest the hind—whom no sad thoughts bereaves
 Of the gay season's pleasures!—All his hours
 To wholesome labour given, or thoughtless mirth;
 No pangs of sorrow past, or coming dread,
 Bend his unconscious spirit down to earth,
 Or chase calm slumbers from his careless head!
 Ah! what to me can those dear days restore,
 When scenes could charm that now I taste no more! (31.1-14)

The poem presents a happy shepherd sustained and nourished by the pastoral landscape. There he finds “wholesome labour” and “thoughtless mirth” (9) while the spring showers “Feed the green ear, and nurse the future sheaves!” (6). This shepherd, a carefree hind, is “unconscious” of the “sorrow past, or coming dread” (12,11). Existing in a perpetual present of the rejuvenating spring, the shepherd is “unconscious” of the suffering outside the idyllic pastoral setting. Though corn can be nourished by the rain, Smith cannot feed off this land—the landscape cannot act as nursemaid to *her* woes. In the final lines, she introduces herself into the sonnet by excluding herself from the very setting she has just described: “Ah! what to me those dear days restore,/ When scenes could charm that now I taste no more!” (13-14). Suddenly appearing in the couplet, Smith turns the sonnet back on herself, and the poem reveals itself to be not primarily about the shepherd but about her own inability to partake of the natural scenery of her childhood. The couplet offers the possibility of restoration in the first line—the creation of a pastoral retreat

through the imagination's use of a memory—only to relinquish that fantasy as the poem cruelly comes to a close. Alienated from the landscape by her fallen middle class existence and resisting any easy alliance between “woman” and “nature,” the poet again refuses to regain Eden by consuming the pastoral.

Not only does Smith reject nature's consolation and its sensory charms, but she also rebuffs the faculty of taste and the discourses of luxury and feminine consumption that were often attached to eighteenth-century women on their entrance into the public sphere. Though as a poet of sensibility Smith might seem to stand in obvious relationship with some of the discourse on taste's main tenets, she ultimately critiques empiricism for its inherent gender bias. As critics have argued, the cult of sensibility was underwritten by empirical science that connected physical stimulation and sensitivity to taste; more sensitive people would likely have better taste.⁴⁹ This also meant women could be more prone to emotional disorders like hysteria and to rabid consumerism, and much eighteenth-century conduct literature was written to correct these perceived tendencies. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's program for taste still held sway even at the turn of the century, and in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, women often serve as natural models of taste, particularly when they are shopping or talking about dress, in a discourse that often circulated around the female body.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ For the connections between empirical science and eighteenth-century sensibility see especially G. J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. See also Janet Todd's *Sensibility An Introduction* and Jerome McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style*.

⁵⁰ See Erin Mackie's excellent discussions of fashion, dress and taste in both her study *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* and her collection of essays from *The Tatler and Spectator, The Commerce of Everyday Life* (319-24).

The concept of taste, in its journey from Addison to the nineteenth century is often credited with consolidating a middle class public sphere by educating readers in the ability to make appropriate consumer or aesthetic choices in a burgeoning free market. Their choices would signify their class interests and at the same time educate them in those values that reinforce a liberal, modern state.⁵¹ These “aesthetic narratives of acculturation,” as Marc Redfield terms them, were once available to Smith, as a child of the South Downs and a girl at boarding school exhibiting a flair for polite accomplishments like singing, acting and writing poetry. Later, however, as an economically abject woman and a poet aspiring to high aesthetic poetry, Smith rejects these normative models of acculturation. Her superlatively abject speaker tries to ally herself with a proto-Kantian high aesthetic of poetry over and against the unreflective consumption that often characterized bourgeois taste. In this way, her poetry becomes a poetics of rejection, resisting—even as it appears to feed upon—sensation, emotion and experience that form subjective ideas of bourgeois taste.

Newer sonnets, which Smith adds in subsequent editions (1786-89), begin to shift from representing a speaker numb to sensation to depicting aesthetic objects that are at once correlatives for numbness yet also objects of beauty independent of individual, subjective predilections like taste. Several poems describing the ocean waves that border England’s southern coast entail descriptions of blankness, voids or melancholy bordering

⁵¹ See especially Timothy Dykstal, “The Politics of Taste in the *Spectator*” and Marc Redfield’s introduction to *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Dykstal argues that Addison’s ideas about taste helped to shift the main activity of the public sphere from action to “making,” the making or selection of consumer goods that would, in turn, signify a class. Redfield, on the other end of the period, traces the political ends of aesthetic discourse through Matthew Arnold’s insistence that liberal educations would make better or even ideal citizens.

on death. In sonnet 44 mentioned earlier, “Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex,” the stormy ocean and windy climate, which represent classic tropes of sensibility and passion, eventually unearth bones from the cemetery: “Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave,/ But vain to them the winds and waters rave” (9-10).

Similarly the Laplander in sonnet 53 looks wistfully at the Tenglio river: “O’er the blank void he looks with hopeless pain” (13). Both poems emote a melancholic desire for eternal rest. Even more importantly, death becomes a signifier of the absence of sensibility and its emotional pain. With its heaving waves, moving water might first seem to act as a sign of this sensibility, yet as a cold, insensible body that looks nearly infinite, the water begins to represent a kind of abstract void or space that replaces the embodied charm of the pastoral landscape. The ocean’s repeated motion also chafes bones into a clean white slate, a figure of beauty based in the representation of its whiteness. These images of death verge on a kind of universality and abstraction that place aesthetics, as Kant did, outside personal proclivity or feeling and into a subjective but formal judgment of the object—or a space bereft of objects altogether.

Smith develops the imagery of insensible voids even more fully in sonnet 62, originally published as a sonnet written by Orlando in *The Old Manor House* (1793), but incorporated into the *Elegiac Sonnets* in Volume II, first published in 1797. The speaker passes through a farm village covered in snow, which becomes the object of his lament:

While thus I wander, cheerless and unblest,
And find in change of place but change of pain;
In tranquil sleep the village laborers rest,
And taste that quiet I pursue in vain!

Hush'd is the hamlet now, and faintly gleam
The dying embers, from the casement low
Of the thatch'd cottage; while the Moon's wan beam
Lends a new lustre to the dazzling snow.
O'er the cold waste, amid the freezing night,
Scarce heeding whither, desolate I stray;
For me, pale Eye of Evening, thy soft light
Leads to no happy home; *my* weary way
Ends but in sad vicissitudes of care;
I only fly from doubt—to meet despair!

When the language of taste appears again in this sonnet, it is the tranquil numbness of sleep and quiet that the speaker cannot experience. As opposed to the more sensible consumption in the earlier poem, here what the speaker now wishes to taste is a vacancy represented by the stillness and silence of the village at night, if not by the white moonlight and snow—"the cold waste, amid the freezing night" (11). Though the winter pastoral scene—the "hush'd hamlet" and the snow "dazzling" in the moonlight—seems to offer comfort, the speaker is only passing through. The village represents a distant idyllic retreat and the fantasy of a happy home, which the speaker cannot possess along his or her "weary way." This happiness depends not on pleasure but a lack of feeling or thought—peace, quiet and sleep.

This poem vacates not only the consumption and sensibility represented in previous poems but also gender itself. As Anne Meyers has suggested, this sonnet, voiced by the male Orlando and later appropriated by Smith as a female poet in another

collection of *Elegiac Sonnets*, presents an androgynous speaker vacated of gender. The poem similarly plays with affect by vacating the winter landscape of people and the feeling attached to them. The weather—the snow and the temperature that keeps the snow cold—provides a kind of physical sensation that can negate or move beyond feeling altogether, both physical sensation and emotions.⁵² The freezing night is physically painful, yet the dazzling power of the cold rests in its ability to burn through sensation and numb the speaker. Intense physical sensation—like the effusive sonnets themselves—actually provides a means of moving beyond sensation and emotion toward a space where the body can no longer pose such a threat to the speaker.

Like the move beyond gender, the speaker travels completely beyond the body to establish an abstract retreat that appears as an anti-pastoral. With its self-quotation of the language of taste, the poem ironizes that language altogether, since the speaker desires not sensory stimulation but something purely beyond the senses. What the poem provides after the first quatrain is exactly this something else: a vision that doesn't play on the senses (as the descriptions of the Downs do) but outlines an abstract form of beauty. We might see this abstraction in Smith's choice to drain the landscape of color. In eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, color was often subservient to line.⁵³ As Jeffrey Robinson argues, line was analogous to the highest form of imagination in poetry: "The outline corresponds to traditional abstract form in poetry and a focus on the precision of identity expressed by the lyrical subject" (6). Painting the landscape white and devoid of

⁵² I take my distinctions between emotion, feeling, sensation and passion from Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory*: "Feeling is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions)" (4).

⁵³ Jeffrey Robinson similarly discusses how line and color relate to the categories of imagination and fancy (*The Fancy in British Romanticism* 5-6).

color, Smith emphasizes the line of her drawing, or the figure the poem makes, the path the speaker takes through the landscape, from passion and the childhood pastoral to numbness and the shape of a landscape outlined in snow. The sonnet effectively creates a form of beauty vacated of its painful content. Like many other sonnets Smith wrote, it seemingly pleads for death as the only way out of her financial and emotional problems. Her solution, in the poem's figure, suggests that what Smith longs for is the death of subjectivity into an aesthetics not based on a subject's individual perception but the free, formal beauty of the object.

It is this way of constructing beauty that resembles Kant's ideas, not the least of which is his repudiation of empiricism.⁵⁴ For Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*, universal aesthetic judgments should be based solely on "the mere form of purposiveness" in an object, or that object's presentation (66); overly invested or emotional subjects could not retain the objectivity needed to look at the form of the object without bias. As Kant writes, "Any taste remains barbaric if its liking requires that *charms* and *emotions* be mingled in, let alone if it makes these the standard of its approval" (69, Kant's emphasis). If we take Smith's claims about moving beyond despair seriously, then her aesthetic vision, at least in the earlier sonnets, might also be located in an idyllic and redemptive idea of the mind resisting the reality that insists on impinging on its imaginative power. But if Smith carves out respite from emotion—in a cold, white, distant landscape—then it is a vacancy that begs to be filled. The cold will only momentarily numb her before it

⁵⁴ We might also think of Shaftesbury who, in his writing on taste, talks about the need to evacuate social concerns in order to arrive at disinterested judgments of taste. See Gigante for a good discussion of Shaftesbury's obsession literally evacuating and emptying the body of taint to arrive at a personal disinterestedness "from which all idiosyncrasies of birth, habit or circumstance have been purged" (qtd. in Gigante 49).

becomes, again, too painful. In her vacillation between sensibility and senselessness, she charts a dialectic that often traps her in an eternal present of poverty and suffering, longing for an aesthetic that might be only marginally possible and whose certainty needs to be repeatedly envisioned.⁵⁵

Smith develops this idea elsewhere in her sonnets, where her inability to taste lands her in a state of tastelessness, signaling her desire to live outside class boundaries, particularly the middle class association with acculturated taste. Like Keats, Smith attempts to shirk her middle class status with an aristocratic fantasy forged through poetics. Though in Smith's case her need to transcend class often resembles a middle class ideological desire, her persistence in linking elite notions of beauty with hinds or the destitute underlines her rejection of middle class consumption as a route beyond class distinctions. This tendency toward classlessness situated in the ability to make objective, universal aesthetic judgments reformulates the sonnet as a lyrical space that can vacate the narratives of class descent and the other kinds of personal histories that might impinge on the poet. In sonnet 73, "To a querulous acquaintance," Smith takes time to chastise a more affluent friend for her complaining about her own pains. Scolding this

⁵⁵ This aesthetics, moreover, represents abstract beauty as a means of routing not only gender and consumerism but also the incipient and hegemonic demands of bourgeois identity. It is no coincidence that Smith writes a sonnet about seeking refuge from bourgeois taste in the voice of Orlando from *The Old Manor House*. In the novel, Orlando is presented as the possible heir to his aunt Lady Rayland's old manor, though his blood is also tainted with merchant-class roots on his mother's side. Orlando enters the winter scene while serving as an army officer, attempting to gain enough manly military experience to live up to Lady Rayland's class ideals for the future heir of Rayland Hall. His view of the scene unallied with sensation is ultimately related to his desire to white-wash his past of its bourgeois stain and either become fully aristocratic, or perhaps exhibit a kind of classlessness. Orlando's ability to write poems and form abstract aesthetic judgments goes a long way toward allying him with a Romantic "culture class," or Kant's *sensus communis*, which is aesthetically elite, despite some bourgeois parentage.

woman who has prospered enough to walk “o’er level paths, with moss and flow’rets strewn” and sleep in “a downy bed/ With roses scatter’d,” Smith reminds this acquaintance that there are many women who make do with much less fortunate circumstances (2, 3-4). Unlike those ladies who still live and sleep among floral, tranquil country spaces, Smith and others “Taste all the sad vicissitudes of grief;/ ... steep in tears their scanty bread” (8-9). These abject women are forced to eat the inedible—bread drenched with salt water. They do not even have the luxury most women of modest taste possess—a poor, but well-dressed meal.⁵⁶ If they are to be nourished at all it must be by that which is both tasteless and inconsumable.

It is precisely her fall from the middle class she was married into that allows Smith to take up something beyond aesthetics as taste epitomized by classy women. In a last poem using this language, she depicts a “woodsman” who sleeps after a long day’s work and, unlike the poet, can find a momentary respite from life and labor. The poet laments: “Would I could taste, like this unthinking hind,/ A sweet forgetfulness of human care” (11-12). If we take the hind to be the male farm laborer, then her lament signals a longing for country living and unalienated labor, or perhaps more realistically, a desire for the carefree life of the leisure class. Smith’s somewhat abject representation of the “unthinking” laborer may reflect the aristocratic leanings of her aesthetics, yet when she revises the formulation in terms of herself, she pointedly uses the term “hind.” This word, which also means a female deer like those that populated pastoral poetry and the

⁵⁶ Penny Bradshaw, in her discussion of Smith’s later Jacobin novel *Desmond*, argues that Smith’s later prose critiques not simply the excess of the French aristocrats but also the British middle class politics of consumption, whose excess was necessarily based on the hunger of the poor. Smith, Bradshaw notes, was somewhat of a snob (n12), and her commentary reveals Smith privileging a certain kind of poverty that becomes linked with high aesthetics over and against bourgeois emulative consumption.

Early Modern English sonnet tradition, reminds readers of the kind of predatory consumption surrounding women that was endemic to the pastoral sonnet tradition. In sonnets like Wyatt's "Whoso list to hunt," the male speaker cheerfully pursues his prey, who herself is a sensible but unreflective part of the pastoral landscape. Smith's use of the "hind" when connecting the laborer to herself in place of Orlando's "village laborer" accentuates the gendered problems with the discourse of taste, consumption and luxury. Rather than abusing the "hind," Smith uses him figuratively to critique the traditional associations between femininity and "unthinking" consumption.

The *Sonnets* reveal Smith in the process of forging a lyric from the traditional sonnet—a lyric that provides a space outside the normative, often pastoral narratives of female acculturation in the eighteenth century. Her execution of this move repeatedly through many sonnets, as well as her fall back into the language of sensibility and sensation in others, foregrounds the extent to which her project of aesthetics is marked by impossibility in the *Sonnets*. It is this impossibility, however, that Smith will employ as a fruitful antinomy in her final epic work, *Beachy Head*. There vacancy will become less a figure of a continually rejected past than of a future constantly created. The impossibility of ridding bodily concerns from aesthetics will be transformed into the possibility of using the language of the market and the structures of Enlightenment reason and conceptual law to surpass their strict teleologies and create a string of suspended futures, an Enlightenment-to-come.

***Beachy Head* and Narratives of Trade: "Come and behold the nothingness of all"**

Smith's critique of the interlocking discourses of acculturation, consumption, taste, and class come to a head in her final poem, when she turns her focus on history and its imperialist and nationalist tendencies. Her problems with the aesthetics of taste as consumption become writ large in this work through a meditation on international trade and its effects on the possibilities for universal freedom and ethical living. Set on a Brighton cliff overlooking the English Channel, *Beachy Head* is often seen as the feminist version of the Romantic pastoral, a lush, botanical antithesis to Wordsworth's transcendent nature. The poem routes the mountain's sublime status through the minute fossils and sedimentary materials that make up England's dramatic Southern coastline, and Judith Pascoe and other scholars have shown how Smith delves into the empirical, material realities of the natural world—from the catalogues of local botany to laments about how the shepherd might make an honest living in an increasingly consumer culture.⁵⁷ For these reasons Labbe suggests that in *Beachy Head* Smith showcases the apex of feminine intellectual capabilities at the turn of the nineteenth century (144).

If the poem tries to recreate a real, empirical encounter with nature, then it also reproduces the violent geological and international forces that create England's coastline. As Smith describes the cliff in the first lines of the poem:

Fancy should go forth,

And represent the strange and awful hour

⁵⁷ See especially Judith Pascoe, "Female Botanists and the Poetry of Charlotte Smith"; Donnell R. Ruwe, "Charlotte Smith's Sublime; Feminine Poetics, Botany, and *Beachy Head*"; Kandi Tayebi, "Undermining the Eighteenth-Century Pastoral: Rewriting the Poet's Relationship to Nature in Charlotte Smith's Poetry"; Anne D. Wallace, "Picturesque Fossils, Sublime Geology? The Crisis of Authority in Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*" and Theresa Kelley, "Romantic Histories: Charlotte Smith and *Beachy Head*."

Of vast concussion;
[...]
[that] from the continent
Eternally divided this green isle.

Beachy Head represents less the accumulation and aggregation of positivistic understandings about the land, English history, or the role of the poet, and more a confrontation with this first vast divide and others that echo it through the poem. It comes to figure the rift of possibility when material reality, history, and the very language used to articulate both are ruptured and thrown into question. Though others have discussed Smith's use of aesthetic discourses such as the sublime, the beautiful, the picturesque and the pastoral,⁵⁸ she does not rest in her critique of these aesthetic discourses but uses them to present a case for the aporetic nature of language and of history itself. In doing so, she develops her aesthetics as a practice of radical self-critique.

Smith vacates imperialist and naturalist histories in order to arrive at a space of lyrical possibility—the right to imagine a future unallied to embodied identities, consumer trade and its culture, or the trappings of nationalism. She achieves this through a series of interlocking moves. First she articulates the history of imperial invaders on Britain's soil only to show how their projects failed in the ever-changing “pathless topsoil” of the South Down. Though Smith wants to see the pastoral as a space free from

⁵⁸ Donnelle Ruwe has contended that the poem works to deconstruct both the sublime located in the stupendous cliff and also the beautiful or picturesque found in the poem's pastoral descriptions of the mountain's surface, and Kandi Tayebi has similarly argued that Smith unravels the idealized eighteenth-century pastoral by populating the landscape with real shepherd figures.

the concerns of trade and empire, as she tried to free the pastoral from consumer taste in the *Sonnets*, in *Beachy Head* she takes a different tactic. Rather than rejecting consumer language, she uses the capitalistic rhetoric of contingency and excess to exceed itself and the confines of consumer ideology. Transforming the pastoral into a space riddled with accidents and chance, she uses these aesthetic strategies of “free beauty” to rethink larger concepts of ethics, justice and universality. She finally returns to meditate on the liminal space of the channel’s cliff, its vantage point in the global world during the Napoleonic Wars, and its inhabitant, a lone hermit.

As a figure for this kind of permeability, the cliff top itself is anything but immobile or stolid. The first hundred lines or so of the poem depicts Beachy Head during the transitional (and cyclical) moments of sunrise and then sunset. Its drama resides not in its jagged rocks, its height or girth, but in its effect on the air and water around it, particularly in the numerous descriptions of echoing sounds and alternating currents of air and water. As the sun rises on the scene, Smith displays “the rippling tide of flood”:

rough hollows echo to the voice
Of the gray choughs, and ever restless daws,
With clamour, not unlike the chiding hounds,
While the lone shepherd, and his baying dog,
Drive to thy turfy crest his bleating flock. (24-28)

The entire scene is in motion, particularly the bleating and baying animals, who speak in alternating pulses of sound. In the distance a sloop “catches the light and variable airs/
That but a little crisp the summer sea/ Dimpling its tranquil surface” (34-36). The winds

make tiny indents in the surface of the water and variegate what would be a calm, clear summer sea. It would be easy to say these descriptions make the passage blandly lyrical, sketching the beauties of the cliff by making them quietly alive. However, the alternation and motion of the water and air reverberate the “vast concussion” Smith has just narrated. If we consider the epic rift between the two landmasses as the first vacancy Smith carves out of the landscape in the poem, then the braying and the dimpling start to seem like echoes or tremors of that first vacancy. The animals and the air create their own pockets of nothing that either become filled in with clamor or leave little rifts in the ocean. The entire landscape vibrates with possibility.

Beachy Head, even more than Shelley’s *Mont Blanc*, presents an ironic figure of the sublime or the natural Romantic monument, which would allegedly shore up subjectivity and imagination by its secure status as an object.⁵⁹ As the poem’s central figure, Beachy Head is not only placed in doubt as dependent upon the imagination, as Shelley’s skepticism does to *Mont Blanc*, but it serves as a monument to the possibility—and hope—that even the most grounded of natural elements (a mountain, a national coastline) remains unfixed. Rather than remaining silent or still like Smith’s vacant anhedonia in the sonnets, Beach Head offers a vibrant vacancy, one that oscillates between material nature and the future that might come to fill it.

Before envisioning what this future might be, Smith has quite a lot to say about the past. Narrating her version of English history, she examines the various layers of history and sediment that make up the cliff wall, from sea to cliff top. Even before she begins, however, she gives us a model of history that resembles a palimpsest:

⁵⁹ See Frances Ferguson, “What the Mountain Said” for her now classic reading of Shelley’s “*Mont Blanc*.”

Contemplation here,
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,
And bid recording Memory unfold
Her scroll voluminous—bid her retrace
The period (117-121).

Like the ancient manuscript scroll, historical memory will be written, scraped away, and written again on the same sheet of parchment. Here memory recreates history and poetry—the epic writing on the scrolls.⁶⁰ The manuscript she goes on to select contains the eras of English history made up of the Danish, Roman, and Norman invasions of England. These histories, the “contemplation” of Smith’s brand of lyrical-epic poetry, are written as the repetition of history, incursions that substitute for each other as instances of imperial conquest that both rupture and then consolidate English identity. If *Beachy Head* had set out to supply a linear or Enlightenment progressive history of the English, then Smith might have narrated the Roman invasion first, then the Danish and ended with the Norman. Instead, she begins with the Norman invasion and its resonances with the contemporary conflict between the English and French, then goes back to the Roman invasion during the last century BC, and finally ends with a reference to the pirate Danes (eighth to tenth century AD):

The pirate Dane, who from his circular camp

⁶⁰ In *Romanticism, Lyricism and History*, Sarah Zimmerman argues that Smith’s earlier use of memory in the *Sonnets* documents how the poet’s growth in this poem becomes the historian’s ability to recover past social history. For Zimmerman, the lyric practice associated with memory services Smith’s larger historical project, defining memory as a straightforward process of recollection (65). I would instead suggest that Smith’s use of repetitious memory involves a cyclical process of selectively remembering, forgetting, and rewriting.

Bore in destructive robbery, fire and sword
Down thro' the vale, sleeps unremember'd here;
And here, beneath the green sward, rests alike
The savage native, who his acorn meal
Shar'd with the herds, that ranged the pathless woods;
And the centurion, who on these wide hills
Encamping, planted the Imperial Eagle. (425-33)

This plot of earth holds the histories of the native Britons, the Danes, and the Romans, who all lay buried in the layers of sediment on Beachy Head's shores. The irony of the passage, that all three are "unremembered," emphasizes the extent to which their histories (the fossils and sediments both literally and figuratively buried in the mountain) have been erased or leveled by the "pathless" surface of the earth atop the cliff. Moreover, despite the purported goal of these invasions—to colonize the native inhabitants in order to rob the land of its natural resources—the conquerors end up buried under the land as fossilized ruins of their imperialist projects.

As Anne D. Wallace points out, Smith may not have been party to any one geological theory floated during her time, but the historical narratives she unearths resemble the strata that early geologists were beginning to uncover. Smith surrounds the previous passage with some radical statements about how retracing various levels of sedimentary history erases as much as creates history. In this view, history is built from layers of sediment constantly intermixing and radically erasing one another. Looking upon elephant fossils from the Roman Claudius' invasion, Smith chastises all past and future invaders of English soil:

Hither, Ambition come!

Come and behold the nothingness of all
For which you carry thro' the oppressed Earth,
War, and its train of horrors— see where tread
The innumerable hoofs of flocks above the works
By which the warrior sought to register
His glory, and immortalize his name[.]—
[...]
All, with the lapse of Time, have passed away,
Even as the clouds, with dark and dragon shapes,
Or like vast promontories crown'd with towers,
Cast their broad shadows on the downs; then sail
Far to the northward, and their transient gloom
Is soon forgotten. (419-25, 434-9)

These hoof prints, which act as signs of the Roman Empire's gigantic ambition, also turn out to be the signs of its inevitable fall when they vanish from the surface of the landscape.⁶¹ Here Smith verges on satire, mocking the imperial claims of the Romans, their "unwieldy" elephants, the epic mode and the linear, teleological narrative that often becomes history. The poem recounts national history and origins precisely to reject

⁶¹ Smith's view of the Romans would seem to oppose Edward Gibbon's arguments about the fall of the Roman Empire, which Smith read (Fletcher 80, 95). Though Smith might agree with Gibbon that as with the Romans, an effeminate, English aristocracy was already corrupting the foundation of English Empire, Smith here satirizes imperial, masculine ambition itself—the very drive to make history by conquering peoples and claiming a piece of land as property.

them,⁶² and in the process posits the very writing of history as a kind of perpetual erasure of one narrative for another, just as shadows temporarily darken the blank page of the sky and then disperse.⁶³ Though Smith rejects the imperial history and piracy that these invaders represent, by transforming them into the beachy sediment of the cliff, Smith is still able to find a place for them on Britain's shores. The original colonial violence that the Romans and Danes inflicted on the native Saxons has been well repaid by death's own brutal hospitality, the most universal equalizer.

Smith's version of history essentially vacates historical narratives in favor of the "pathless" ground, or the mountain's unstable surface. Toward the end of the poem, English histories eventually devolve into pastoral descriptions of the Downs, populated by fossils, flowers, smugglers, or shepherds. The pastoral, secured from imperial invaders, potentially becomes a site for the lyrical imagination, temporarily freed from narratives of invasion and acquisition. This lyrical topsoil remains open and hospitable even to antagonistic invaders and their ruined imperial or material desires. As opposed to the necessities of history, the lyric becomes a space of future contingency and synchronic possibility.

⁶² I follow Brian Wilkie's account of the epic in *Romantic Poets and The Epic Tradition*. Rather than viewing it as a genre, Wilkie sees the epic as a shared tradition of literary characteristics. Its main attributes include the use of tradition that typically rejects the past (the "epic paradox"), a display of heroism, or a code of conduct, as well as the imitation of various conventions like the ordeal-journey or supernatural agencies. There has not yet been a thorough discussion of *Beachy Head* as an epic poem—or as a Romantic epic, where the journey is an internal one, and the hero Byronic or otherwise conflicted. Smith's poem does not, at first glance, appear to use any of the typical epic conventions she must have known about through reading Milton, Spencer, Ariosto and others. It does attempt a history of Britain, and Smith's copious descriptions of flora and fauna might qualify as imitations of the listing or series of descriptions in other epic works.

⁶³ Paul de Man most famously proposed this version of history as narrative erasure. See "Shelley Disfigured" in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*.

A New Language for the Pastoral: Free Beauty and the Contingent Language of Capitalism

Before arriving at the moment of lyric possibility, when the poem climaxes into a series of disappearances, the poet first must reconceptualize the pastoral itself, because though it is a location that purports to offer a lyrical escape from trade, conquest and law, the pastoral is nonetheless a *topos* still very much attached to the material problems of luxury and property. The poet does exploit the pastoral as a retreat from narratives of invasion, trade, and luxury but not as one might think. Rather than simply chastising market culture's ability to affect people's taste for the countryside, Smith instead defamiliarizes the pastoral using rhetorical tactics that we might associate with capitalism. First, her pastoral descriptions eschew nature as a vehicle for natural resemblances, ultimately endowing the poet with choices that release her from necessary comparisons dictated by nature. Smith often compares the natural world to man-made or market items, and this fungibility of luxury goods and natural objects in her poetic descriptions reveals the contingency inherent in metaphorical language as a mode of exchange, even in seemingly exact representations of nature. Second, her luxuriant descriptions often incorporate poetic excesses that imitate the speculation in new markets and mass production. The intense materiality of Smith's over-abundant descriptions ends up transcending representations of actual flowers and vines and instead expresses an indeterminate but formal design. By uniting poetic practice with capitalist praxis, she pointedly pushes the language of capitalism to exceed its own laws and to build upon the language of free beauty begun in the *Sonnets*.

Like Kant's ideas of beauty as purposive purposelessness, Smith's descriptions of the pastoral use excess and contingency to free the pastoral—and its saleable poetics—from value based on use. As a sign of lyrical futurity, Smith's new version of the pastoral partakes in Derrida's notions of "unconditional hospitality"—here a hospitality to concepts.⁶⁴ Not unlike Smith's violent hospitality to colonial invaders, rhetorical hospitality allows her to twist capitalistic rhetoric into a language that surpasses Kant's aesthetics and violates capitalism's conceptual teleologies.⁶⁵ Where Smith initially attempted to make aesthetic judgment a function of the objective, white-washed landscape in the *Sonnets*, in *Beachy Head* she pushes aesthetics past the formal beauty of empty, open spaces toward a kind of free beauty that formally enacts and conceptualizes indeterminacy and incalculability.

She first takes up her soapbox against trade at the beginning of the poem with a common eighteenth-century diatribe pitting natural beauty against artifice, or natural resources transformed into consumer goods. Beachy Head's waters become troubled when the speaker spies a "ship of commerce, richly freighted" off the coast, carrying "gaudes and baubles" (42, 58). In a series of comparisons describing the seascape after the ship enters the picture, she pits the "pure air" of Heaven, "the sound of the seas," and the "gay harmony of birds" against the "fretted stop, or modulated airs/ of vocal science"

⁶⁴ As I will discuss in more detail below, Derrida uses the concept of unconditional hospitality in both *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (149-50) and *Of Hospitality*.

⁶⁵ Though Kant has often caught slack for the teleological nature of his supposedly "free" beauty, Derrida argues to the contrary in *The Truth in Painting*. Similarly, Robert Kaufman has argued that Adorno reads Kant as privileging the aesthetic as a "boot-up disk for conceptual thought" that involves "a necessary eschewal of determination-by-extant-concepts" (711, 714). See his "Red Kant, or the Persistence of the Third *Critique* in Adorno and Jameson." Whatever views one takes of the "purposive," ideological motivation behind Kant's aesthetic, my argument is that Smith uses her aporia as a means of imagining an indeterminate free beauty.

(60, 62, 63, 67). These natural sounds, according to the poet, are proof of “unadulterated taste” as opposed to the ostensibly vitiated taste of viewers accustomed to luxury items and tutored voices. The contrast between natural and human music, or more generally organic and man-made beauty, carries into the next comparison between “the brightest gems/ Glancing resplendent on the regal crown” and the colors of a sunset over Beachy Head.

There, transparent gold
Mingles with ruby tints, and sapphire gleams,
And colours, such as Nature through her works
Shews only in the ethereal canopy.
Thither aspiring Fancy fondly soars,
Wandering sublime thro’ visionary vales,
Where bright pavilions rise, and trophies, fann’d
By airs celestial; and adorn’d with wreaths
Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers. (81-89)

This passage contains two paradoxical moves. First, in order to depict the natural beauty of the skies, Smith relies on the language of gems. Rather than those jewels ostensibly mined and imported from the colonies, perhaps sapphire-rich India or gold-bearing America, Smith places these gems as signifiers of nature’s uncommodified, decorative, regal beauty. Second, this image of the sky becomes the basis of a Spenserian, Edenic bower. Though filled with wreaths and flowers, the “ethereal canopy” and the “visionary vale” must be found in the open spaces of Fancy’s immaterial vision. In both cases, Smith builds a poetry based on the paradoxical nature of resemblances. If she articulates

the free and natural in terms of the commodified, then commodified goods also end up in the service of descriptions of immateriality. Is Smith attempting to re-materialize the heavenly sublime, or is she abstracting empirical flowers into immaterial visionary vales? This paradox highlights the poet's ability to manipulate representational language—and our perceptions of nature—into contradictory and non-coinciding positions. The more the poet seemingly aims at making nature coincide with itself (the colors of the sky and the minerals in the earth), the more nature seems to resemble artifice (commodified gems). The extent to which the poet can match the immaterial with the material emphasizes the poet's ability to manipulate contingencies into metaphors that retroactively naturalize resemblance. What seems to be the hand of God making natural associations is really only the poet's dexterity.

Rather than securing poetic riches through a necessary connection to material nature, both nature and poetry become examples of speculation. Just as gems enable speculative trade, Smith's poetics venture into a speculative mode where customary value or associations detach themselves from material things, leaving her free to imagine poetic goods whose ship is yet to arrive. This is not to say that Smith endorses the rapacious speculative economy that underwrote the slave trade or imperial looting, and she provides evidence of this stance in a later passage she writes condemning the commodification of slaves. Neither does she use speculation's abstraction of value to typify the world into insurable, averaged quantities—a prime characteristic of the eighteenth-century speculative imagination, as Ian Baucom argues.⁶⁶ Rather, her abstractions loosen natural

⁶⁶ See Baucom's discussion of speculative epistemologies and the speculative imagination in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (106-09).

descriptions from their material moorings. The fungibility of commodities and nature allows the poet some room for reflection, choice, and chance combinations in her comparisons, enabling the imagination to free itself from normative speculations in property.

Smith brings up this issue of the contingency of comparisons inherent in metaphorical language again in her much discussed section on geology. There she wonders how it is that seashell fossils found in the cliffside look like oysters and mollusks, or, as she says, are “seeming of resembling substance” (375). Her thoughts about nature’s resemblances, as other commentators have argued, lend themselves to a discussion of aesthetics and how aesthetics might represent the conflict between empirical and idealist traditions of thinking.⁶⁷ They also and more broadly implicate the contingent nature of language itself. The preface to this section more than implies that Smith wants to delve into a meta-discourse on the relationships between art and nature, poetry and natural vistas:

Those widely spreading views, mocking alike
The Poet and the Painter’s utmost art.
And still, observing objects more minute,
Wondering remark the strange and foreign forms
Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous soil
Mingled, and seeming of resemblance. (370-5)

⁶⁷ Ruwe reads these seashells as Smith’s statement about an empirical and minute version of the sublime, which would amount to a statement about feminine aesthetics. Anne Wallace has gone a step further to suggest that competing views of the picturesque and sublime working in this passage reveal the aporetic nature of a sublime created on empirical terms. See also Kelley’s reading of the shells and their relationship to Smith’s advocacy on grand versus local history in the poem.

The questions she goes on to ask about these shells is even more startling, taken as a referendum on the status of language:

Does Nature then
Mimic, in wanton mood, fantastic shapes,
of Bivalves, and inwreathed volutes, that cling
To the dark sea-rock of the wat'ry world?
Or did this range of chalky mountains once
Form a vast bason where the Ocean waves
Swell'd fathomless? (378-84).

If Nature mocks the painter's ability to create an apt resemblance, then nature also encounters this problem when it mimics itself. Like the poet's use of the sky to strip gems of their material nature and rip them from their familiar commodified relationships, the poet again trumps nature by posing parts of the natural world as separated from other parts and only brought together by resemblance. The poet asks whether nature resembles itself by mere chance or because it was once an organic whole whose parts are now separated by geological time and continental space. Brought into such proximity with comments about the poet's ability to make resemblances herself, these questions also seem to be about the accidents of language—and the unanswered possibility that resemblances are merely unacknowledged contingency.

Straddling both sides of the vast concussion, the poet might have easily answered the question, telling the reader that indeed fossils are the self-same substance as the cliffs; instead, she leaves the question open to the possibility that linguistic representations offer not naturalism or realism but contingency. If Smith rejects luxury—and the versions of

taste that oversee its production—then she rejects commodity culture not for nature but for poetry itself. Ironically, it is nature, with its insistence on natural associations and inherent relationships between its parts, that begins to appear determinative and teleological within the confines of the pastoral. The fungibility of commodities, on the other hand, allows the poet some room for reflection, choice and chance combinations in her comparisons. Writing nature as mediated through the accidents of poetry—like the accidents of continental plate tectonics, Smith reshapes nature into whatever she wants it to be.

Commodities, of course, have their own teleologies ending in the hands of consumers, since by definition goods are always circumscribed by exchange value or use. Smith mobilizes a second rhetorical tactic, that of excess, to propel poetry beyond these problems with value. In many of the passages where she describes her formative walks through the countryside, she reaches toward beauty that approaches a quality of freedom through its lush variation:

bordering unfrequented lanes
Bowered with wild roses, and the clasping woodbine
Where purple tassels of the tangling vetch
With bittersweet, and bryony inweave,
And the dew fills the silver bindweed's cups—
I loved to trace the brooks (349-54)

Through repeatedly describing this weaving and tangling, Smith engages in creating the kind of beauty that transcends the material qualities of the flowers. Rather than praising their smell, or even their colors, she emphasizes the eye's ability to trace the vines and

brooks, drawing their line for us, outlining their form. As she describes them, these tangles of flowers begin to resemble Kant's examples of free beauty as borders of vines: "free delineations, outlines intertwined with one another without design and called foliage" (41) and "the delineations *à la grecque*, foliage for borders or wall papers" (66). Such patterns exhibit freedom through the excess and contingency of their design, eluding any recognizable form. In doing so they sustain the free play of the imagination and represent the form of form itself without reference to any kind of use. According to Kant, this quasi-conceptual judgment represents "a lawfulness without a law" (92), and as such Smith looks to a kind of beauty that adheres to a certain conceptual law of free play, yet at the same time characteristically exceeds itself as well as the teleologies or structures such a law might require.⁶⁸

These patterns of flowers in part gain their abstract, formal quality from that profusion of detail so characteristic of Smith's botanical landscapes. If a landscape's beauty is based on the purposeless form of the flowers, then this beauty also depends on the poet's propensity—and ability—to manufacture an additional wealth of flowers, vines, and plants into a poetic profusion. Even Smith's copious footnotes listing the botanical names for the various flowers heighten this sense of excess and variation. On the one hand, these new names create the feeling that more flowers are populating the scene than it can hold. On the other, the poet's imagination seems to supply a greater bulk of floral species than the land actually displays. Beachy Head's descriptive abundance appears to surpass even the quantities of gems and slaves involved in

⁶⁸ For another discussion of floral borders and the paradox of Kantian disinterested subjective aesthetic judgment, see Christina Lupton's article, "Walking on Flowers: the Kantian Aesthetics of *Hard Times*."

speculative commerce, as if Smith is juxtaposing the wealth of national resources with Asian and African exotic luxuries.

These sketches of natural flora and fauna, coming at the end of a poem vacating foreign, imperialistic commerce, seem part and parcel of the explosion of consumer culture, including the acquisitiveness that defined middle class culture during this period.

⁶⁹ Historian Maxine Berg, in her study of luxury and the eighteenth century, argues that British national markets sprang up in response to the unprecedented quantities of cloth, porcelain, and cabinets brought to England. These patterns the poet “traces” in the landscape resonate with those Wedgwood patterns and designs on china and lacquered cabinets that were becoming common household items. By the time Smith writes *Beachy Head*, however, Napoleon’s blockade of British ports on the continent brought about the possibility that British trade dominance might be muted, and Smith’s descriptions seem like a local version of the novelty sought abroad. Smith’s tangling, imagined vines compete with these other freighted goods, but their success depends not upon their status as natural but their ability to overwhelm the reader with their attractiveness and their wealth—made nearly infinite by poetry’s ability to exceed material abundance and to speculate about the forms of free beauty.

Perhaps Smith unwittingly represents the very desires of capitalistic excess in a poem that was meant to become a commodity itself. If not unwitting, then the move is a particularly savvy one, as Smith redraws excess in terms of a beauty that moves beyond taste or commodification. The excess and repetition of the weaving and tangling exceeds materiality and becomes immaterial. The free beauty of the borders attempts to provide

⁶⁹ See Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century* (19-20) and Neil McKendrick’s seminal *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

an abstraction of the form of beauty, and even though the Latin names for flowers in Smith's footnotes provide scientific information, they also abstract the empirical living things into genus and species. Just as Smith often used sensibility to burn itself out into a painless vacancy of calm immateriality in the *Sonnets*, here she mobilizes the rhetoric of excess to build a formal beauty that attempts to outdo luxury. More importantly, the passage reveals Smith to be using accepted structures of language in subversive ways, in the attempt to unmake those very structures. The paradoxical use of the rhetoric of the commodity critiques consumer culture even as such language throws into question the possibility sustaining an ideal beauty without its haunting, material other.

These descriptions that display the purposeless beauty of the landscape almost escape the imposition of subjective desires, an ideal ultimately disrupted when the poet enters the picture saying, "*I* loved to trace" (my emphasis). But it is not only the autobiographical Smith that impinges on the possibility of freedom that the landscape might entail. The action of tracing memory also brings with it an instrumentality that mars any real vacancy. Yet Smith notably makes this tracing impossible just a bit later in the poem, when she examines the archeological ruins at Beachy Head. She states that there were "No traces in the records of mankind,/ Save the half obliterated mounds and half filled trenches doubtfully impart/ To some lone antiquary" (403-6). She mocks the antiquary because he fancies that he can demarcate these ruins and vainly endeavors to delineate history. The antiquary cannot trace without teleology, without narrative, especially because in the tradition of eighteenth-century antiquarianism, he is looking for that version of history—or literary history—that would ratify and consolidate England's nationalism. So the poet's attempt to trace a free beauty in her memories of the

landscape is defeated by the narrative she is trying to draw about herself. The imposition of her own history, the story of her class fall, undermines the immaterial and lyrical impulses that could usher the poet towards new, unconditional ways of thinking. Vacancy essentially offers a cognitive break from history's exigencies and temporarily puts a stop to both the pastoral's traditional ideologies and the poet's own history in the South Downs. In Smith, lyrical moments become associated not with a romanticized, nostalgic, static past but with the unfulfilled promises of the future. The poet who uses memory and older literary forms like the pastoral becomes a problematic figure who stands in the way of her own invention. For this reason, Smith ends the poem with a final confrontation with the role of poet and with the potential for living ethically outside the teleological demands of nationalism and capitalism in the Napoleonic age.

The Hermit of Beachy Head: Beside History, Open to What Comes

The final movement does just this when it characterizes the disappearance of two successive figures who live on the Downs: the stranger-poet and the hermit. While, as Labbe argues, these may be figures for the poet, they more broadly offer two interlocking, final comments on language as guarantor of universal rights. The stranger-poet, a forerunner to the hermit, disappears from Beachy Head but not before leaving behind a trail of his romantic ballads near old trees. These poems fuse his ideal views of the pastoral and his Wordsworthian Romantic "labor" of wandering through the land composing poems about the reunion with his lost love. He laments to his absent Amanda: "You'd look, amid the sylvan scene,/ And in a wood-girl's simple guise,/ Be still more lovely in mine eyes" (646-8). In his "visionary, nursing dreams" (655), he

represents the rustic poet who fuses his idealized views of the landscape with an idealized love for an unavailable maid. Smith sympathizes with his dreams when she says, “let him cherish his ideal bliss” (667), but mocks him when she states that he might be happy in a bower in the South Seas. As the footnote incisively points out, discoverers once imagined the newly found islands of Tahiti would offer the “visionary delights” of Eden the poet longs for, but they subsequently uncovered “the grossest vices.” While the note may be referring to those native inhabitants viewed as unreflective, appetitive savages by eighteenth-century adventurers, it also may be pointing to those adventurers who, purportedly nostalgic for simplicity, made use of these bowers for unrestrained sexual romps.⁷⁰

The footnote ingeniously upends the purity of the wandering-poet, suggesting that his own lust for women and recognition—he is constantly leaving his poems for young village women to find them—complicate the pleas for simplicity, monogamy, and freedom found in his poems. Moreover, his naïve ideas about nature and his role as poet secured from the literary market (or a capricious audience) represent a poet clinging to an older, antiquarian “ideal bliss” that is impossible not simply because it is idealized, or Romantic. His vices stem from the fact that he turns to the past for his solutions, a past that narratively, ideologically, and teleologically impinges on the very freedom the poet desires to inhabit. If the poet looks for freedom from urban luxury and corruption in the bower of the pastoral, then his lyric poetry ironically continues to look to the past for this

⁷⁰ For other approaches to the exploitation of Oceania as a Romantic bower of bliss, see James C. McKusick’s “The Politics of Language in Byron’s *The Island*,” a discussion of Byron’s depiction of Tahiti as a site for license and responsibility. He similarly characterizes the South Seas as a basis for Coleridge’s and Southey’s pantisocracy in a piece written for *Romanticism and Colonialism*.

freedom, rather than to the possibility of a different kind of future. His *telos*, like those of the Romans and the Danish pirates, has proven to be misguided. Though his hope is to be envied, his disappearance from the landscape would seem to comment on just how useless his poetic model has become. Unlike the poet of the egotistical sublime in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, the bard of Beachy Head is sublime in his disappearance, and the rift he creates offers the possibility to re-imagine the role of the poet.

The final passages of *Beachy Head* circle back to Smith's initial meditations on the liminal coastal waters of the English Channel and a hermit who lives in one of the cliff's caves. Associated with the Old Testament God of Genesis, who "Omnipotent/ Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills" of Beachy Head (6-7), the ocean subsequently becomes a space of justice, equality and universality, and as such comes to represent the unrealized ideals of the Enlightenment. By returning to this border between France and England, Smith offers a solution to the failures of the Enlightenment and French Revolution in the form of this hermit. He represents the post-Enlightenment ideal of unconditional hospitality, an idea akin to "lawfulness without law," and one that both Derrida and Peter Melville have culled from Kant's late ideas about hospitality and cosmopolitanism. As a figure of exile, the hermit suggests that the promise of Enlightenment freedom might be redeemed, but only through pledging oneself to something beyond nationalism and the materiality it proffers. In his repeated attempts to save mariners lost at sea, he represents an ethics that exceeds the limits of nationalism or international law and remains open to whatever or whoever comes across Britain's shores. For this reason, the hermit, like the motion of the waves constantly changing

Britain's boundaries, figures those repeated labors that have all the possibility of making good on unfulfilled Enlightenment promises, an Enlightenment to come.

Exiled from society, the hermit burrows within the cliff face:

Just beneath the rock

Where Beachy overpowers the channel wave,

Within a cavern mined by wintry tides

Dwelt one, who long disgusted with the world

And all its ways, appear'd to suffer life

Rather than live (672-676)

The hermit lives between the sea and land, in a cavern that is less a womb, as biographer Lorraine Fletcher has suggested, than a site of vacancy itself, with the "wintry tides" forever mining and chipping away at both the hermit and his home. Just as the ocean erodes the cliff's materiality, creating the stunning white rock face the southern coast is known for, the hermit also lives outside any material needs. He does not exist quite out of time but next to it, nesting beside those sedimentary layers of history Smith has already vacated. He literally and figuratively lives beside the vast concussion, the jagged shore that is reminiscent of that first shocking and unexpected event that realigned geological, linguistic and political relationships.

If the vast concussion promised one set of social, political, and material transformations, it has resulted in the failures of empire, imperial economics and nationalism in the Napoleonic age. The hermit's situation is a testament to these failures:

for his heart

Was feelingly alive to all that breath'd;

And outraged as he was, in sanguine youth,
By human crimes, he still acutely felt
For human misery. (687-691)

Once a man of society, he rejected those “human crimes” that may very well be the luxury, corruption, and imperial lust Smith documents earlier in the poem. These lines, moreover, suggest that the hermit may have chosen his home by the sea, creating a self-imposed exile. Scholars have tended to see the hermit figure as a stand-in for Smith herself, who was also pushed to the edge of society by crimes committed by men—her husband’s adultery and her father-in-law’s botched will held up in the chancery courts, both of which left her impoverished but for her poetry. That the hermit is a man—and not a displaced woman or a grieving mother—significantly raises the stakes of the passage, depicting a country where both women and men must flee to the edges of society in order to live ethically and peacefully. The hermit channels several other male figures from her works, including the stranger poet, the coastal smugglers, and the exiled clergy from *The Emigrants*, and even the traders and invaders skirting the channel. This detail suggests quite powerfully that Smith may be advocating for the kind of change that can only happen from the margins of society.

As Kari E. Lokke has discussed, Smith may be playing into the trope of the hermit popularized during the end of the eighteenth century, and he certainly can be read as a generic cipher for sympathy.⁷¹ Situated as he is at the end of an epic poem, seated in a continental rift, however, the hermit figures an even larger model for a universal ethics.

⁷¹ See her book chapter, “Embodied Compassion: The Figure of the Hermit in Charlotte Smith’s *Beachy Head*,” in *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism*, edited by Jacqueline Labbe.

As Smith elaborates in a footnote, the hermit is loosely based on a man named Darby who was believed to be living in a cave for many years, eating shellfish for sustenance. Additionally, the note mentions that the Parson Darby tradition might be thirty years old, a fact which would pointedly set the legend's origin around 1776. Rather than an unhistoricized figure, the hermit straddles the beginning of the American Revolutionary War and some important events in the Napoleonic Wars contemporaneous with *Beachy Head*'s composition: the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and the beginning of Napoleon's blockade of English ports on the Continent with the Berlin Decree of 1806. What the hermit looks out upon is some extremely contested naval space, fraught with colonial wars and blockades. If the hermit has sought escape from "human crimes" on land—perhaps the harsh measures of the Pitt government—he cannot help but look onto troubled waters.

The footnotes themselves mimic this faux-escape. Though the text seems to end with figures removed from history, the notes placed at the poem's end mark a horizon that cannot be anything but historically grounded. Unlike typically Romantic attempts to flee from history into the imagination, Smith ironically escapes out of the very history of imperialism she then sets as the vista of her final vantage point.⁷² In more specific terms, this outlook—which is the poem's final vista in a series of views taken throughout the poem—calls on the reader to look beyond England and English history to England's relationship with France and the rest of warring continental Europe.⁷³ *Beachy Head*, like

⁷² Aside from Jerome McGann's *Romantic Ideology*, see Alan Liu's seminal *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* for the classic argument on that poet's ideological escape from history.

⁷³ Matthew Bray argues that *Beachy Head* represents Smith's critique of Britain's nationalistic Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism. Rather than seeing the two nations as

the textual maneuvers of the poem itself, is constantly slipping into the sea, which marks both the erasure of historicity and its return.

Though the hermit does watch the waves, they do not become a sign of nationalistic nostalgia as they do for the exiles in *The Emigrants*. Instead the hermit becomes famous for wading through them and saving whoever might become stranded by their caprice.

Wandering on the beach,
He learn'd to augur from the clouds of heaven,
And from the changing colours of the sea,
And sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs,
Or the dark porpoises, that near the shore
Gambol'd and sported on the level brine
When tempests were approaching: then at night
He listen'd to the wind; and as it drove
The billows with o'erwhelming vehemence
He, starting from his rugged couch, went forth
And hazarding a life, too valueless,
He waded thro' the waves, with plank or pole
Towards where the mariner in conflict dread
Was buffeting for life the roaring surge;

permanently severed and separate, Bray argues that Smith espouses a shared history between the two nations, encouraging Britain to incorporate French Revolutionary and even Napoleonic ideals. Though the Channel obviously connects France and Britain, the generic figures of the hermit and the mariners he saves, I would argue, seem to suggest the larger global framework of European conflict and cosmopolitanism during the Napoleonic Wars.

And now just seen, now lost in foaming gulphs,
The dismal gleaming of the clouded moon
Shew'd the dire peril. (692-707)

Patrolling the shores, the hermit develops great skill in reading nature. He learns how to “augur” storms, and in effect he becomes a master of understanding the various forms of motion the cliff’s climate tends to develop. Smith’s descriptions of Beachy Head have not changed radically from the beginning of the poem, since even in her final lines the cliff is in flux: the “changing colors of the sea/ And sullen murmurs of the hollow cliffs,” the dark porpoises “gambol’d and sported” and the wind “drove the blows.” The air and water are constantly changing and in motion, though perhaps in this final passage they fluctuate with a degree of constancy formed by the simple verbs “gambol’d,” “sported,” “drove,” and “learn’d.” The hermit can read these signs, and his first feat is learning to live within the constant change, permeability, and instability Beachy Head represents. As an avid reader of these events, the hermit positions himself as someone who understands large tempests—emotional and political—yet is not subject to them. Rather, he unwaveringly rescues those who would be drowned. As someone ostensibly abjected by the system, he acts as a countercurrent pulling mariners—participants in the system—from its deadly grasp.

In this light, the hermit becomes the inverse of the shepherd-smugglers Smith criticized toward the beginning of the poem:

one, who sometimes watches on the heights
When hid in the cold mist of passing clouds,
The flock, with dripping fleeces, are dispers’d

O'er the wide down: then from some ridged point
That overlooks the sea, his eager eye
Watches the bark that for his signal waits
To land its merchandize:--Quitting for this
Clandestine traffic his more honest toil,
The crook abandoning, he braves himself
The heaviest snow-storm of December's night,
When with conflicting winds the ocean raves,
And on the tossing boat, unfearing mounts
To meet the partners of the perilous trade,
And share their hazard. Well it were for him,
If no such commerce of destruction known,
He were content with what the earth affords
To human labour (176-192)

Smith reproves the shepherd who deserts his dripping, scattered flocks for illegal contraband. A footnote points out, "shepherds and labourers of this tract of country, a hard and athletic race of men, are almost *universally engaged* in the contraband trade" (Curran 225, emphasis mine). The note serves to censure the shepherds' connection to the money economy. Though hardy enough to live off the work of their bodies, even the hinds succumb to their own greed, participating in the commercial economy by treating animals like goods, raising them for sale or as ruses for more lucrative smuggling operations. Smith brings up but denounces the universality of their employment, suggesting that global trade—and its capitalistic ideology and laws of exchange—is no

way to define universality. Though the smuggler is quite accommodating, his hospitality is in the service of ships and commodities that necessarily participate in international violence during the Napoleonic era of blockades, what Smith alludes to as the “commerce of destruction” (190).

Like the smuggler, the hermit also deserts whatever his societal role once was to troll the shores of the channel, yet he picks up not goods but mariners—those stranded by wars and commerce gone awry.

Often he had snatched
From the wild billows, some unhappy man
Who liv'd to bless the hermit of the rocks.
But if his generous cares were all in vain,
And with slow swell the tide of morning bore
Some blue swol'n cor'se to land; the pale recluse
Dug in the chalk a sepulcher—above
Where the dank sea-wrack mark'd the utmost tide,
And with his prayers perform'd the obsequies
For the poor helpless stranger. (707-16)

With a large dose of poetic justice, Smith has the hermit save sailors from the sea only after they have been separated from their ship and cargo, so that he saves these transnational souls once the sea has freed them from—or taken revenge on them for—their roles in the trade economy or in a European war based in large part on imperial economies. As if baptized by the Channel waves, the “mariner” becomes the “unhappy man” and finally a “stranger” buried anonymously within the cliff face, not unlike the

hermit who, in the next few lines, will also rest in a grave unmarked but for the “chalk” of the Down cliffs. Death, however, is not the only equalizer here; both the hermit and the lost naval souls have been denuded of their individual social identities and have become strangers to each other and the nations from which they came. Like Julia Kristeva, Smith explores a kind of universality based on a mutual strangeness.⁷⁴ The humanity of the hermit and the mariners is only confirmed once they have been stripped of various social identities and ideological claims.

If the hermit resists any nationalist, consumerist interpellation into society that defines the rogue smuggler or legal merchant, he nonetheless becomes involved with a quite idealistic iteration of universality vacated of national ties, what Derrida has termed “universal hospitality.” In many of Derrida’s later writings, the concept of universal hospitality, like his notion of unconditional forgiveness taken from Emmanuel Levinas, becomes the impossible condition for the acceptance of the Other, an open-ended cosmopolitan identity and the promise of democracy. Derrida insists that hospitality occur before any kind of interpellation excludes the visitor or names him a foreigner: “Let us say *yes to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female” (77). The anonymity of the hermit and the strangers arguably locates them “before any *identification*.” Unlike either the penetrative imperial invasions or the

⁷⁴ See Kristeva’s *Nations without Nationalism*, where she argues: “the universalist breakthrough continued to make progress up to Locke, Shaftesbury, Montesquieu, and, in my opinion, did not die out but rather took on a new orientation with the Freudian discovery of our intrinsic difference; let us know ourselves as unconscious, altered, other in order better to approach the universal otherness of the strangers that we are” (21).

blockades imposed by either England or France during the Fourth Coalition, the hermit stands as a figure of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. Rather than inseminating the world with trade or ideology, he sits poised on the border, ready to receive whatever and whoever comes ashore, particularly those who have been mangled by the voyage. He not only saves men but also offers strangers a final resting place when he buries and presides over their deaths.

As Melville has recently discussed, Derrida's ideas about hospitality come from his reading of Kant, who had included hospitality in a plan for international peace (and Enlightenment freedom) in his 1795 essay, "Perpetual Peace."⁷⁵ Kant advocated the creation of international or cosmopolitan law as well as a form of hospitality offering the rights of visitation to stranded international travelers. Writing during the Napoleonic Wars, particularly after Prussia and Austria capitulated to Napoleon with the failure of the First Coalition, he argued that European cosmopolitanism must be based on a public legal code, which would grant the right of visitation to stranded travelers. Though reason mandated this much, morality ultimately depended upon legislation rather than conscience, and hospitality became a duty-based right of visitation and nothing more.⁷⁶ Smith, however, surpasses Kant's notions when she uses the hermit to represent the kind

⁷⁵ Melville argues that Kant's work reveals how a "foreigner's arrival plays itself out [...] as the nation's troubling recognition of its own internal strangeness" (74), an act that always involves violently interpellating the stranger as such. I would argue that despite the fact that Smith names the dead mariner a "stranger," part of the strength of her depiction depends on the freedom from interpellation as "foreigner" that the hermit and the mariners finally achieve, outside the bounds of the nationalism exacerbated by the Napoleonic Wars.

⁷⁶ For recent readings of Kant's cosmopolitan notions on law and hospitality, see Michael Scrivener's *Cosmopolitan Ideal* and Allen W. Wood's "Kant's Project for Perpetual Peace" in *Cosmopolitics*.

of justice that exceeds law. The hermit comes to demonstrate a universal acceptance and veers close to Derrida's critique of Kant:

the thinker of the cosmopolitan right to universal hospitality, the author of *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), is also, without there being anything fortuitous in this, the one who destroys at its source the very possibility of what he posits and determines in this way. And that is due to the juridicality of his discourse, to the inscription in a law of this principle of hospitality whose infinite idea should resist the law itself—or at any rate go beyond it at the point where it governs it. (71)

He goes on to characterize hospitality as a Kantian antinomy, in which freedom becomes defined as that which exceeds universal law: “the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses” (*Of Hospitality* 76-77). Because the hermit's repeated actions become something like a code of conduct, they exceed mere personal responsibility. Yet on the borders of the nation, he also disregards any codified law that might dictate how the hermit should treat the stranded mariners. Thus the hermit represents what Derrida has called a “non-dialectizable, insoluble antinomy ...between the law of unlimited hospitality and the laws” of philosophy and of sovereignty (77).

At this point it should come as no surprise that the hermit, who seems like a simple figure of compassion and embodied sentiment, should come to represent a host of idealistic possibilities rife with paradox. At this final precipice of the poem, the various structures of excess—nationality, market culture, ethics—come to a head and represent

what Derrida has termed “l’avenir” or “the Enlightenment-to-come”: “criticizing unconditionally all conditionalities” (*Two Essays* 142). This is Derrida’s attempt to find a reasonableness beyond the confines or failures of Enlightenment reason, with its stiff laws and morals. The future-to-come or the Enlightenment-to-come will arrive when the ideals of nationality, law, and eighteenth-century Enlightenment reason are surpassed and exceeded (*Two Essays* 143). Since all ideals involve teleology and instrumentality, the Enlightenment-to-come would move beyond both the empirical and the ideal, towards something tied down neither by the material demands of current existence (like the market) nor by the ideals that can only imagine old, defunct, and restrictive ideological structures (like nationalism).

The future to come is an unthinkable ideal built around an unconditional event, such as Beachy Head’s “vast concussion,” or the textual events of Smith’s footnotes, injecting historicity into the idealized figure of the hermit, or even the rhetorical openness of pastoral description open to the logic of capitalistic excess. This idea culminates in a final figure who represents both legal unconditionality and formal, lyric indeterminacy. Rather than simply rejecting trade or consumption as she does in the *Sonnets*, Smith accommodates even these foreign, law-bound concepts in order to exceed and overcome them. In this way *Beachy Head* uses but reforms Enlightenment law and reason as concepts necessarily open to whatever political events, historical narratives, or concepts that come to alter it. In particular, reason, in both Derrida and Smith, must be made open to an incalculable ethics of care. It is important to note that this ethics of care is not simply the embodied sympathy derived from the discourse of sensibility, which Smith

rejected in the *Sonnets*, but a moral, conceptual notion of ethics allied to an uncompromising sense of justice.

As in Kant, the ethics or Good of the hermit's openness also corresponds to the beautiful, and the poem returns to figure vacancy as futurity, hospitality and aesthetic free beauty in a final void marked by the disappearance of the hermit and the absence of his parting words:

Those who read
Chisel'd within the rock, these mournful lines
Memorials of his sufferings, did not grieve,
That dying in the cause of charity
His spirit, from its earthly bondage freed,
Had to some better region fled for ever. (724-31)

If the hermit makes a life beside a vacancy, he becomes part of it the night he disappears. Washed into the sea, his bones might eventually become like those found on the shore of Middleton in Sussex. The hermit has achieved Smith's longed-for state of vacancy, figured in the earlier sonnet as the pure whiteness of the bones, chafed clean by the sea and ultimately deaf and insensible. The poem, by eschewing the market and nation-driven narratives that impinge on the hermit and the coastal, pastoral landscape, moves toward a lyricism that might exist beyond the material demands of location and luxury.

The hermit might simply represent the quiescence the poet sometimes desires but for the missing epitaph he might have written, which signals that his death might also be about the possibilities of language. As the poet explains, before the hermit died, he had chiseled on the rocks of his cave "these mournful lines," and much critical speculation

has tried to figure out whether Smith never had the chance to write the hermit's epitaph, or whether the poem itself stands in for his final words.⁷⁷ Though we might read this poem as an unfinished fragment, perhaps the lacuna is Smith's own final act of charity, freeing her readers from any kind of definitive meaning about Beachy Head itself.

Unlike Wordsworth's peddler or shepherd figures from *The Excursion*, Smith's hermit disappears without preaching his words of wisdom. His sermon is his silence, and he finally remains outside language but ever about to write his epitaph. Rather than actually chiseling his last words in stone, in language that will become monumentalized and hardened, the hermit seems forever poised in the moment just before the act of writing. This kind of futurity might smack of Romantic ideology, as it sounds much like Wordsworth's pitch for the Romantic imagination in book Six of the *Prelude*: an "infinite ... something evermore about to be" (605, 608). On the one hand, though Smith's vacancy aims to rupture material reality, rather than a process of constant creation, she envisions language as forever on the precipice of history, looking out at the beautiful yet politically fraught churning of the waves. If the hermit figures the poem's final vacancy, Smith's footnotes reside next to his unwritten epitaph, once again filling the imaginative ideality with the excess and contingencies of history. The poem, in effect, ends twice, as the historical footnotes subject the lyrical space of the hermit's life and death to that history in the margins, a lyricism both hospitable to and in excess of the

⁷⁷ For a reading of *Beachy Head* as Romantic fragment poem, see John Anderson's "The Romantic Fragment Poem As Mosaic." Jacqueline Labbe reads these final moments as both the dissolution of the author and of any stable notion of subjectivity, both of which "disallow closure and resolution" (159). Lorraine Fletcher writes that Smith sent *Beachy Head* to her publisher five months before her death, and though she might have been too sick to finish the poem, it is a possibility that she intentionally left the hermit's epitaph unwritten. See *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (335).

subsequent events that will mark the coast of Beachy Head. The hermit signals Smith's need to keep history in her vista, but temporarily let its laws slip through her grasp to imagine a different possible future.

On the other hand, the vacancy marked by the hermit's lack of epitaph also figures a kind of non-knowledge that poses a problem for the subject and ideology. Smith's quasi-conceptual basis of aesthetics and justice always begins from a point of non-knowledge—the moment before the understanding and imagination might be harmonized—a place where the subject is already dissolved with the hopes of leading to a new kind of non-determinative subjectivity. Simon Malpas argues that this “cut” inherent to the structure of Kantian knowledge disables “the systematic knowledge-based thought of modernity ... and ideology” (13). Other women writers will develop Smith's idea about non-knowledge to different ends, translating the idea of an *a priori* gap between understanding and imagination into their own philosophical and poetic stances. For Smith, this vacancy is unlike Wordsworth's “infinite” in the way that it destabilizes systematic meaning structures. She strives not for idealistic possibilities but for a knowledge that will not be bound by conceptual, national, or market orthodoxies. Without the hermit or his final words, we too are suspended in a position of vacancy with the eternal prospect of remaking knowledge, or of uttering something revolutionary.

Chapter 3. Mary Robinson's Diverse Mind: From Oblivion to Idiocy

The relationship of form, or the “constructive principle,” to the materials of the work (to its themes, the conceptual mass, but also to the words themselves) is the initial problem for the “open text,” one that faces each writing anew. Can form make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information, the uncertainty, incompleteness, vastness) articulate without depriving it of its capacious vitality, its generative power? Can form go even further than that and actually generate that potency, opening uncertainty to curiosity, incompleteness to speculation, and turning vastness into plenitude? [...] Form is not a fixture but an activity. (47)

—Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*

Mary Robinson was surely the hippest writer of her generation, a close follower of fashion, political and poetic fads with enough panache to retain an aura of fame throughout her life. Her feel for novelty, whether Della Cruscan poetics or Revolutionary fervor, allowed her to make her way into various groups and schools. As many contemporaneous critics of her poetry liked to point out, she was dexterous at imitating trends set by other writers.

Although we have never professed an admiration for the Della Crusca school, the pupils of which appear to us to be no other than a kind of imitators of poets, yet it is due to Mrs. Robinson to say, that she possesses great fertility of imagination, delicacy of sentiment, and a just ear for harmony and varied modulation of numbers. There is a stiffness, constraint, and affectation, in the models on which our British Sappho studies to form her style and manner: but in these, as in her other poems, she gives proofs of genius capable of producing greater excellence, if it had been better directed. (qtd. in *Selected Poems* 385)

According to this reviewer of Robinson's *Sappho and Phaon* in the *English Review*, though the writer might show the inklings of poetic dexterity, she still studies under the tutelage of other poets. Based on Lucy Newlyn's persuasive model of Romantic women's poetics, most scholarship on Robinson has continued to see her writing as an echo, whether imitating Della Cruscan poetics, Robert Merry's Revolutionary odes, the vogue for sonnets, novels of sensibility, or Wordsworth and Coleridge's experiment with ballads.⁷⁸ Scholars most often connect this ability to don and discard identities and fashions in both her poetry and her unconventional personal life to her time as a hailed stage actress. Robinson has become the poster girl for Romantic theatricality, a model that places a premium on performativity and multiplicity.⁷⁹ Both paradigms of echo and theatricality assume that at the heart of her poetry Robinson imitates the world around her, fashioning a poetics of surfaces rather than depths. As Stuart Curran has suggested,

⁷⁸ In *Reading, Writing and Romanticism*, Newlyn discusses Robinson's echoing of Coleridge's project in "To the Poet Coleridge," a poem written in response to his "Kubla Khan" (254-56). Though Newlyn reads the exchange as Robinson hedging her bets between a poetic collaboration with Coleridge and one of rivalry, there is the sense that Robinson does not add anything substantive to the poetic conversation. W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdsley's history of the Della Cruscan school, *The English Della Cruscan and Their Time*, depicts Robinson as a latecomer and subsidiary member of that school. In her article "From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*: Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt," Ashley J. Cross discusses the problem of the *Lyrical Tales*' literary debt to the *Lyrical Ballads*, arguing that Robinson attempted to link her volume to the male poets' book in order to insert herself into male literary history and to ensure her literary legacy.

⁷⁹ Judith Pascoe forged this influential, historicist model of Robinson in her groundbreaking *Romantic Theatricality*. Julie Schaffer, Sharon Setzer, and others have followed suit in their focus on *Walsingham*, a novel where one of the main characters cross-dresses as a man in an attempt to claim an inheritance. These scholars have rightly read the novel as destabilizing gender relations and stable notions of subjectivity in favor of a more performative model. Though feminist critics have read Wollstonecraft as originating the notion of performative gender roles, Pascoe argues that Robinson takes her model from her experiences as a stage actress and theatricality's general influence on late eighteenth-century culture.

“Robinson is concerned primarily with lyrical effect, the surface,” an effect that reveals “a vacuity in signification at the heart of modern culture” (17, 13).

These narratives about performativity, however, miss the ways in which Robinson’s poetry is engaged in making certain philosophical and poetic claims about multiplicity. Her “superficial” formal play, as well as her questioning of unified, stable identity are part and parcel of a much larger project to build a model of the mind that has the capability of generating or responding to psychological and formal diversity. Like Charlotte Smith, Robinson begins with the problems that embodied experience presents for women of the 1790s—namely, sensibility, with its repetitive languishing in painful emotion as a sign of women’s stunted poetic and social roles.⁸⁰ Though she never had a chance to read Smith’s “Beachy Head,” she was clearly a student of the older poet’s sonnet revival. Robinson similarly attempts to circumvent sensibility through the temporary cessation of feeling and thought, but she ultimately embraces sensation as a productive epistemology. Where Smith rejects sensation for a Kantian, quasi-conceptual space of futurity, always open to whoever or whatever comes to fill it, Robinson works to suspend mental and poetic habituations by flooding them with an unmanageable plethora of new sensations, ideas, and, most importantly, poetic forms. Unlike Smith, who substitutes hospitality for consumption, Robinson works toward rampant production, paradoxically arguing for the most radical kind of invention through the trope of the

⁸⁰ The best narrative to detail the turn against sensibility in the 1790s is G. J. Barker-Benfield’s *The Culture of Sensibility*, especially the chapters on Mary Wollstonecraft. Claudia Johnson also touches on this subject in her chapter on Wollstonecraft in *Equivocal Beings*, arguing that Burke’s conservative depiction of Marie Antoinette in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* co-opted sensibility for the conservative cause. While writers like Wollstonecraft and William Godwin are generally understood as having misjudged the backlash against sensibility, I would argue that a savvy writer like Robinson was already engaged in a critique or revision of the discourse on emotions.

Enlightenment idiot, deprived of society's beneficence and abjected to the margins of society.

Drawing heavily from empiricist theories of knowledge and psychology, poems like "Sight" (1793) and *Sappho and Phaon* (1796) attempt to reset the mind's associations through moments of oblivion, or radical forgetting, that then clear the ground for a barrage of new sensory information. In her sonnet sequence, Robinson stages the rejection of the sonnet of sensibility as a defunct mode of lyric stasis and imitation, a crucial step in ending Sappho's single-minded, oppressive passion for Phaon. As Robinson's poetry develops, she shifts from this model of the mind based on Enlightenment psychology and begins to experiment with formal solutions that offer a similar, but more material model through language. As early as *Sappho and Phaon*, she turns to the Enlightenment trope of *idiocy* to figure Sappho's stunted emotional and intellectual growth. Her poetics reach an apex in her final volume, *Lyrical Tales*, and other poems from the last years of her life, in which she uses the trope in combination with the ballad form to promote formal variation. Together, the idiot's stuttering, nonsensical speech and the ballad's refrain transform imitation or echo into an additive, generative poetic technique.

These formal experiments constitute a referendum on the poetics of the 1790s and help us supply an alternative narrative about the development of poetry and poetic forms during the Romantic period. Robinson juxtaposes two kinds of poems: those that aim for a poetic transcendence and those poems that create psychological difference and formal variation. Or to put it differently, she contrasts vacant or static lyricism that preserves moments isolated in time and space with a poetics of vacancy that unleashes repetition as

incremental, difference. By creating contingent alternatives to poetic and intellectual habituations, Robinson offers a model different from the lyricism of Wordsworth and Coleridge and from the popular poetics of sensibility and domesticity. Her technical strategies reconceptualize feminist aesthetics and the thinking subject outside the terms of either reason or sensibility.

This thread of thinking finds another iteration in some important twentieth-century feminist poets. If Keatsian paradox descends through Wallace Stevens and John Ashbery, plotting the uses of paradox and irony to fragment and question the poetics of subjectivity, Robinson presents a different route around the Romantic egotistical sublime and lyrics based on teleological moments of epiphany. She foreshadows poets like Gertrude Stein and Lyn Hejinian, whose use of repetition, echo, parataxis, seriality, and insistence build what Hejinian calls an “open text.” Many feminist scholars have remarked on women writers’ propensities to refuse narrative (or figurative) closure precisely because the teleological trajectories open to them are often unappealing or entrapping.⁸¹ Though many poems, Romantic and otherwise, tend to yield up their own contradictions and interpretive variations, particularly under a deconstructionist lens, Robinson’s poetry courts not aporia, as Smith’s does, but a range of psychological and formal differences. Her poems become sites not only of dialogism but of what Theodore Adorno, discussing Holderlin’s late lyrics, described as “aconceptual synthesis” (130). Forged by linguistic techniques like parataxis and seriality, Holderlin’s poems resist synthetic meaning through “a constitutive dissociation [...] [that] gently suspends the traditional logic of synthesis” (130). Robinson similarly presents textual moments that

⁸¹ See especially Judith Roof’s *Come, As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative and Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, edited by Alison Booth.

allegorize and enact reading as dissent and difference in poems that take as a main preoccupation the refusal of unitary meaning. Moreover, the resistance to hegemonic interpretation signals Robinson's desire to think about how poetics might provide models for resisting normative political and social structures, including gender discrimination as well as the various Leftist plans and discourses that occluded women even as they promoted "universal" equality and freedom in the decade following the French Revolution.⁸²

Through this poetics, Robinson attempts to circumvent what Jerome McGann, in *The Romantic Ideology*, has chastised as the tendency toward synthesis and reconciliation in Romantic male poets and their readers. Robinson's Sappho provides an excellent example of a female figure who longs for Romantic union, reconciliation, and romantic synthesis with her lost lover, and the sonnet sequence serves as a critique of Sappho's fatal trajectory. Her reviewers, as well as our own contemporary scholarship, largely miss this point, that Sappho's mimicry of the sonnet of sensibility and her longing for reconciliation—her poetic and cultural habituations—are exactly the problems that Robinson wants to vacate. Because Robinson views poetry as generating variation that refuses synthesis, it is even more tempting to characterize her experiments as depicting a kind of continuous change, what McGann terms as Romantic ideology's emphasis on "creative process" (30). Her poems resemble what McGann characterizes as Byron's "spontaneity," or the poet's effort "to make the flow of language the encompassing totality of immediate experience" (30, 128). Robinson is certainly working toward the

⁸² For example, in *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*, Saree Makdisi calls the radical, intellectual Left "hegemonic," in its plan to stamp out plebian, communitarian politics in favor of Painite universal rights or Godwinian gradualism. See his chapter, "Fierce Rushing."

kind of change that might produce new knowledge and free the mind, yet the sensations she explores cannot be sublated into ego-driven despair nor described as the tonal fluctuations in the satirical mode of a single narrator's voice. Her revolutions of formal and psychic states strip various characters of their habituations, leaving them ravaged, raving, or otherwise fractured and abject. Robinson does not plot an escape route from despair, and her women and children are not redressed in Edmund Burke's tradition, Helen Maria Williams's Revolutionary robes, or Smith's Kantian conceptuality. Instead they remain ragged figures of both alterity and mental difference. It is their exclusion from society that drives them to idiocy and engenders a different way of thinking about alterity and poetic articulation.

Rather than comparing Robinson to Byron's totality of immediacies, it makes more sense to locate Robinson as one of the many Romantic poets who were working toward A. O. Lovejoy's idea of plenitude, a concept that McGann claimed might stem the tide of the Romantic ideology. As Lovejoy put it long ago, the Romantics "believed not only that in many, or in all, phases in human life there are diverse excellences, but that diversity itself is of the essence of excellence; and that of art, in particular, the objective is [...] the fullest possible expression of the abundance of differentness that there is, actually or potentially, in nature and human nature, and [...] perhaps never capable of universalization" (293). Robinson does not derive her idea of diversity or plenitude from the German Romantic tradition that Lovejoy discusses in *The Great Chain of Being*; rather, she develops it from her own, partially native, empiricist notions about how experiences motivate reflection.

The empiricist lens helps to emphasize the role of sensations and desire in Robinson's ideas about change and freedom, as well as the more material conditions for thought. Though McGann and others have attempted to privilege feeling over reason as a way to accrue new value for women's writing, it is helpful to use several theorists to emphasize the more nuanced ways that sensation and desire operate as modes of thinking. As opposed to Jacques Lacan's idea that repetitive behaviors merely hide the more important originary trauma, Gilles Deleuze's notion of radical difference created through repetition—which he takes from Hume—stresses variation as precisely the point. Repetition as difference expresses the creative potentiality of diversity as a string of ontologically separate entities or sensations. Because Deleuze's early idea of difference eventually gives way to his rhizomatic ideas about immanence, which arguably slips into a Romantic ideology through his concepts of becoming and continuous change, it is more helpful to understand the consequences of difference as repetition through two other theorists working loosely with Deleuze: Hélène Cixous and Giorgio Agamben.⁸³ The French feminist theorist argues that the explosive expression of polymorphous desire leads to a heterogeneous "production of forms." Cixous helps us understand how Robinson's representations and characters yield up a collection of contradictory formal structures and sensations operating within the same poem, unlike a kind of continuously evolving creative process. Alternatively, Agamben helps to reframe Robinson's project with language as one about the potentialities for language, one that includes resistance to writing or articulation. He elucidates Robinson's deft maneuvers with idiocy that provide a writer with the ability to retard old meanings and create others. Viewing Robinson in

⁸³ Still, see the Deleuzian-inspired readings of Romanticism in the *Romantic Circles Praxis* volume, *Romanticism and the New Deleuze* (January 2008).

this way, her poetics counter both Wordsworthian transcendence and Smith's Kantian futurity with a material heterogeneity, an empirical bevy of sensations and formal opportunities, or what we might say is the repetitive idiocy of a deep multiplicity.

Oblivion and Robinson's Perverse Empiricism

Like other writers engaged in Revolutionary politics of the 1790s, Robinson begins the decade by wondering how prejudice and habituated associations hinder people from achieving the Revolutionary ideals of social equality and freedom—especially of mental liberation. Many of Robinson's early 1790s poems explicitly explore a model of the mind that uses the empiricist models of Locke, Hume, and Burke to wreak havoc on memory, custom and habituation. Though she engages with Lockean psychology's concept of the mind as "dark room" to be filled with the light of reasoned knowledge, Robinson's poems often demonstrate that the mind sometimes comes to knowledge through temporary moments of darkness that reset its functions and its knowledge base. Appropriating language from her early Della Cruscan fluorescence and from the language of sensibility, Robinson sketches repeated moments of oblivion that lead to rapture or bliss, which at this point in her career she defines as the transcendent height of sensation.⁸⁴ Pivoting off the empiricist notion that sensation and empirical experiences

⁸⁴ Though Hargreaves-Mawdsley does not have much to say about Robinson, his study of the Della Cruscan movement shows that Robinson was getting the concepts of oblivion and rapture from her experimentation with this group. In particular, many of his examples document Robert Merry and Hannah Cowley using the popular rhetoric of "oblivion" or apathy and "rapture" or ecstasy in their poetic exchange between "Della Crusca" and "Anna Matilda." Both Merry and Cowley often use these terms in separate poems, first writing of their melancholic depression at being neglected or in despair and then responding to the other's poem with the language of rapture (160-2). One might argue that Robinson takes these models and unites the two states of feeling in dialectic. The entire project of Della Cruscan language might be seen as a project of rapture, where numerous overwrought descriptions are piled together to cause the reader a powerful,

engender ideas, she inverts empirical theories of knowledge and builds a concept of the mind that is constituted, at least in part, by a series of rolling blackouts that vacate stale sensation and thought. Mental and bodily freedoms are constituted not through an escape into a mental world of ideas, but through the periodic cessation of feeling and thought.

Her revolutionary fervor is most well known through poems like “Ainsi va la Monde” (1791) with its final image of blissful Freedom dressed in a “rainbow vest” figuring the bright, diverse light that enables visionary sight. Her later volume *Sight, Solitude and The Cavern of Wo* (1793), however, provides a primer on those darker states of mind that, like oblivion, are inextricably bound to the production of Enlightenment knowledge. By 1793’s post-Revolutionary disappointment, moreover, these figures of darkness may represent a Romantic skepticism about rationality. The book begins with “Sight,” an ode dedicated to John Taylor, oculist to the King, editor of *The Morning Post* and Robinson’s longtime friend. Remarkable not only for its reproduction of stock Enlightenment and Revolutionary figures, this poem markedly engages with Enlightenment psychology. Though Robinson explicitly repudiates oblivion’s blankness as the result of affective and intellectual depression, the poem repeatedly returns to meditations on oblivion, a move that implicitly belies her reliance on mental blankness as an unwanted but necessary means to new knowledge.

ecstatic sensation. Robinson imbues this language with much heftier references to Enlightenment goals, as Merry also did, but even more strikingly to modes of abstract reasoning.

The speaker begins by describing the gift of sight and the light that helps man sort through his “intellectual maze,” yet even her initial descriptions of light already work in conjunction with the darkness:

Transcendent gift! but for thy light divine,
Oh! what a chaos were the mind of MAN!
Compos'd of atoms, exquisitely fine,
Each moving in a dark obstructed sphere
Forlorn, and undelighted! (11-15)

Robinson's model of the mind is very much like Locke's “dark room” detailed in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things” (II.XI.17).⁸⁵ Transcendent light allows the reader to see creation's “bright diversity of charms” (19), but only after they are defined against the “dark obstructed sphere,” that represents a lack of knowledge, like oblivion (32). “Sight” still describes oblivion in fairly negative terms, and transcendent sight and rapturous light are the foregone endpoints of the poem. Yet even these depictions suggest that light can only enter the picture if it has a void to fill. If, as Susan Stewart has argued, *poiesis* arises to “counter the oblivion of darkness” (2), then Robinson conversely creates darkness in order to emerge from it.

Like another of Robinson's poems, “To Apathy,” the description of “Oblivion horrible” (26) takes part in the flip side of the cult of sensibility, the desire for

⁸⁵ In the Broadview edition of *Walsingham*, Julie Schaffer notes how Robinson draws on the epistemological and educational theories of Locke as she first describes the protagonist's tenacious memories and impressions of his childhood home (47n1).

indifference, for mental and physical numbness, or forgetfulness.⁸⁶ This “melancholy blank” (32) appears a bit like the mature adult returning to Locke’s *tabula rasa* through the sleep, depression, and periodic moments of ignorance through which the mind cycles during the poem. Though oblivion may represent stasis and a profound lack of knowledge, Robinson’s periodic return to the “blank page” has striking implications for the ways the mind might use blankness as the grounds for new knowledge:

Nor yet alone the misery extreme
Of the dread gloom opaque involves his mind;
The longing for that SOMETHING unknown,
Whose pow’r he feels, diffusing its warm touch
O’er every sensate nerve! that POW’R which marks
The varying season in their varying forms,
That tells him there is YET a sense untry’d,
Ungratified, yet fraught with heavenly bliss (76-83)

This passage pointedly grapples with Locke’s ideas about knowledge, sensation, and experience. Experience, in Locke’s epistemology, provided the basis for knowledge and was first and foremost accumulated through sensation and then, afterwards, by reflection on those sensory perceptions. Locke, like Hume after him, pondered the consequences of sleep, forgetfulness, and oblivion to human consciousness, considering how one could attest to being the same person if consciousness and previous experience were interrupted

⁸⁶ See for example Francis Greville’s “Ode to Indifference,” a piece of which Robinson uses for her epigraph to her “Ode on Rapture,” and also many of Smith’s poems that allude to opium use. Charlotte Sussman’s article “The Art of Oblivion: Charlotte Smith and Helen of Troy” discusses Smith’s turn to nepenthe (and opium) as antidotes for too much sympathy. Robinson also took opium, as Martin J. Levy most fully discusses in “Coleridge, Mary Robinson and Kubla Khan.”

or lost. For Robinson, however, the cessation of feeling and thought in that “dread gloom opaque” may shut down current perception but strategically allows for “that SOMETHING unknown” to creep into the mind. Oblivion forms a radical kind of forgetting that allows human consciousness to remain intact, deleting certain ideas while inventing others. As Locke argued, Liberty is defined by “the power to think or not to think ... according to the preference or direction of his own mind” (II.XXI.7), and Robinson’s poem highlights the extent to which forgetting might be freeing. In his chapter on “Identity and Diversity,” Locke inadvertently suggests how oblivion might help change a man’s mind: “*Absolute oblivion separates what is thus forgotten from the person, but not from the man*” (III.XXVII.20). Though it will not change the overall identity of a man, lost memory might change the way he thinks about himself and the world around him. For Hume, variation in an expected result changes the assurance or probability of a customary event. So, in “Sight” oblivion’s form of radical forgetting alters the mind’s habituations. For Robinson, the unreliability of memory and experiential forms of knowledge invite variation and change that have the potential to alter probability and custom.

It is necessary to point out that while the poem repeatedly dwells in these moments of oblivion, it also spends a good deal of time detailing the lush wonders of nature’s varying forms, which represent rapture, or the array of sensations and ideas that compose a healthy landscape, as well as a healthy mind. The poem climaxes and ends, however, when the rainbow of materiality merges into the white light of Enlightenment

“sight” that may blind and stupefy as much as it illuminates.⁸⁷ Not unlike Shelley’s “shape all light” in “The Triumph of Life,” by the end of the poem, light seems to transmute into a blinding form of oblivion:

Such are the horrors, such the pangs acute,
That shroud the DARKEN’D EYE, whose mortal sense,
Consign’d to one unblest’d and mournful night,
Can by ETERNAL DAY alone be cured.
Where the dim shade shall vanish from its beams,
And, bathing in a sea of endless light,
The renovated orb, awoke from DEATH,
Shall snatch its rays from IMMORTALITY! (212-19)

Bathed in a “sea of endless light,” the speaker is frozen in a moment of rapture and ecstasy, a lyrical moment that eerily resembles absolute darkness. The speaker can, at least in this final moment of bliss, feel or see nothing but light, a state that precludes every other emotional variation but transcendent enlightenment. As the inverse of darkness’s blank slate, immortality’s eternal day figures the tyrannical propensity for knowledge to become too sure of itself. This blinding rapture lyricizes the world to

⁸⁷ In this sense, Robinson’s figurative use of light foreshadows Percy Shelley’s use of light imagery in “The Triumph of Life,” particularly his figure of the “shape all light,” though Shelley may also be parodying the counter-revolutionary position that equated the Revolution with the Enlightenment. It also resembles Paul de Man’s arguments “Blindness and Insight,” especially in “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” where de Man argues that the writer is often blind to his own rhetoric, which the reader and critic attempt to uncover. This formulation in Robinson’s early work foreshadows the propensities of her later work to encourage her own readers to be suspicious of reigning rhetoric (like that of overwrought sensibility) and to include oppositional situations or arguments within the work that might help readers more readily to question the text’s and their own rhetorical blindness.

death, as the transcendent lyrical moment inadvertently promotes temporal and ideological stasis. This regressive transformation of rapture into transcendence may happen inadvertently in “Sight,” but by 1793, Robinson may also be surreptitiously parodying the French Revolution’s religion of Reason, which had been blinded to its own excesses during the Terror and reign of Robespierre, not to mention France’s declaration of war on England by early 1793.⁸⁸ By merging any “diversity of charms” into a unified, teleological white light, rapture—whether millenarian or Revolutionary—conceals the rainbow that a normal (periodic, non-eternal) day might reveal. The speaker ends up sightless and dumb in an idealized, transcendent space that has pulled away from the material, sensory, variegated natural world. Light’s necessary err into blindness begs for the kind of oblivion that might dissolve reified associations and refresh the grounds of knowledge.

This periodicity is accentuated and enabled by Robinson’s choice of blank verse, what would come to be the ultimate poetic form of lofty contemplation in works like “Tintern Abbey” and “Beachy Head.” Though we might assume that Robinson’s non-rhyming, non-stanzaic verse would be the perfect poetic form for engaging with the kinds of diversity she later more effectively enacts with the ballad, in “Sight” the sprawl of the blank verse invites this periodic and dialectical relationship between oblivion and rapture. Paradoxically, without any structural repetition, Robinson’s verse still has a difficult time creating difference. Instead, blank verse becomes teleological through its vertical and horizontal rhythms, which create a largely linear momentum and structure. The building

⁸⁸ For this reading of the French Revolution blind to its own excesses through metaphors of light, see Orrin N. C. Wang’s “Shelley Disfigured” in *Fantastic Modernity* and W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*.

thrust climaxes at the moment of transcendence, when the white light of ideal sight dominates the rest of the poem. In the end, the poem fails to find an appropriate model for diversity and variation, vacillating between the blankness of oblivion with its absence of sensation and a totality of thought dominated by Enlightenment reason.

Sappho's Stupid Sonnet and the Freedom of Oblivion

When Robinson returns to this problem again in her 1796 sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*, she concentrates on the tendency for habituated emotions and thoughts to become tyrannical and suffocating, precluding any rapturous array of experiences. The epiphany of the sequence occurs when Sappho realizes that she needs oblivion to excise certain addictive mind-sets, a reversal of Robinson's skeptical attitude in "Sight." Oblivion eventually serves as both an antidote to her single-minded passion for Phaon and, even more problematic for the poet, a cure for the stock poetic form of the sonnet that stunts and retards a woman writer's poetic growth or freedom. These habituations deter Sappho from the coveted bliss or rapture—now a non-prescriptive variation of sensations, ideas, and poetics, rather than the white light of epiphanic knowledge. Jerome McGann argues that through Robinson's reimagining of poetics as a form of passion that chastises its unreceptive male reader, "Sappho becomes a Promethean figure who will inaugurate a new age of enlightenment and higher 'Reason'" (123). While McGann is right to point out that Sappho's use of affect is purposely excessive in order to break through emotional and intellectual convention (130), the sonnet sequence in fact portrays how repeatedly languishing in the same sensations and perceptions stifles the mind. In staging the impossibility of Sappho's rapture through her

Romantic reunion with Phaon, Robinson instead illustrates a different possibility in Sappho's suicide, an allegory about the uses of oblivion as a means of shocking Sappho—and her readers—into different ways of thinking and feeling.

As a poetic manifesto, moreover, the sonnet sequence's adumbration of oblivion points to Robinson's argument with the hold sensibility had over the lyrical sonnet and women's writing in the 1780s and 90s.⁸⁹ Critiquing the sonnet's tendency to reify, consolidate, and totalize emotions, her sequence troubles any singular, driving emotive resolution or restitution and instead inspires her to more intellectual, poetic goals. The poem documents the failure of her earlier models and demonstrates how the poetic might intervene in public discourse. As Jason Rudy has argued and as "Sight" explores, Robinson figured the lyric as a form of electricity or light that would jolt readers into a universal mindset.⁹⁰ This universality partakes in Revolutionary ideals of universal freedom and communication, which, after the Terror and the Napoleonic wars, seemed even less likely. Robinson's later poems, such as the *Sappho* sequence, document the failure of lyric rapture as a means of unifying the public or public debate, and instead we begin to see Robinson taking up a more diffident version of the public sphere.⁹¹ Rather

⁸⁹ Robinson herself was skeptical of the sonnet's vogue and overuse, as she testifies in her introduction to *Sappho and Phaon*. The sonnet had become a genre of sensibility ever since Smith's immensely popular *Elegiac Sonnets*, a model that many women writers used to voice passion, sympathy and melancholy. For the variety of women using the sonnet form to work through questions of sensibility, see Daniel Robinson's "Reviving the Sonnet: Romantic Women and the Sonnet Claim" and Paula Backscheider's chapter on women and the sonnet form in *Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre*.

⁹⁰ I take this idea from Rudy's chapter on Robinson and Felicia Hemans, "The Electric Poetess," part of his forthcoming book on electricity and lyric poetry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

⁹¹ Though Adriana Craciun has discussed Robinson's views of the ideal public sphere rendered through the free, public press and Robinson's contributions to *The Monthly*

than universal assent, the lyric begins to aspire to a model of dissent and competition of ideas undermining the hegemony of sensibility and other discourses that restricted debate.

The *Sappho* sequence opens with a sonnet that envisions ideal rapture, which Sappho associates with Phaon, but which remains the province of poetry:

Favour'd by Heav'n are those, ordain'd to taste

The bliss supreme that kindles fancy's fire;

Whose magic fingers sweep the muses' lyre,

In varying cadence, eloquently chaste!

[. . .]

For thou, blest POESY! with godlike pow'rs

To calm the miseries of man wert giv'n;

When passion rends, and hopeless love devours,

By mem'ry goaded, and by frenzy driv'n,

'Tis thine to guide him 'midst Elysian' bow'rs,

And shew his fainting soul,— a glimpse of Heav'n. (1.1-4, 9-14)

According to Sappho, supreme bliss ignites the imagination and produces poetry with “varying cadence.” Here two excited emotional states oppose each other—bliss, which produces fruitful variation, and frenzy, which is uncontrollable because it comes to dominate every other sensation. Poetry's varying cadence should be able to calm frenzied passion and lead the lover to transcendent bliss.

Magazine, I would argue the Robinson moves past this civil, idealized view of the public debate toward one that chafes against the public sphere's tendency to come to hegemonic consensus and to consolidate power structures.

Sonnet 3, entitled “The Bower of Pleasure,” depicts this ideal world, which refuses the tyranny of a single emotion or perspective. In the “tangled shade,” protected from the “blazing torch of noon-day light,” (1, 2) Sappho paints a picture of rich, material nature in motion:

The birds breathe bliss! light zephyrs kiss the ground,
Stealing the hyacinth’s divine perfume;
while from pellucid fountains glitt’ring round,
Small tinkling rills bid rival flow’rets bloom!
HERE, laughing Cupids bathe the bosom’s wound;
THERE, tyrant passion finds a glorious tomb! (9-14)

Nature operates on all the senses here. The tyranny of passion, which Sappho will outline in greater detail in sonnet 6, is put to rest where a multiplicity of physical sensations competes for attention. Following the empiricists, Robinson suggests that a variety of sensory stimulation also engenders an abundance of ideas. The scene takes place in the shade, invoking Locke’s dark room as a mind whose emptiness allows for the rich play of ideas rather than the white light of a single, blinding ideology.

The figure of “rival flow’rets” strongly suggests that bliss operates as an affective, intellectual, and formal countermeasure, an ideal that she will not actually develop until her experimentations with ballads at the end of the decade. In “Spenser’s Ravishment: Rape and Rapture in *The Faerie Queen*,” Katherine Eggert has argued that Spenser’s Bower of Bliss in Book II of the *Faerie Queen*, to which Robinson alludes with the “bow’r of Pleasure,” offers an important, alternative model of reading. Rather than the forceful penetration of the reader by a phallic text, the rapture of the Bower offers a

“suffusion of delight” and a “multiplicity” of readings (3). Robinson, like many other writers of the period, takes a page from Spenser’s book of *copia*, a technique that places her among those writers of the eighteenth century who viewed his verse as excessive and protean, as Greg Kucich has demonstrated.

Though Sappho can imagine this kind of plenitude, she cannot actualize it as long as she remains addicted to Phaon. Robinson contrasts this host of possibilities with “tyrant passion” or, as she describes in sonnets 17 and 32, the “thraldom” of romantic love. Sonnet 6 most fully articulates this univocal feeling: “to fix the tender gaze” or “to chant *one* name in ceaseless lays/ To hear no words that other tongues can say” (1, 5-6). At this point Sappho begins to realize that her passion—a passion for finding bliss with Phaon—has become a monologic thought, limiting her emotional and intellectual vision. Again, in empiricist terms, because love will allow her only to perceive one emotion, and one set of sensory stimuli, her ideas cannot develop. Nor can her poetry, as she admits that she is trapped singing Phaon’s “*one* name in ceaseless lays.” Sappho knows, even at this point early in the sonnets, that she may be doomed to sing the same tune over and over again.

As the rest of the sonnets demonstrate, her love for Phaon stunts her mental capabilities, as she becomes caught neurotically thinking the same thought and feeling the same feelings over and over again. Though she begins her complaints of despair over the probability of never rekindling Phaon’s love around sonnet 20, she truly sinks into an affective hell after she leaves Greece for Italy. Pursuing her lover, this change of landscape not only heightens the frantic pitch of Sappho’s pleas for Phaon’s return, but it also brings the imagery of oblivion into the poem. The physical movement marks a shift

in sensory and perceptual terrain that offers the dual possibilities of seeing Phaon again and forgetting him. As Sappho states in sonnet 23: “Let one kind word my weary woes repay,/ Or, in eternal slumbers bid them rest” (13-14). Though she still stridently yearns for romantic reunion, her ultimatum suggests that her best chances for recovery are in forgetting Phaon. That she cannot highlights the tenacity of habituated memory. Each time Sappho looks anywhere she sees signs of Phaon: “For me no spring appears, no summers bloom,/ No Sun-beams glitter, and no altars burn!/ The mind’s dark winter of eternal gloom,/ Shews ‘midst the waste a solitary urn” (10-13). Her perceptual abilities have been stunted by her obsession with Phaon, and it begins to dawn on her that her mind itself is a wasteland while “mem’ry still, reluctant to depart” haunts her (28.5).

It is no stretch to say that Sappho’s inability to get over Phaon has made her an idiot. In describing the Greek poet’s addiction to habituated memories, Robinson is implicitly drawing from the Enlightenment discourse of idiocy, a discourse she typically perverts. In Locke’s discussions, savages and animals (such as parrots) are inhuman precisely to the extent that they can not acquire language or especially memories. Idiocy occurs because savages can not take their sensory experiences and then use reason to reflect upon and store them in the mind (Locke Book II, Chapter XI, Section 12). As opposed to the inability to process sensory information, Sappho becomes dumb, in both senses of the word, when she can only repeat and regurgitate the memories of Phaon she already has. Sappho’s idiocy stems from her inability to develop new sensations or reflections because her perceiving mind is blocked by those memories that insist on overlaying themselves on every perceptual terrain. At this point she needs something more radical than either reason or sensitivity to help her conceptualize new experiences.

Sappho, moreover, is explicit about the toll her emotional state takes on her writing. At the same time, Robinson uses the anachronistic sonnet to lodge a referendum on the poetry of sensibility that dominated much women's writing in the early 1790s. The relationship between Sappho's emotional state and her stunted poetic potency is spelled out most incisively in a late sonnet, "To the Muses," just before Sappho decides to commit suicide.

Prepare your wreaths, Aonian maids divine,
To strew the tranquil bed where I shall sleep;
In tears, the myrtle and the laurel sleep;
And let Erato's hand the trophies twine.
No parian marble, there, with labour'd line,
Shall bid the wand'ring lover stay to weep;
There holy silence shall her vigils keep,
Save, when the nightingale such woes as mine
Shall sadly sing; as twilight's curtains spread.

There shall the branching lotos widely wave (39.1-10)

This sonnet is most striking for the part the lyric mode plays in the tyranny of imitation. The Parian marble, which bears the narrative of Sappho's journey from Greece to Italy, is missing from the scene, and instead Erato, the muse of lyric poetry, twines the myrtle and laurel plants. Lyric poetry itself takes the plants that should signal love, devotion, peace, and writing and twists them into an ornament for Sappho's deathbed. The death scene is dumb to any story but the mute symbols of Sappho's woe. Without other kinds of testimony, the dead plants become a metonymy for the poet, just as the nightingale's sad

song replaces her poetry. The “holy silence,” which should make the viewers of Sappho’s life-in-death receptive to her story, instead fills them with stunted and stupid signs of her despair. In the end, instead of inspiring any grand realization and emotional outpouring in Phaon, this repetitive, lyric mode imprisons both Sappho and the reader in stagnant feeling. Just as multiplicity could not be adequately represented by Enlightenment ratiocination in “Sight,” *Sappho and Phaon* demonstrates just how suffocating and single-minded sensibility—and the poems it adduces—can be.

Rather than providing the multiple opportunities for interiority that she longs for, Sappho’s sonnets rehearse decades-old emotional content. Robinson says as much in her introduction to the sequence, passing some harsh judgment on “the non-descript ephemera from the heated brains of self-important poetasters, all ushered into notice under the appellation of SONNET!” (146). Robinson may simply be looking to separate herself from the poseur sonneteers by advocating that sonnets be written with strict adherence to traditional forms. The other possibility, though, is that her sequence performs and works through the rejection of the sonnet of sensibility. There were a variety of sonnet forms Robinson could have chosen to use for her sequence. She resists the closing couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet and opts for the six-lined, alternating rhyme of a Sicilian sestet. The Italian form necessitates more rhymes but might potentially have provided her with a greater degree of formal openness and diversity. Unlike Charlotte Smith, whose sonnets abound in formal variation, however, Robinson uses the same form for every sonnet, closing down the possibilities for variation except within the strict scheme of her chosen Italian stanza. While Sappho’s use of imitation in this sonnet bars her from real creativity, Robinson’s management of Sappho’s repetition

may signal the beginnings of Robinson's appropriation of imitation for self-critique. Modern readers are often tripped up by this distinction, taking Sappho's stagnant feeling for Robinson's poetry, rather than as a self-reflexive assessment. It is this knowing imitation that vacates the sonnet, and the devolution into sorrow and despair ultimately opens a path beyond sensibility through the shock of oblivion. Only when Sappho falls deeper into oblivion and finally hits rock bottom does she find the potential to forget Phaon and transform herself.

Although Sappho had attempted to "WAKE!" from her poetic and mental monotony in sonnet 33 (33.1), it is only after this sonnet attesting to Sappho's lack of poetic power that she can move toward a revelation about the necessity for oblivion, which she achieves in sonnet 40. The intervening poems are filled with pleas to "let black Erebus succeed" Venus's ray (35.6), and Robinson narrates Sappho succumbing deeper into a state of oblivion in order to awake to a more permanent revelation:

On the low margins of a murm'ring stream,
As rapt in meditation's arms I lay;
Each aching sense in slumbers stole away,
While potent fancy form'd a soothing dream;
O'er the Leucadian deep, a dazzling beam
Shed the bland light of empyrean day!
But soon transparent shadows veil'd each ray,
While mystic visions sprang athwart the gleam!
Now to the heaving gulf they seem'd to bend,
And now across the sphery regions glid;

Now in mid-air, their dulcet voices blend,
“Awake! awake!” the restless phalanx cried,
“See ocean yawns the lover’s woes to end;
Plunge the green wave, and bid thy griefs subside.” (40.1-14)

When passion’s dominance has been muted through the oblivion of sleep, Sappho’s fancy is once again potent and can effectively describe the process that will lead her to a visionary moment. Not unlike the beginning of Shelley’s “Triumph of Life,” Sappho embarks on her revelatory experience through the haze of distorted, semi-conscious perception. This quasi-hallucination between waking and sleep finally calls her to “Awake! awake!” and at last breaks her loose from the thought patterns she has been stuck in throughout the entire sequence. Robinson’s epiphany is provoked first by sleep and then by “transparent shadows,” as if her mind is reverting back again to Locke’s “dark room.” Even more dramatically, however, the pattern resembles Edmund Burke’s own reading of “Locke’s opinion concerning darkness” in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*. In contrast to “custom” which “reconciles us to everything,” Burke argues, “Black will always have something melancholy in it, because the sensory will always find the change to it from other colours too violent” (149). Putting aside the overt racism of the passage, we can note how Burke attributes this shock to the alternation of darkness and light, which causes the eye to dilate painfully (146). Sappho’s own dark vision dilates her mind, awakening her to “mystic visions” that lead her to the “heaving gulf” of the deep.

Though we can easily read Sappho’s revelation as a decision to commit suicide and give up on a world where Phaon does not love her, given the extent to which a

discourse about the mind dominates the sonnet sequence, the suicide might be read primarily as a figurative and poetic gesture. Sappho's resignation of herself to the unknown deep composes a visionary moment where the most extreme formulation of oblivion also composes the most radical form of bliss—an ecstasy that transports Sappho beyond the memories that have dominated her subjectivity.⁹² Standing on the “dizzy precipice” in the sequence's penultimate sonnet, Sappho finally learns the use of oblivion's forgetful lack of knowledge:

While o'er my breast the waves Lethean roll,
To calm rebellious Fancy's fev'rish dream;
Then shall my Lyre disdain love's dread control,
And loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme! (43.11-14)

Sappho may be thinking of her poetry's life beyond the grave, but the lines make even more sense when taken as a statement about oblivion's role in expunging her idiocy and memory in order to change her perceptions, her ideas, and ultimately her poetry. Suicide often doubled as a Romantic trope for freedom from an either-or situation, beginning with Goethe's *Werther*. Robinson extends this trope as not only a figure for female agency, but also as a gesture of final grounding in a series of moments of oblivion that compose the plot of the sonnet sequence. Like Smith's hermit, Sappho sets her sights on a wide, open gulf that frees her from the gender-bound ties of memory and sensibility.

⁹² Kari E. Lokke, in her book on Romantic women's novels and transcendence, argues that narratives like Sappho's—particularly Germaine de Stael's *Corrine*—represent a transcendence of passions where “rejection of the ‘absolute power’ of one idea or feeling will come to serve as a program of political and socio-cultural liberation as well” (27). While the ends of my argument about Sappho are somewhat similar, I view Robinson as rejecting that transcendence in order to find an altogether alternative route to thinking and feeling.

Looking toward a host of “loftier passions” and “loftier themes,” Robinson takes the plunge into a wider, more fraught poetics that begins to move toward multiplicity, diversity, and dissent. She does this most materially when she sketches a way for Sappho’s desire to move beyond the single object of Phaon. In doing so she resembles Hélène Cixous, who figures erotogeneity in “Laugh of the Medusa” as a polymorphous desire that launches “a production of forms, a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision” (2040). In the end, *Sappho and Phaon* looks toward the polymorphous possibilities for Sappho’s desires, possibilities that will literally expand her experiences and “production of forms.” Moreover, these desires of Sappho, up in the air as they are at the end of the poem, repudiate any kind of unified form or identity. Cixous similarly describes her new woman as having the “gift of alterability” (2053). Sappho’s poetics and subjectivity are, in the final sonnet, envisioned as both thrown into question and freed from former constraints. How Robinson realizes this kind of feminine aesthetics while rejecting the epiphanic trajectory of oblivion will be the preoccupation of her later works.

Rapture as Formal Diversity: Repetition, Difference, and the Uses of Idiocy

At this point in her career, Robinson begins to shift away from a dialectical struggle between oblivion on the one hand and rapture or bliss on the other and moves toward a way for vacancy to inhere inside a poetics that simultaneously promotes bliss, diversity, and variation. She accomplishes this by tying her ideas about radical empiricism to formal experimentation, yet what is perhaps most interesting is how this mental and poetic diversity arises in conjunction with—and as a result of—the repetitive articulations of several idiot boys. As was the case with Sappho, Robinson defines the

idiot by subverting traditional Lockean and Enlightenment discourse on idiocy and knowledge. Rather than depicting animals or savage boys whose brains are too empty to record and remember sensations and experience, Robinson's idiots are dumb because they cannot rid themselves of old memories, habituations, or prejudices. The examples after Sappho, however, become more like idiot savants whose vacant brains provoke them into stuttering random differences and new sensations. This paradox is heightened by Robinson's turn from more lyrical forms to the ballad as the prime measure of this plenitude. In the wake of the antiquarian revival, the ballad in the eighteenth century was thought to preserve cultural memory and literary bardic heritage at the same time it was the site for rampant if accidental divergence in the form of variants.⁹³ The paradox surrounding the ballad as both a storehouse of cultural memory and as a generator of multiplicity is exactly the tension Robinson highlights in the figure of the idiot whose repetition in the later poems starts to manifest minute differences.

In particular, the structure of the balladic refrain helps Robinson focus her attention on the difference between the repetitive, vacant lyric, such as some of Sappho's memory-bound, static sonnets, and a lyric that becomes a site for a cascade of incremental, formal difference and psychological heterogeneity. While using Deleuze might help draw out some interesting ideas that Robinson was developing about the uses

⁹³ Ballad collecting gained steam in the mid eighteenth century with Thomas Percy's *Reliques* (1765). Percy notoriously attempted to produce originary and authorial versions of many traditional ballads. Other editors, like Joseph Ritson, or much later, Frances Child, would pointedly collect a number of ballad variants in their collections, helping to shape an understanding of each ballad as a collection of tales and tunes circulating around a generalized plot or trope. One might go so far as to argue that Robinson was a part of the new vanguard of ballad editors who sought to highlight the ballad's instability as one of its most interesting characteristics. Nick Groom recounts Percy's editorial practices in *The Making of the Reliques*.

of poetic repetition, the salient link between Deleuzian repetition as difference and Robinson's model of idiocy is that they both work from Hume's ideas of repetition, association, and habit to explore variation, distinction and change. In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze uses Hume to argue, "Habit *draws* something new from repetition—namely, difference" (73). Both Deleuze and Robinson essentially set out to delineate and argue with the following Humean dictum: "Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it" (qtd. in *Difference and Repetition* 70).

Rather than erasing habit altogether, Robinson now explores the possibility of pushing past habit's monotony through verbal over-production. This newer model crucially develops structural changes in the materiality of her verse, which in turn instigates change in both the contemplating mind and the objects it ponders. Her insistence on the materiality of her poetics as well as idiocy's empirical basis acquits her poetics of being merely an escape into a metaphysical mind. The link she establishes between the material body of verse and varying psychological perspectives undercuts the Cartesian mind-body dualism that helps to install ideology. Moreover, her poetry's fractional variations present a model for social change with a new means of viewing the category of "woman" as only one of many modes of alterity.

Before examining her most fruitful experiments with ballads in *Lyrical Tales*, it is useful to look at an earlier example where Robinson is already thinking through how the ballad's peculiar characteristics might help her to establish a model for change and freedom. In her novel *Walsingham* (1797), Robinson interpolates poetry—including many ballad or ballad-like poems—as many did women novelists of the time. Rather

than simply intensifying lyrical or sentimental moments in the prose, her poems, particularly the ballad, collect and put into conversation thematically similar narratives running through the text. In this experiment with the ways prose and poetic genres remediate and compete with each other, more allegorical and metaphorical poems are often pitted against the eponymous protagonist's self-absorbed, sentimental, hegemonic first-person narrative. Like Sappho, whose tyrannical passion and memory of Phaon make her immune to any other perceptions, Walsingham's over-wrought sensibility likewise makes him blind to other characters, plots, or perspectives circulating in the novel. The poems he writes or copies down into the text of the confessional novel often parody his blindness to these other narrative or emotive threads. In this way Walsingham, like Sappho, becomes a figure for a kind of emotional monotony or idiocy.

Walsingham's poems, moreover, become paradigmatic of textual idiocy, a mode of vacancy that critiques dominant narratives and supplies other variants or points of view. While most scholarship on interpolated poetry has argued that the poetry serves as a means to reinforce and extend a particular character's depth and sensibility, Robinson seeks the benefits of pitting different textual materials against one another.⁹⁴ In an article about the interpolation of poetry into Ann Radcliffe's novels, Mary Favret argues that the similarity of lyric moments to adjacent prose moments in the text reveals the extent to which poetry and prose genres were becoming incestuous and identical—a situation, she argues, which forced writers like Wordsworth to make claims about the superior nature of poetry in the "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*. If imitation marks one avenue available

⁹⁴ Gabrielle Starr's book *Lyric Generations* explores how the lyric mode builds "round characters." See also Nathaniel Paradise's article, "Interpolated Poetry, the Novel and Feminine Accomplishment."

to women writers who wanted in on the lyric boys' club, it represents only one part of the story about how women like Robinson intervened into literary aesthetics at the turn of the century. Rather than an effusive mimicry of prose descriptions, Robinson's poems develop textual idiocy as a form of remediation. Walsingham's poetic repetition of descriptive and narrative content opens up gaps and differences in parallel textual moments, ultimately offering poetry, rather than prose, as a site of reflection and dialogism.

Many of the poems Walsingham first writes as he tells the story of his childhood do follow Favret's model of imitation. For example, he writes "Imitation of Spencer" [sic], as he reflects back on the early days of his youth spent in the Welsh countryside that he has just narrated. He describes himself as a "mountain weather-beaten wight" who cannot help but indulge in chivalric values and rustic life. Similarly, the sonnets in this early part of the novel also tend to mimic the emotional state that he presents in prose. After a particularly humiliating encounter with his cousin, Walsingham escapes to a portico and describes a lively summer pastoral scene (134). He proceeds to translate this scene almost exactly into verse, using a volta in the couplet to juxtapose his own woeful mood with the cheerful summer landscape, the aristocratic grounds that allegorize his cousin's entitled gaiety. While these poems might reinforce Walsingham as a sensitive narrator exiled from his own family, his poems' belaboured repetition of emotional content tends to refract his sensibility as self-pity.

It is no coincidence that Walsingham's poetry clashes most forcefully with his prose narrative after he moves to London and begins to imitate the excessive appetites of the aristocracy even as he censures them. No longer a young rustic at one with nature, he

begins to write poems that ironize his complicity in urban life and that inadvertently collate the situations of many characters in the novel aside from himself. The most poignant example comes just after the supposedly sensitive Walsingham flirts with, rapes, and then jilts his landlady's daughter, Amelia Woodford. This "pupil of nature," with his sensitive sympathy and his natural lust, epitomizes the double entendre of the novel's subtitle in a sonnet he writes just after this episode (351). The poem quotes a recent conversation recounted in the text between Walsingham and his friend Mr. Optic who informs him that Amelia "lives; but in so pitiable a state, that it would be happiness to die!" (301). A confused Walsingham then writes the poem with this closing line, "For since 'tis *hell* to live—'tis HEAV'N to die!" as he laments both her "destruction" but also his own role as an outcast from society. The sonnet implicitly compares the situations of both Amelia and Walsingham as melancholy sufferers, yet whereas Amelia eventually does expire from the shame of her rape, Walsingham never dies from being an outcast in aristocratic London or Bath. By mocking the universalizing gesture of the sonnet of sensibility and its language of pleasurable death, the poem likewise satirizes Walsingham's selfish quotation of Amelia's real agony for a situation that is really incomparable. Poems like this one create textual moments outside the first-person, self-pitying vantage point of Walsingham and provide the reader with a mechanism that encourages them to take stock of various characters and contrast Walsingham's dubious actions with his sympathetic rhetoric. If Walsingham is stuck in a certain mode of sensibility, his poems create a site of reading that entices readers to move toward a wide range of perceptions and ideas about the narrative events.

Perhaps no poem in the text allegorizes these interpretive moments with such force than the ballad that he copies down for the reader just after running into a highwayman who is another outcast society boy and Walsingham's brother in disguise. The landlord of an inn tells Walsingham "The Doublet of Grey" just before he is about to cross the heath that supposedly is home to the ballad's haunting ghosts. The old, local ballad recounts the story of an aristocratic girl who falls in love with a peasant of whom her family disapproves. She eventually disguises herself in a doublet to protect her forbidden lover and dies by his side, haunting the countryside. Narratives of disguise and haunting—especially by women—abound in the novel: Miss Woodford, Sir Sidney, and Lady Devlin all disguise themselves and haunt Walsingham in various ways due to their unrequited love. Moreover, many of the men engage in disguise, including Walsingham and the young highwayman, in their own attempts to make themselves worthy for their lady loves. The ballad's allegorical mode, rather than serving as a mere showcase for Robinson's talent in imitating yet another style of poetry, highlights certain narrative and thematic strains in the novel, encouraging readers to compare and contrast different characters who have taken up their own doublets of grey. This comparison challenges certain interpretations Walsingham has been pushing on the reader. He continually chastises women for their deceptions; most pointedly Walsingham holds Amelia responsible for disguising herself at a masquerade as his love interest, Isabella, a move that results in Walsingham kidnapping and raping her. Yet Walsingham also hid his true identity from Amelia and her mother to make himself appear a proper gentleman. By contrasting Amelia's disguise with that of other characters, including Walsingham, the ballad becomes a space of reflection and judicious reading.

Poetry thus becomes the point of dialogism with the power to mute Walsingham's first-person prose confession. Robinson lures the reader to counterpose the protagonist's idiocy with the textual idiocy of repetition as remediation, ultimately urging an understanding of the novel outside Walsingham's jurisdiction and perception. She creates a kind of textual bliss of "varying cadences" by using the ballad as a means of provoking readers to light upon the multiple parallel narratives available in the novel. These diverse textual experiences provide readers with varying sensations and reflections on a single topic like disguise, and this opens a gap in any notion of unitary subjectivity. These interpolated lyrics thus remediate incremental narrative and thematic differences, which then create strategic spaces, voids, or ellipses in the text and the way the text makes meaning. In turn, a multitude of narratives can be inscribed on the same poetic moment, leaving the reader to make a number of linkages among events, people, and outcomes.

Moreover, these fissures between allegorical poems and the somewhat more realistic novel create cognitive gaps between metaphorical and narrative meanings. Temporary moments of non-knowledge work in two ways: first, through a textual remediation that offers competing forms of knowledge; and second, through the literal space between narration and lyric, a space that provides a temporary cessation of language or sensation. This kind of undecidability creates a space for readers' own reflections—on both Walsingham and the formal dynamics of the novel. Just as Robinson was able to critique Sappho's inability to experience variegation in nature, these textual moments resist the tyranny of the first person perspective, and, perhaps more importantly, the hegemony of sensibility over young female readers. Finally, this

technique may represent Robinson presenting a solution to various arguments about the novel's dangerous effects on its young female readership. Rather than either policing young women's behavior or imbuing them with a subversive excess of sentiment and sensibility, Robinson's novels supply women with a means of halting narrative that in turn that will help them generalize, analyze, and think for themselves.

If *Walsingham* provides a readerly model for thinking through sentimental novels, Robinson's later poems emphasize the ballad's generative properties that produce a kind of textual idiocy and a thought process outside pure reason. Like the volume it emulates, *Lyrical Ballads*,⁹⁵ Robinson's last literary effort, *Lyrical Tales*, represents her own theoretical enquiry into the popular ballad genre, taking aim at Wordsworth's plan to rehabilitate the minds of men through the simplicity of rustic customs and language.⁹⁶ Wordsworth sets out to lyricize the ballad, paradoxically using the form's narrative structure in the service of writing poems with teleological trajectories that lead readers to an epiphanic moment of lyric transcendence at the end of a rustic story. Robinson focuses on different features of the ballad: its tendency to rewrite itself with each iteration, its seriality and repetition and, most acutely in these last poems, the ballad's refrain. These tactics allow Robinson to reject lyric transcendence as she engenders variation both in the minds of her characters and through the poems' formal structures. This use of variation and multiplicity leads to a different—and more complicated—brand

⁹⁵ See Ashley J. Cross's article on *Lyrical Tales*.

⁹⁶ Adriana Craciun argues that Wordsworth may have been influenced by Robinson's democratic view of the public sphere, "and perhaps composed his own countervision of art—nativist, introspective, and masculine—in some respects as an alternative to Robinson's celebration of London as a cosmopolitan and (proto)feminist sphere of public art" (19). As I have already suggested, I would argue that Robinson is taking the opposite tack, resisting the hegemony of the public sphere by enacting a form of reading that is differential, antagonistic, and not built on a model of rational, reflective thinking.

of vacancy as cognitive, political, and material potentiality, a vacancy whose production depends upon moments of decreation, pause, or ellipsis.

Both poets employ the figure of the idiot to help them derail the Enlightenment narrative about how reflective thinking leads to social progress and linguistic achievement. Enlightenment philosophers like Condillac and Rousseau considered savage boys as both signs of a mind vacated of memory and language and also as test-cases for theories about how language and knowledge come to fill man's originary vacant brain, sending him down the path to civilization. While Wordsworth uses the idiot as an example of what can happen when man's mind is vacated of reason and becomes receptive to the educative bounty of nature, Robinson portrays the idiot as a savant whose utterances formulate a kind of thinking that is neither primarily rational, emotional, or naturalistic. Although Robinson and Wordsworth are working against the same Enlightenment standard and using the same Enlightenment tropes, and though Robinson is clearly working from Wordsworth's earlier volume, she was already exploring the uses of idiocy in the *Sappho* sequence and *Walsingham*. It is in *Lyrical Tales*, however, that Robinson first envisions the idiot as a productive, rather than stunting model for thought. In these poems she moves past poetic repetition as a reification or even a critique of language and thought and instead highlights the non-coincidence of the idiot's repetition. It is exactly this non-coincidence that in turn produces unique singularities. Her idiots allegorize thought as a radical, generative act of creation, and their contingent output not only randomly constructs language outside socialized language and the social structures that language instantiates but also constantly relies upon the unmaking of language and actuality.

Three late poems in particular crystallize how Robinson's idiots become allegories of poetic vacancy and also spell out how the idiot as a figure of exclusion might revise the political discourse of the 1790s. Additionally, these final poems circle around how Robinson, as a woman writer, finds in language a model for materiality that aspires to transpose itself onto the social world—a more creative and excessive version of embodied reality. Unlike Wordsworth's work, where one poem can stand as a synecdoche for his whole career, Robinson's multiple, repetitive corpus forces readers to read several poems at once to understand the various and sometimes conflicting aspects of her argument with empiricist, Enlightenment rationality as well as sensibility. "Deborah's Parrot" serves as the best example of how idiocy becomes a model for the poetics of vacancy. It offers readers a parrot who cannot sing lyric poetry but whose prating wreaks havoc on the domestic sphere and whose cawing produces variants of the same text. A poem composed after *Lyrical Tales* but certainly part of that larger project, "The Savage of Aveyron," develops Robinson's intervention into the philosophical discourse of idiocy and its political implications. The balladic refrain uttered by a savage abjected by society helps Robinson to dispute both communitarian politics and the universal rights discourse dominating the Left at the end of the 1790s. In her final poems, Robinson fuses the political and the linguistic as she focuses on resisting any kind of conceptual synthesis or normative stance. The late poem "To the Poet Coleridge" depicts her richest poetic display of language's impersonal materiality.

Repetition abounds in *Lyrical Tales* through the volume's abundant use of rhyme and anaphora often employed as signs of abjection and madness, but it especially occurs through the narrators' refrains. The "Poor Singing Dame" lives only to "louder, and

louder, repeat her old Song” (26). The undiscerning Maid in “The Mistletoe” asserts her dominance over a rival for a gallant’s heart by telling the whole village that “*we’ve been there twice before,*” that is, kissing under the mistletoe. “Mistress Gurton’s Cat” dies twice before the Mistress truly grieves for her catty friend. Many of these poems, particularly those about animals and women, use the trope of doubling or of female rivalry within society to allegorize a repetition that typifies habituated characters and poetics. These examples stand in tension with other poems about women and children on the outskirts of society, and that employ refrains encompassing multiple positions based on a logic of accumulating, differential variation.

Robinson makes this transition in perhaps the most meta-poetic poem in the volume, “Deborah’s Parrot.” The poem describes a rivalry between the spinster Debbie and her prating parrot. As a bird who cannot sing but only mimics, the parrot can be read as another sign of stunted women’s poetry. The parrot does quite a number on the townsfolk by gossiping and prating: “sometimes told an ancient Dame/ Such tales as made her blush with shame!” (53-4), but his mischief results mostly from imitating his mistress’s stock phrase: “But chiefly he was taught to cry,/ ‘*Who with the Parson toy’d? O fie*’” (57-58). This refrain occurs twice in the poem, first to instigate spinster Debbie’s practical jokes on young maids. Once Debbie marries, the neglected parrot turns on his owner by reciting the line in front of her new, possessive husband, who then beats her into submission. Despite the fact that the accusation causes many women a good deal of trouble, it is nonsense. Like Locke’s famous parrot in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Debbie’s parrot speaks without reason (Book II, Chapter XXVII, Sections 9 and 10). His mind is vacant except for the memory of a single phrase. It is

difficult to tell who is more daft: Debbie, her parrot, or the townsfolk who believe the parrot and create meaning from the bird's blather. If the parrot represents the parody of lyric songbirds like the nightingale, the poem itself satirizes the final epiphany of Debbie's husband. It derides any transcendent textual moment or meaningful interpretation adduced from vacant repetition.

This poetic gesture implicitly mocks Wordsworth's uses of idiocy and the lyric in *Lyrical Ballads* such as "The Idiot Boy" or, proleptically, "There was a boy," which was published in the 1800 edition. Despite the narrative adventure of "The Idiot Boy," Johnny's idiocy essentially enables Wordsworth to collapse the ballad narrative into a final moment of lyrical, transcendent experience with the natural world. Sent by his sick mother on a journey for a doctor, the boy gets lost in the woods and eventually has to be retrieved by her. When she finally finds him and asks where he has been, he replies:

"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,

"And the sun did shine so cold."

—Thus answered Johnny in his glory,

And that was all his travel's story. (460-63)

Though it looks almost as if the cocks are asking "To who?", their crowing is every bit as nonsensical as the parrot's repetition. Like Debbie's husband and the other listeners who ignore all other evidence but the parrot's performance to make sense of his talk, Johnny's vacant mind allows him to bypass the "gross stimulants" of the ballad narrative he has just experienced, as well as its information and contexts. He finally arrives at what Avital Ronell calls "the silent experience of poetry ... an ungraspable event" (275). For Ronell, Johnny's non-signifying "to-whoo, to-whoo" represents a privileged kind of

poetry, a moment of non-understanding or what she describes as “vacantly glacializing ecstasy” (277).⁹⁷ Ronell is not the only Wordsworth scholar who reads his idiots as staging a turn from Enlightenment reflection or ratiocination. Alan Bewell argues that Wordsworth explicitly rejects Condillac’s and Rousseau’s arguments that the idiot modeled an originary human nature deprived of memory and reason. For Bewell, Johnny’s vacant mind becomes receptive to a quasi-religious, pre-linguistic nature, with its non-rational, amazing educational power (65).

Robinson had already begun to question the dramatic, reflective light that would lead to Enlightenment transcendence in such poems as “Sight.” However, in *Sappho and Phaon* and especially in *Walsingham*, Robinson turns around to question the counter-Enlightenment receptivity to “natural” feeling like sensibility, which might also lead to a revelatory educational—and conceptually synthetic—moment. In these poems, she patently refuses to privilege the lyric ecstasy of pre-linguistic feeling, probably because women had for so long been subordinated as silent keepers of domestic feeling. Though she explores similar moments of non-signifying, idiotic language to represent instances of

⁹⁷ Ronell, in her book *Stupidity*, thoroughly discusses the Romantic idiot, particularly Wordsworth’s idiot boys (246-77). In an article about Wordsworth’s vacancy, Joseph Viscomi argues that in the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth uses “mental vacancy” to refer to “the tranquility induced by nature’s sedating sounds, which vacates and prepares the mind to receive nature’s impulse” (44). Wordsworth’s characters and his reader are thus made receptive to an “immanence” that also includes the “self-emptying necessary to receive the grace of God” (44). Viscomi shows how Wordsworth uses multiple narrators to create this dialogic space and also employs natural objects, like the Yew tree in “Lines left up on a Seat in a Yew-tree,” to rail against proscriptive aesthetic discourses like the picturesque that limit a traveler’s ways of seeing nature. While these tactics resemble Robinson’s use of personas like Sappho and her employment of various kinds of poetic materials in dialogue, the end of Wordsworth’s vacancy still seems to be a kind of transcendence provided by nature, however receptive his speakers might be. In these late poems, Robinson’s vacancy is not created through nature’s soothing qualities, nor does it create the possibility for what seems to be a primarily transcendent experience of God.

non-understanding, she pointedly resists leaving her animals, orphans, and abject women adrift in the “suspension of occurrence: a caesura or syncope” (Ronell 276). Robinson’s use of the ballad sidesteps both Bewell’s counter-Enlightenment version of Wordsworthian poetics and Ronell’s de Manian, aporetic reading of idiocy. Her innovation in the *Lyrical Tales* is to employ moments of non-understanding as a point of departure for a different kind of thought, based on neither reflection nor receptivity but on an experimental and necessarily random, constructive form of articulation. She neither rehabilitates idiots as pre-cursors to human development through reflection nor privileges them as uniquely dumb and sensitive to nature. Debbie’s parrot, like other idiots in *Lyrical Tales*, models a unique kind of contingent creation that seemingly only occurs when a subject loses its sentimentality and its wits.

Thus there is a second way to understand the parrot’s mimicry, one that competes with his nonsensical repetition. The parrot’s refrain may insinuate the pleasures and dangers of a repetition that can be interpreted in different ways with each telling. Though the parrot might be restricted in its language, he does seem to manifest intelligence and agency when he purposefully repeats the stock accusation “loud as he was able” in front of Debbie’s new husband. The first time the parrot’s accusation is spoken, in the last line in the fifth stanza, the reader is patently told to disregard its meaning as an act of repetition randomly aimed at any person present to receive its message. The rumor circulated by “a false and canting preacher” shows its true colors as non-knowledge. Yet the actual repetition of the line in the poem, again taking the place of the ballad refrain at the end of the stanza, is both false and true: false because Debbie did not toy with the Parson but true because this new iteration is directed at a new object and has been

received differently by a new listener.⁹⁸ Simply put, repetition as refrain works to undermine its status as secure knowledge even as it takes on multiple meanings.

The parrot's speech act both mimics and resists Debbie's authority and her language by making it at once mean something and evade meaning. Viewed in this way, Debbie's ownership of an exotic pet might be read as a sign of her bourgeois conspicuous consumption and affective desire, while the parrot, as a figure of the subaltern, colonial object who speaks from the margins, voices its own desires for a different kind of freedom. In addition to drawing on Locke's version of the parrot, the poem also alludes to the many parrots and popinjays in traditional ballads who act as figures of both sexual freedom and morality.⁹⁹ In ballads like "Lady Isabel and the Elfin Knight" and "Young Hunting," parrots often serve as the keepers of secrets about their mistress's lapsed virginity, or their murder of the man who has seduced them, and these birds are often silenced by bribes or by force. In Robinson's ballad, the subaltern parrot refuses this traditional silence and speaks in a roundabout way. He punishes Debbie for her ruthless gossiping by falsely accusing her of licentiousness. Though nonsensical, the punishment does accrue meaning when it calls out a larger claim for justice. As a figure for minority

⁹⁸ Since the parrot is actually tattling gossip or rumors, one might also use rumor theory to explain the parrot's changing repetition. Rumor theory argues that each new telling of a rumor changes its meaning but does not rewrite the text. Recent studies of oral poetry, like Homer's, also takes this view that the poet's multiple iterations are not variants but instead compose a "multiform" text.

⁹⁹ See Barre Toelken's "What the Parrots Tell Us That Child Did Not; Further Considerations of Ballad Metaphor." For a good discussion of parrots in early modern writing see Bruce Boehrer's "'Men, Monkeys, Lap-dogs, Parrots, Perish All' Psittacine Articulatory in Early Modern Writing." Laura Brown also has a good discussion of the use of animal imagery, especially the parrot, in discourses touching the abject in *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century*, particularly her chapter "The Orangutang, the Lap Dog and the Parrot: The Fable of Nonhuman Being" (221-66).

discourse, like Deleuze's stutter or Homi K. Bhaba's mimicry, the refrain both resists and changes meaning through its iteration. The subaltern parrot's speech imitates its master's idiocy (particularly Debbie's false consciousness about her own place in society and her purported control over language) such that it violently reveals both the tyranny of the master and the oppressive structures of the master's language.

Not unlike the recitation of ballads themselves, the repeated line takes on new meaning with each iteration and every audience. Once again, this "asythetic concept" of the ballad and its altering repetition stands in contrast to another of Wordsworth's ballads, "There was a Boy." In that poem, it is the silence interspersed between echoes of the boy's animalistic mimicry that eventually allows nature to "enter unawares into his mind" (22). If the boy Winander experiences some sensational moment of either immanence or transcendence, Debbie's parrot creates a chaotic space of vying meanings from thought produced by compulsive articulation. This vacancy of secure meaning might seem to claim too much for a dirty bird's stupidity in gossiping about girls gone wild. Yet this model of knowledge—thought as a type of periodic non-thought created through language's contingency—underscores Robinson's search for a thinking subject not tied to reason, feeling, nor the struggle between the two so typical of the late eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ It might be interesting to consider Robinson's fraught friendship with Mary Wollstonecraft, which has usually been explained by the latter's possible jealousy over William Godwin's attentions to the beautiful, charismatic former actress, in terms of the two women thinkers' differences on reason and education. Whereas Wollstonecraft famously advocated for the education of women through masculine reason in order to earn them a place in the public sphere, Robinson argues for a kind of de-education via moments, forms of non-knowledge, or instances of conflicting thought. In this way Robinson's vacancy, as a retardation of thinking, likewise contrasts with Charlotte Smith's uses of reason and aesthetics as judgment. Both poets, however, emphasize the

Robinson's experiment with the ways the refrain both vacates and contingently constructs new meaning comes to fruition in a poem that most directly deals with the Enlightenment discourse of idiocy. Published in the year after her death, "The Savage of Aveyron" (1801) is a companion poem to "All Alone" from *Lyrical Tales*, and the earlier poem is a rewriting of Wordsworth's "We are Seven." Both the savage, whose mind has been stunted by an early childhood trauma, and the speaker, after coming into contact with the boy, idiotically repeat themselves through the poem's pattern of refrains. The speaker is itinerant and wandering in "the mazes of a wood" (1) when she meets a savage boy who can only communicate by shrieking and is drawing notches in a blasted tree, crying, "Alone!" At first, Robinson's savage boy exhibits the signs of lyric repetition and affective intensity that characterize Wordsworth's Johnny. The boy can count the three beats needed to put together any kind of metrical foot, he can shriek as if in final, ecstatic revelation, and he can say "alone," the verbal sign of lyric solitude. The boy's recitation of "alone" both enacts the theme of a lyric even as it explains its own rhetoric as a poem with the pretense of solitude, written to be overheard.¹⁰¹ As signs of the lyric, these gestures trap the boy in his savage state, but Robinson refuses to let the mimicry stand in for poetry.

necessity of contingency for vacancy's power in refiguring the thinking subject and its place in the social, normative world.

¹⁰¹ I take this idea about the lyric from Sarah Zimmerman in *Romanticism, Lyricism and History*. She, of course, takes the idea of overhearing from John Stuart Mill's essay on lyric poetry. Zimmerman argues that the lyric was a very public, social genre, written to be overheard and to employ its audiences in social and personal reflection. Robinson seems to argue something similar by having a boy cry "alone"—a gesture that both articulates his solitude and his wish to have an audience who will not only hear him but also participate in reconstructing his story.

This poem supplies two tactics for rescuing the boy from his idiotic, vacant repetition. On the one hand, the ballad's narrative retroactively attempts to account for the boy's savagery. On the other, the poem uses a refrain, composed of a final quatrain in each stanza that calls into question those causal tales and provides an even greater space for forming difference rather than explaining it away. The poem's stanzas are each composed of three ballad quatrains (*abbaccdeffe*), with the final quatrain serving as the refrain. The most stable form of the repetition begins in the second stanza, after the speaker meets the boy:

Then, mazy woods of AVEYRON!

Then, wilds of dreary solitude!

Amid the thorny alleys rude

I sigh'd to be—a traveller alone. [sic] (36-39).

During the first half of the poem, the refrain generally keeps the final rhymes and in the same order: Aveyron, solitude, rude, alone. Just after the mid-point of the poem, the refrains begin to vary along with the narrative the speaker is trying to invent, as she gives the boy a back-story to explain away his primitive mind. Succumbing to the ballad's narrative bent, she participates in the Enlightenment tendency to engage in hypothetical histories of idiots (Bewell 57-64). This injection of narrative into the tale temporarily interrupts the poem's established pattern of varying the refrain's final line and instead varies the quatrain's final couplet.

After she relates how the boy's mother was accosted and killed by forest ruffians, she offers this refrain:

When in the woods of Aveyron

Deep in their deepest solitude
Three barb'rous ruffians shed their blood,
And mock'd, with cruel taunts, her dying groan. (132-5)

These variants incorporate the boy's tale into the poem, inviting both explanation and sympathy for the murder of the boy's mother, an act that is ultimately responsible for his savage state. Most of these stanzas preserve the rhymes "Aveyron" and "solitude," allowing Robinson to vary Aveyron's solitude even more greatly because she has an entire quatrain in which to play. In this stanza, for example, the woods become the site of gore and groaning. As the narrative attempts to redeem the boy's humanity, its variation of the refrain multiplies the differing sensations—and gothic desires—exhibited in the poem. The violence also suggests the narrator's difficult but necessary move in allowing other characters to inhabit the refrain, allowing the most diverse of alterities to manifest themselves.

The refrain's linguistic force, however, becomes even more dramatic when the refrain pulls away from the narration, and parts of the poem begin to seem as if the explanatory tale had been added after the initial experience with the boy, to make sense of the automatic, repetitive writing done as the narrator is infected with the boy's idiocy. The savage boy compels a wild sort of repetitive yet revolving contemplation in the mind of the speaker, as the last line of the larger refrain repeatedly echoes ever so slightly. After hearing the boy's first shriek, the speaker states, "I thought myself alone!" (12), but after deciphering the boy's yell as "Alone! alone!" (20), she changes her stance to "I wish'd myself—a traveller alone" [sic] (27). Watching him rush freely around the woods, the speaker responds: "I sigh'd to be—a traveller alone," (39), but after realizing

the boy cannot speak, she decides “And wish’d to be—a traveller alone” (50). The remainder of the poem contains more variations: “I thought myself a traveller—alone” (63) and again “I wish’d to be—a traveller alone” (87). The speaker’s changing ideas about herself are plotted through her shifting articulations of the refrain’s main verb: “wish’d” “sigh’d” “thought” and “Waiting to seize,” all of which obliquely signal desire, lament, expectation, fantasy, self-reflection, self-doubt, and fear. At times, this successive catalogue of sensations does build on the narrative trajectory of the poem, using the additive situations that occur in each of the narrative stanzas to provoke varying emotional responses. At the same time, the speaker’s articulations take on the repetitive quality of the boy’s utterances and add to it a measure of contingency that changes the refrain with each stanza. Unlike the causal explanation of the story, which manages to explain *why* the boy is an idiot, the speaker’s refrains present the boy as something more than an object of sympathy and pity.

Robinson highlights this contrast between these tactics of story and refrain with the poem’s ending, which finishes with a variation of the refrain that brings it full circle, provoking comparison with its first iteration:

Till, mazy woods of AVEYRON,
Dark wilds of dreary solitude
Amid your thorny alleys rude
I thought myself alone.
And could a wretch more wretched be,
More wild, or fancy-fraught than he,
Whose melancholy tale would pierce AN HEART OF STONE. (168-74)

In the poem's very first refrain, the speaker had originally claimed "I thought myself alone" because no one could be "as weary of the world as me" (12, 14). This final iteration of the line marks the distance the refrain has traveled throughout the poem. In the first iteration, she refers to the fact that her wretched state has been literally interrupted by the savage boy's presence. By the end of the poem, she is not alone because her loneliness has been filled by her own changing responses to the boy. The tyranny and solipsism of loneliness has been replaced by a host of sensations, thoughts, and characters. Thus the tale is helpful less for its explanatory power in ascribing reasons and causalities for the boy's sad state than for a narrative's dialogic ability to evoke multiple thoughts about a single subject. Robinson's narrator ends up imitating the boy's "fancy-frought" articulation, producing a host of unrefined sensations, in spite of her narrative attempts to substitute a story for the boy's idiocy. Even as a coherent explanation gets narrated, it is undermined by the contingencies and instabilities of the speaker's balladic refrain. Though at the end of the poem she may come back to her original refrain a changed spectator, the refrain's seriality, in contrast to the instrumentality of the hypothetical narrative, emphasizes a chain of linguistic and psychological responses that cannot be sublated into a dialectic between despair on the one hand and immediacy, sensory ecstasy, or epiphany on the other. Unlike Don Juan's constantly shifting tone that McGann sees as the Byronic version of Romantic ideology, the speaker of this poem has not escaped into her head.

At the same time, the injection of the hypothetical history does import into the poem a crucial political and social valence that the refrain then works on and transforms. As much a poem about exclusion as differential variation, the story takes pains to show

how unseemly groups of men, when left to their own devices and “natural law,” end up radically excluding members of society. This exclusion, however, is necessary for what Deleuze would call “deterritorialization” or the abjection that produces something like Cixous’ resistance to normativity. The speaker’s real and continued encounter with the savage boy produces a different version of otherness. Together the idiot, the speaker, and the presumed listener with his heart of stone present an array of alterity manifested in the changing ways the speaker attempts to conceptualize the state of being alone. Perhaps not quite Deleuze’s radical difference, the spectrum Robinson presents in *Lyrical Tales* comes close to what Elizabeth Grosz has described as Deleuzian Feminism: “a radical antihumanism that renders animals, nature, atoms, even quasars as modes of radical alterity” (179). Rather than the binary distinctions between woman and man or man and animal, the savage of Aveyron helps Robinson measure people as a potential collection of differences.

This political stance, moreover, straddles two important strands of post-Revolutionary politics, rejecting both 1790s communitarian politics such as those taken up by Blake or later Wordsworth as well as the individualist universal rights discourse tendered by Paine and other leading radical intellectuals. In the wake of the Corresponding Acts Society of 1799, which effectively sent radical, leveling groups underground until after Waterloo,¹⁰² Robinson’s subversive idiots dispute any communitarian solution to political, social, and intellectual inequality. The group violence that leads to the murder of the savage’s mother can be read as representative of the male brutality unleashed by the French Revolution and the start of the Napoleonic

¹⁰² See Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (91-2) for an account of the government’s attacks on the democratic societies.

age. In “The Savage of Aveyron,” the communitarian thinking of the Corresponding Societies is analogous to other instances of groupthink turned totalitarian, for example, France’s “democratic” war-mongering under Napoleon or the Terror’s mass paranoia. The gothic gore in many of Robinson’s later poems often comes not from a single patriarchal threat but from group action. Debbie’s parrot blatantly uses its mimicry to undermine both the bourgeois community that vengefully punishes its unchaste women and also his smaller, domestic community. Likewise, the refrains vocalized by the speaker of “The Savage” bar the reincorporation of the savage or his witness into any kind of normal society. Exiled on the margins of life—and often on the edges of the nation—Robinson’s characters do not even participate in Wordsworth’s vision of a counter-public sphere.¹⁰³ Moreover, in *Lyrical Tales*, communities tend to become particularly totalitarian in their reading of social situations. Debbie’s fellow villagers collectively believe the parrot’s prating, and they punish deserving and undeserving objects alike. Similarly, the speaker of “The Savage” defends herself and the savage against stock interpretations of idiocy, which act just as violently as the band of marauders to reduce the boy and the speaker to mere figures of insanity.

Neither do Robinson’s depictions fall easily into the Lockean discourse of individual liberty or universal rights. These *Tales* almost always describe characters that are not quite individuals and cannot easily be sublated into the universality of mankind—either legally, emotionally, or intellectually. As a kind of savant, the idiot cannot lay

¹⁰³ For a reading of the *Lyrical Ballads* as offering a rural counter-public sphere in the wake of the disappointments of both the French Revolution and Wordsworth’s own attempts at popular literature, see Joseph Byrne’s manuscript on the Joseph Johnson circle and its conceptions of the public sphere, particularly the chapter on Wordsworth and Coleridge.

claim to the reason or education that would entitle him to sovereign self-liberty. He stands as a foil to the Enlightenment view of the individual progressively developing through linear time. Paradoxically, the universality claimed in human rights discourse covers over differences and abjects those who cannot be fit into the system—such as the “savage” African slaves, American Indians, and other victims of imperial bands of ruffians. Outside society yet still subject to it, Robinson’s characters engage in linguistic over-production as a means to rewrite the thinking subject as an open text.

Her poems imagine these idiots neither as exiles critiquing the society that has rejected them nor as individuals staking their proprietary, progressive claims for justice, but as figures whose idiocy creates a vacuum of normativity where creation and contingency are once again possible. Robinson’s political agenda, perhaps like the New Left, is occupied with those unique acts of articulation that can only happen outside regnant political structures in the deterritorialized space they help to create. By reading the poem, readers, too, have the opportunity to be infected by the savage’s and the speaker’s stuttering speech acts and to mimic their deterritorialized state. In a kind of reverse linguistic mimicry or sympathy, listeners, by repeating the refrain themselves, may become more like the savage and radically participate in minority discourse and the perspectives it offers. For Robinson, these desperate, bare utterances only produced in a state of exclusion are the poetic avant-garde.

Moreover, the view that women are one among many modes of radical alterity helps us to understand why Robinson does not develop the idea of multiplicity through the body. We might assume that, as a woman writer, she would naturally focus on women’s bodies—rather than language—as a means of critiquing the hegemony of the

British government and its domesticity at the turn of the century. That she focuses more on the way refrains alter the “body” of language, or its materiality, may be a testament to Robinson’s own increasingly useless body. As biographer Paula Byrne has argued, Robinson turned to poetry when she contracted rheumatic fever and, unable to circulate through the *bon ton* anymore, resorted to roving the public literary sphere.¹⁰⁴ We could just as easily account for the shift, however, by saying that Robinson’s performances in the world of fashion quickly grew old. Her poetry reveals the possibility that there was more multiplicity to be had through the alterable body of language than those cumbersome and all too fateful narratives surrounding the gendered body, with its stock roles of crone, mother, ingénue, and fallen woman.

We can find this linguistic richness in “The Savage of Aveyron,” particularly through Robinson’s rewriting of the idiot as a productive linguistic trope. While the speaker’s refrain disrupts the universalizing gesture of the narrative for politicized alterities, the caesuras in each refrain mark gaps that play with the materiality of language, and not simply in a superficial way. If the melancholy tale of the mother’s murder pierces a listener’s lack of sympathy, his “heart of stone,” the refrain insists on penetrating a listener’s unresponsive brain by using the speaker’s own cognitive confusion to isolate different sensations. The pause figures not merely the blank, lonely state of Johnny or the Wordsworthian Romantic poetry of lyrical ecstasy but a brief instance of non-understanding from which the speaker recovers herself only by

¹⁰⁴ For Robinson’s transformation from a public performer to a poetic one, see Paula Byrne’s chapter “The Ride to Dover.” Byrne describes Robinson’s contraction of the fever, which provokes a mistaken account of her death while she is in exile on the continent in “Exile.” This figurative death helps her to recreate herself as a Della Cruscan poet when she reenters the public sphere with the publication of “Laura Maria” (246, 262).

rearticulating her position through the course of a subsequent stanza. Like the many other instances depicting the cessation of sensation and thought in Robinson's writing, the use of the caesura represents a cognitive gap in the speaker's thinking about the savage boy, a gap that replicates (or stutters) the boy's own non-understanding of his state, and in turn propels the speaker to attempt a new linguistic combination. This wild, "fancy-fraught" discharge of sensations and thoughts not only provokes reflection but narrows the gap between savage, speaker, and listener by placing each participant somewhere in the mix of sensory responses. In this way, the speaker channels the boy's idiocy into a vacancy that doesn't simply cause a flood of sensations, as did oblivion, but instead works to distinguish differences.

The caesura also plays with the texture of the refrain in an even more material way, by inserting moments where not only meaning but writing itself is interrupted. As Ronell suggested through her de Manian reading of Wordsworth, these ecstatic blanks could be read as the aporetic nature of language, which refuses signifying propositions for an experience of language's "materiality," its inhuman, mechanical automatism. Though the speaker's cognitive and linguistic pause may contingently produce language that the speaker has no control over, Robinson's idiotic repetition may signal not *aporia* but *euporia*, or a material richness.¹⁰⁵ This is a point made by one of the most recent interpreters of Deleuze's stutter, Giorgio Agamben. Discussing language's materiality, he writes: "The aporias of self-reference thus do not find their solution here; rather they

¹⁰⁵ In his review of Agamben's *Potentialities*, Leland Deladwarrantaye's makes this very contrast, between de Man's materiality as *aporia* and Agamben's reading of materiality through Deleuze as *euporia* (7-8).

are dislocated and [...] transformed into *euporias*” (217). He later goes on to explain *euporia* in terms similar to Robinson’s use of the caesura:

The interruption of writing marks the passage to the second creation[....]
The creation that is now fulfilled is neither a re-creation nor an eternal repetition; it is, rather, a decreation in which what happened and what did not happen are returned to their originary unity ... while what could have not been but was becomes indistinguishable from what could have been but was not. (*Potentialities* 270)

Here Agamben proposes repetition as partially a “decreation” that un-makes actuality for a state of potentiality. The poem’s caesura decreates both the speaker’s language and thought just as the savage’s idiocy decreates his own story and his Enlightenment “individuality.” In these poems, vacancy is best explained not as an absolute lack of either memory or progressive knowledge but as a kind of passive yet creative potential.¹⁰⁶ Both the boy’s and the speaker’s idiocy contingently generate articulations *and* pauses that through the malleable nature of language, produces cognitive and psychological plenitude. Vacancy thus inheres in and generates the potentiality of open texts.

Robinson most dramatically demonstrates this formulation in one of her last poems, “To the Poet Coleridge” (1800). To do this, she moves past her contortions with

¹⁰⁶ The philosophical thread leading to Agamben’s notion of potentiality, as I have mentioned, has to do with Aristotle’s ontological distinction between potentiality and actuality. Deleuze first tried to steer clear of this distinction by focusing on, for example, the refrain’s ability to “harness nonsonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 327). The refrain allows Deleuze to point out a way of being that sidesteps the usual distinction between matter and form, instead focusing on the process of flows, intensities, and densities. Agamben takes up this argument but instead wants to view potentiality as a state of pure materiality prior to an actuality that concretizes matter and form. Robinson comes closer to this second position because of the way she views language as containing these possibilities and impossibilities in a very material way.

the stanzaic structure of ballad-like poems, or the return and repetition of the refrain, and turns to experiment more drastically with both stanza and rhyme, ending up with what she describes in the poem's last lines as "*Minstrelsy*, SUBLIMELY WILD!" (70).¹⁰⁷

Much has been written about this poem as part of Robinson and Coleridge's poetic conversation, and scholars have most often focused on the power dynamics between the

¹⁰⁷ Throughout *Lyrical Tales* Robinson consistently distorts, stretches and expands the traditional ballad quatrain (*abcb*), either by adding extra couplets or quatrains to the stanzaic pattern. Working from the natural variation inherent to the quatrain in folk or popular verse, her additions run a large gamut. Some poems vary the ballad stanza by adding whole quatrains or more. To list a few: "The Haunted Beach" uses *abaabdedde*, "The Poor Singing Dame," *abcabcdcd*, and "Edmund's Wedding," *ababccdd*. Each of these poems tells a story about haunting, and the ballad structure itself seems to be haunted by a shadow stanza. In "The Haunted Beach," a mariner is haunted by crimes he committed long ago; "The Poor Singing Dame" haunts the aristocratic landowner who threw her in jail to silence her song; and "Edmund's Wedding" tells of a soldier who deserts his regiment because he cannot stop thinking of the lover he left for war. These extensions of the ballad mostly allegorize how an excess of memory traps characters in a nostalgia for times past and older, simpler values. Other poems work more explicitly from the ballad stanza, such as "The Trumpeter, an Old English Tale," which uses an *aaabcccb* stanza, inserting two extra couplets into the original form. The extra lines make sense in a poem that compares the gluttony and boasting of a "gay British King" to the real deeds claimed by a commoner, whom the king eventually promotes as his trumpeter. These couplets contrast the excess of the King's gluttony with the trumpeter's freedom of speech. Surprisingly, the addition of a couplet into the ballad stanza allegorizes a certain amount of freedom from nostalgia and aristocratic social structures.

At the far end of the spectrum are those poems that begin with some nod to ballad structure but are then extended or interrupted with rhyming couplets. The first and third stanzas of "Deborah's Parrot" begin with quatrains before trailing off into rhyming couplets; "Poor Marguerite" has stanzas composed of all rhyming couplets. One of Robinson's major distortions of ballad forms might be characterized as the injection of the eighteenth-century couplet, with its capacity for repetition, difference and satire, into the nostalgic ballad or folk quatrain. The poems about alterity, resistance, vacancy, or fruitful variation always seem to use couplets to enforce the formal play with repetition and difference. The sheer array of rhymes presents a host of variation arrived at through the incremental repetition of sounds that differ ever so slightly. These formal variations of the ballad stanza allegorize the kind of excess that expands the possibilities for memory and perception.

younger male writer and the older poetess.¹⁰⁸ “To the Poet Coleridge” responds to a copy of “Kubla Khan” Coleridge had shown Robinson, and the woman poet certainly mimics some of the male poet’s language. Set in the context of Robinson’s larger project, however, we might read Robinson as using this mimicry to stake a claim about vacancy. Going even further than “The Savage of Aveyron,” this poem uses a paratactic quatrain as the refrain circulating through a poem with a notably diverse formal structure. This final expression of vacancy does not simply inaugurate a new formal heterogeneity, but a potentiality and plenitude that includes the refusal of writing. This kind of material or idiotic excess generated through poetry ultimately leverages the randomness of “inhuman” language against the normativity of socialized language as a means of finding potential in moments of linguistic exclusion that echo instances of political and social exclusion in earlier poems.

Robinson responds to the excessive, pleasurable, and sensory landscape of “Kubla Khan” by repeatedly dwelling on those caves and domes that help to produce sensory and intellectual excess. The following refrain circulates in her poem:

With thee I’ll trace the circling bounds
Of thy NEW PARADISE extended;
And listen to the varying sounds
Of winds, and foamy torrents blended. (5-9)

¹⁰⁸ Most commentators still view Robinson as reacting to and imitating Coleridge’s Romanticism, while Coleridge uses Robinson’s notoriety even as he slights her amateurish verse. Her “Ode Inscribed to the Infant Son of S. T. Coleridge, Esq.,” though written about Derwent, responds to Coleridge’s poem including his son Hartley, “Frost at Midnight,” and Robinson’s “To the Poet Coleridge” responds to a copy of “Kubla Khan” he had shared with her. There is no conclusive evidence to explain why Coleridge showed Robinson a poem he was so protective about, though Martin Levy has suggested it was because both used opium and had drug-induced poetic experiences.

Only after this extended space has been apportioned can wind and water rush into the rocks, hills, and streambeds, creating the varying rhythms and constant motion of the natural world. The poet repeatedly describes caves of ice, a deep dell, or fields as spaces bounded by and with imagination and the physical world:

Spirit divine! with thee I'll trace
Imagination's boundless space!
With thee, beneath thy *sunny dome*,
I'll listen to the minstrel's lay
Hymning the gradual close of day;
In *Caves of Ice* enchanted roam,
Where on the glittering entrance plays
The moon's-beam with its silvery rays; (26-33)

Both sunny dome and caves of ice represent voids that create and encourage playful, non-determinate matter. Gaps in the mind correlate to caverns in the physical landscape, yet unlike the “mental blank” of “Sight,” here Robinson pictures Locke’s “dark room” as one that must necessarily remain empty to house fluctuating, variable perceptions that provoke thought. Waves of light and sound fly, float, and meander through the resonant caves and spaces of nature, but more importantly, like the refrain itself, it is the visible and audible echoes that generate variations of matter.

The refrain and complex rhyming likewise disclose the poem’s formal structure as an echolalia that compiles elements of sonnet stanzas and rhyming couplets, as well as ballad quatrains and refrains. This poem fluctuates dramatically by distorting any regularity to its shape. The seriality and repetition in the ballad-like poems reaches a

wilder pitch here as the refrain becomes completely paratactic, arriving at unexpected moments among stanzas composed of differing numbers of quatrains and rhyming couplets. The poem starts out with two quatrains of an alternating rhyme scheme, as if Robinson begins the poem with the first half of a sonnet. After the stanzaic break and what would be the sonnet's volta, the rest of the poem seems to answer with a wildly variable poetic structure. Lines 9 through 12 present another quatrain, immediately followed by a rhyming couplet: "I'll mark thy *sunny dome*, and view/ Thy *Caves of Ice*, thy fields of dew!" (13-14). What would be the end of the sonnet—the poet's act of marking the dome and cave as spaces bounded for imaginative play—is succeeded by a barrage of rhyming couplets, occasionally interrupted with the refrain. Perhaps not incidentally, the poem continues until it cycles through twenty-six separate rhyme schemes, ending with the picture of Coleridge's phantasmic, visionary maid:

She sings of THEE, O favor'd child

Of *Minstrelsy*, SUBLIMELY WILD!

Of thee, whose soul can feel the tone

Which gives to airy dreams *a magic* ALL THY OWN! (69-72)

Robinson may be speaking directly to Coleridge here but her address echoes not only his hyper-aural "Kubla Khan" but also her own development toward a poetic collection of sensations and differences.¹⁰⁹ The poet blatantly resists the sonnet, couplet, or quatrain as a formal norm, using each structure to resist any reifying form. Like Sappho's turn

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Robinson's essay, "From 'Mingled Measure' to 'Ecstatic Measures': Mary Robinson's Poetic Reading of 'Kubla Khan,'" explores the rhythmic variations that Robinson used to compose "To the Poet Coleridge." Daniel Robinson argues that the female poet's ambition was not to imitate the male poet's rhythmic dexterity but to challenge it with her own metrical prowess and combinations.

toward “loftier passions” and “loftier themes,” Robinson’s feminine poetics—which Coleridge tries but cannot channel—approaches Cixous’ heterogeneity of pleasure, forms, and aesthetic activity. Both the cycling through of rhymes that at times vary from each other only by a few consonants as well as the structuring of a poem that resembles many forms—including the formless—emphasizes her own wild experimentation with a host of paratactic singularities. Excess in Robinson’s hands does not become a tyrannical Kubla Khan who abjects the wailing woman or silences the damsel with a dulcimer.¹¹⁰ Instead, her vacancy necessarily entails silence, cognitive confusion, and open spaces that might create a bevy of material singularities: “Thy *caves of ice*, loud repeat/ Vibrations, madd’ning sweet” (66-7), vibrations that help to manufacture a poetics “ALL THY OWN” (72). One might say that the idiocy of nature, which has no memory and can neither be blind nor insightful, finally produces its own multiplicity.

The great irony of this poem may be how Robinson plays with the idea of “imagination’s boundless space.” The refrain repeatedly expresses the paradox that the poet will “trace the circling bounds” of the new paradise, of imagination’s extension, which of course has no bounds. This tracing would enclose or mark off a certain portion of the imagination in order to depict it with the lushness of Coleridgean aural and philosophical intensity. Yet Robinson’s act of tracing, particularly her description of the various domes and caves, actually creates open-ended structures that entice the production of thoughts, ideas, and sensations as much as they mark the blank domes and caves that also represent the refusal of writing or materiality. This bounding represents

¹¹⁰ See Timothy Fulford for this reading of “Kubla Khan.”

and enacts the boundless, and perhaps explains why Robinson ultimately refuses blank verse as the structure for her poetic open form.

Unlike the caveats issued by Lovejoy against differences becoming reified in ideas like nationalism and racism or those by Laclau about differences becoming equivalent and universal,¹¹¹ Robinson's vacancy entails a kind of writing produced by an over-productive mind churning out uneven, contingent possibilities, including the interruption of thought and writing. Later women poets, such as Felicia Hemans, will spend more time thinking through the tendencies of diversity to overwhelm or to cripple thinking with cognitive overload. Instead, Robinson's excesses use the flexible matter of language to produce an ever-proliferating series of potentialities that resist synthetic closure or universalizing gestures. This idea of linguistic production does not rescue those excluded from society but instead offers their unique vantage points through idiom's verbal potentiality. Countering both active reasoning and sensibility's authentic, immediate knowing, she finds in the empiricist, passive mind a model for mental passive resistance and random creativity.

¹¹¹ See Lovejoy (311-14) and Ernesto Laclau, "Why do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in his *Emancipation(s)*.

Chapter 4. Felicia Hemans's Ruined Minds, Cognitive Overload, and the Emptiness of the New World

“Oh! where can ruins awe mankind,
Dark as the ruins of the mind?” (II.153-4)
—Felicia Hemans, “The Widow of Crescentius”

Recent debates about Felicia Hemans—perhaps the most written about female poet of the Romantic period—still have yet to settle major anxieties about her “domestic patriotism,” as Francesco Crocco has recently termed Hemans’s ambiguous political allegiances. Crocco and others see Hemans as a tool of the British empire, her poems narrating stories about older empires in order to “refurbish” Britain with Grecian or Roman models for its conservative, nationalist, imperial agenda. In this model, women, especially women writers, gain a special though limited role in the public sphere touting patriotic duty from the safety of the domestic hearth.¹¹² Feminist scholars, or those engaged in the project of recovering women’s writing have countered with a more redeeming view of Hemans’s political project. Nanora Sweet, Diego Saglia, and Jeffery Robinson, to name a few, view Hemans’s historicist poetry as refuting those imperial values with either republican self-determination or bourgeois cosmopolitan intellectualism. Sweet, Saglia, and Gary Kelly pointedly argue that Hemans was engaged in building the tenets of liberal ideology that secured the free-thinking individual as the cornerstone of the modern, liberal state.¹¹³ These attempts to characterize her domestic

¹¹² See Crocco’s “The Ruins of Empire: Nationalism, Art, and Empire in Hemans’s *Modern Greece*” and David Rothstein’s “Forming the Chivalric Subject: Felicia Hemans and the Cultural Uses of History, Memory, and Nostalgia.”

¹¹³ Gary Kelly’s “Death and the Matron: Felicia Hemans, Romantic Death, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State” is the seminal work that argues Hemans’s figure of death helps to cement the individual as the basis for the modern liberal state. Many of

values as part of an ideological project, abetting either Tory conservatives or Whig merchants, mistake her pointed use of both these positions in her works. Rather than assessing Hemans's political alliances to gain a view of her poetry as a political project, her poetry demands its readers to pit these political stances against each other precisely to interrupt the power of ideology altogether.

Her poems accomplish this disruption not through the recovery of lost narratives about female heroics, which has often been Hemans's selling point for more sympathetic scholars,¹¹⁴ but through a rhetoric of cognitive and mental breakdown. At crucial, dramatic moments in her poems, characters become paralyzed in trance-like states, overwhelmed by the emotional and political weight of their situations. Characters as early as "The Widow of Crescentius," who stands agape as her husband is hanged, exhibit mental paralysis resulting from a cognitive overload of the brain's ability to process perceptual data or any kind of sensory experience. This material problem productively helps to undermine reified conceptual thinking, positing interstitial moments outside the hegemony of ideologies, which ultimately present the opportunity to change them.

In this way, Hemans posits mental dysfunction as a method of rerouting thought—or stopping it altogether. This model of the mind draws from both

Sweet's articles seek to reframe Hemans as working against conservative, Tory, nationalist discourses, but the best is "History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful. Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment." See also Robinson's "The Poetics of Expiration."

¹¹⁴ Hemans's *Records of Woman* is the classic text for this reading, but see also Tricia Lootens's ground-breaking "Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine 'Internal Enemies,' and the Domestication of National Identity," Paul Westover's "Imaginary Pilgrimages: Felicia Hemans, Dead Poets, and Romantic Historiography" as well "Natural and National Monuments—Felicia Hemans's 'The Image in Lava': A Note" by Isobel Armstrong.

contemporary brain science of the nineteenth century and post-Kantian philosophies of the mind, and her native epistemology essentially bridges English materialism (and its ties to the Enlightenment empiricist legacy) and continental conceptuality. As Hemans was writing, some British scientists were beginning to propose a model of what we now call the pre-Freudian unconscious, based on the ways in which motor or material perceptual events may occur unconsciously yet can be revealed through trance-like states.¹¹⁵ Even as she was in contemporary conversation with brain science, she also seems to have been interested in something similar to G. W. F. Hegel and William Whewell's post-Kantian approaches to consciousness and to the nature of thought itself. Though Hemans might agree with both philosophers when they argue that sense data is always already perceived through conceptual categories, her cognitive overload attempts, though sometimes fails, to free women and other exiles of society from oppressive conceptual habituations. My argument about Hemans' balancing act between the mind-brain and mind-world problems is an attempt to demonstrate how, for Hemans, brain problems might intervene in both issues of consciousness and its effect on our relationship to the world.

In the course of vacancy's history, Hemans's brand of non-thought essentially bridges Charlotte Smith's Kantian aporias and Mary Robinson's empiricist multiplicity. She brings the two together into a vacancy that attempts to erase conceptual habituations through a similar kind of mental blankness as Robinson's, and, like Smith, ultimately sees vacancy in abyssal spaces of a vibrant landscape, which through its topographical features suggest new cognitive forms. Yet for Hemans, vacancy ultimately rests the

¹¹⁵ For a recent and thorough account of the proto-Freudian unconscious in Romantic texts, see Joel Faflak's *Romanticism and Psychoanalysis: the Burdens of the Mystery*.

cognitive shock that happens when abstract thinking is imposed upon sense experience, a crux that always retains a trace of something unrepresentable, which cannot be conceptualized or placed into the symbolic order, a feminine lack that remains skeptical of signification. For this reason it is useful to read parts of Hemans's poetry through Slavoj Žižek's recent post-Kantian, cognitivist account of Hegel, and his ideas of negativity, or the capacity of consciousness to undermine its own rationality. Žižek's reading in particular can help us to explore how Hemans juggles materialist science and philosophies of thought without being subsumed into Hegel's classic dialectics.

Additionally, in terms of vacancy's political implications, Hemans certainly follows in the footsteps of poets writing about revolution. Though very early in her career, Hemans certainly writes poems in support of war and imperial efforts, beginning at least with *Tales, and Historic Scenes, in Verse* (1819), Hemans begins to represent violent revolution as a troubled solution to the imperial age of Napoleon. In "The Widow of Crescentius," this occurs as the widow transmits her ruined mind to the tyrant Otho through her poisonous drugs and minstrelsy, as a psychic, interpersonal contagion that eventually topples the patriarchal regime by ruining its leader's mind as well. Since one of these blocking agents is intoxicating poetry, Hemans allegorizes poetry as a cognitive meme, a bottom-up insurgency for social and political change. Her poetic techniques, in particular the morass of footnoted historical data, mimic this transmission but direct it to the reader, who, in turn, has her own preconceptions shattered when she becomes overwhelmed with historical information.

When Hemans writes "The Forest Sanctuary" (1825), after the Mediterranean and South American revolutions have taken place, violent cognitive overload gives way to a

more peaceful form of vacancy that consists of roaming the open spaces of the New World to keep the mind free from phallic sign systems. As the Spanish protagonist stumbles on the scene of his childhood friend being burned at the stake, he is thrown into a moment of cognitive overload that propels him to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism. He essentially exchanges his Old World mind for a free-thinking and individualized, New World religiosity. The poem continues as the Spaniard immigrates to North America, where Hemans presents the after-effects of his cognitive overload as the counterfactual history of a Spaniard in sixteenth-century New England, complicating any easy English colonial claim to America's imaginary. Like Hemans's use of dashes to emphasize cognitive gaps in the speaker's thinking, the forest sanctuary represents a vaginal space, momentarily free from imperial discourse. Hemans's play with unmarking the landscape and combating the symbolizing power of language helps us to understand feminine lack in a new way, even as she updates her earlier cognitive overload in a model where vacancy inheres. Attempting to replicate the pause before necessary cognition or conceptualization that might lead to ideology and territorialize the New World, Hemans develops a mode of thinking that resembles mind-emptying meditation. While the widow of Crescentius only endures vacancy as a by-product of imperial trauma, the Spaniard finds a self-reliant way to stimulate the cessation of thought. Vacancy, for Hemans, offers a means of managing ideology, as a method of getting out from under both conservative and liberalist ideologies of her day.

The “thought overwhelm’d” Widow

Set as the opening poem in her 1819 volume *Tales, and Historic Scenes in Verse*, “The Widow of Crescentius” was published several months before the Peterloo massacre, and the poem, as well as many others in the volume, has as its major preoccupation revolution by unlikely members of society.¹¹⁶ Though most poems in the volume use similar representations of frenzied, impassioned regime change alongside characters who become shocked into trace-like states as a result, “The Widow of Crescentius” is exemplary in the way it evokes the figure of the mind as the object or starting point for this chaotic social change. The two-part poem tells the tale of the Roman consul Crescentius who is overthrown and murdered by the Pope-backed tyrant, Otho. Occurring in the last four years of the tenth century, the events in the poem resonate with the formation of the Second Coalition against Napoleon, in 1798, which included Naples and the Papal states. After witnessing her husband’s death, Crescentius’s widow, Stefania, dresses as a boy minstrel in Otho’s train and eventually murders him before committing suicide herself. The narrative poem, however, spends a good deal of time describing both the ruined Italian statuary dotting the countryside and its correlative in the destruction of Stefania’s mind. Both parts of the narrative poem climax in lyrical moments dwelling on this damage: part one ends by detailing Stefania’s paralysis while part two deals with Otho’s ruination at her hands.

¹¹⁶ In the second edition, published in 1824, “The Widow of Crescentius” loses the lead spot to “The Abencerrage,” perhaps, as Susan Wolfson suggests, because the latter poem’s subject of Spain, would “appeal to contemporary interest in Spanish nationalism” (90). Another reason may be that Hemans had already revised her ideas about revolution, muting the idealistic structure set out by “The Widow” and instead proffering the failures and ambiguities of the multicultural imperial politics set forth in “The Abencerrage.” For a good reading of Hemans sketching gender and racial ambiguities through the Muslim-Spanish conflict in the latter poem, see Saglia’s *Castles in Spain* (279-93).

Although the poem does describe Crescentius's own "calm" bravery at enduring his bitter fate, its entire first part leads up to Stefania's reaction as she watches her husband's execution:

Yes, in the wildness of despair,
She, his devoted bride, is there.
Pale, breathless, through the crowd she flies,
The light of frenzy in her eyes:
But ere her arms can clasp the form,
Which life ere long must cease to warm;
Ere on his agonizing breast
Her heart can heave, her head can rest;
Check'd in her course by ruthless hands,
Mute, motionless, at once she stands;
With bloodless cheek and vacant glance,
Frozen and fix'd in horror's trance;
Spell-bound, as every sense were fled,
And *thought o'erwhelm'd*, and feeling dead.
And the light waving of her hair,
And veil, far floating on the air,
Alone, in that dread moment, show
She is no sculptured form of woe. (249-66, emphasis mine)

Denied the comfort and stability of her husband's body, the widow is physically restrained from action by "ruthless hands." Without his soothing touch, her "wildness"

and “frenzy” effectively paralyze her. The signs of her femininity—her hair and her veil—wave in the wind, their external motion contrasting with her internal, mental trance. If her hair and her veil show that “she is no sculptured form of woe,” if she does not display a kind of melancholy or despair frozen in time, then the question becomes what state of mind does the “spell-bound” widow represent?

At first glance, the widow’s trance state resembles those that Mesmer and his disciples used in public displays of hypnosis and phreno-mesmerism beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and re-popularized in the 1820s with Spurzheim and Galt’s phrenology. The passage, however, does not suggest that either the martyred Crescentius or his nemesis Otho has induced Stefania into a hypnotic state, nor does the passage use language denoting the presence of animal magnetism or magnetic fluid.¹¹⁷ Neither does the spell-bound widow seem to figure the kinds of gothic or fairy enchantment present in Keats, for example, because there is nothing dreamy about the experience. If the widow has been vacated of sensation “with bloodless cheek, and vacant glance,” her brain paradoxically is still frenzied and wild: “thought overwhelm’d.” Thus Hemans is describing something closer to contemporaneous accounts of both the brain and the mind caught in thought. Specifically, the widow is an apt example of materialist ideas of the complex and overwhelming cognitive powers of the brain, as well as continental theories about how the mind might navigate—or fail to navigate—between *a priori* concepts and the barrage of sensory input. Though these models are often seen as antithetical, both touch upon the propensity for the brain or mind to work itself into states of sensory or

¹¹⁷ See *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* for a good compendium on mesmerism and its uses in literature. For a thorough history of the rise of materialist science in the early nineteenth-century, see the introductory chapter of Richardson’s *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*.

cognitive paralysis, and these accounts can help to explain the poem's important interstitial moments, like the widow's slack-jawed trance.

In their historical accounts of brain science, both Alan Richardson and Jonathan Miller have brought to light nineteenth-century versions of a pre-Freudian unconscious, which was thought to be revealed by trance-like states. They argue that writers beginning with Coleridge drew on contemporaneous formulations of the unconscious that were not based on the later Freudian model of repression of emotional content, but rather a more materialistic, cognitive unconscious. In this model, much of the brain's cognitive processes—perception, memory, and sensation—occur automatically and not necessarily with conscious awareness or volition. As Miller argues, activities associated with consciousness happen in part unconsciously not so much because latent content is repressed but because brain activity occurs more quickly and effectively without conscious supervision. Moreover, he suggests that in the nineteenth century “the hypnotic trance [...] exposed the action of these unconscious processes. By artificially paralyzing the will, a broad layer of automatic action was now made conveniently visible” (par. 39). While Miller documents ideas of cognition as they develop from mesmerism and phrenology into less supernatural and more physiological brain science, Richardson argues that Coleridge and other Romantic writers “were aware of the ‘alternate’ unconscious outlined by Miller, more productive than repressive, working to a large extent independently of the conscious subject, rendering the mind a theater of instinct, emotion, and desires as well as of reason, perception, and ideas” (58). Such states as Coleridge's hallucinations, De Quincey's reveries or Hemans's trances reveal

the machinations of a consciousness not always self-apparent to the thinking subject.¹¹⁸ Rather than the intersubjective sexual and political dynamics working through mesmeric hypnotism, Hemans's trances represent a single mind acting on itself, attempting to cognize the various and sundry thoughts and sensations bubbling up during moments that are emotionally and intellectually difficult to process.

Displaying such "unconscious cerebration," a term used to describe this bottom-up, non-volitional cognition,¹¹⁹ Stefania becomes a woman whose mind is full of thoughts, fragmented and uncollated into conscious awareness or specific ideas. This is not to say that she is subject to her unconscious any more than she might be subject to suddenly unrepressed passions. Rather, Stefania's mind becomes "ruined" precisely at the moment when the host of unconscious perceptions and sensations are revealed to her consciousness. When she cannot act and her will is suspended during Crescentius's murder, then she becomes "thought o'erwhelm'd," paralyzed by the morass of sensations that have begun to overload her brain: "When consciousness again shall wake,/ Hath now no refuge but to break" (273-4). The "wake"/"break" rhyme helps to refract the sequence of events in which the soon-to-be widow is first made aware of her unconscious thoughts, which then puts her mind at an impasse. It is important to note that Hemans does not demonstrate these myriad perceptions but instead only alludes to Stefania's "wildness" and "frenzy," or those states of mind that disable her from processing the wild frenzy of sensory experience. Hemans will shed this bit of mimetic fallacy in later poems, yet it is clear that she does not want readers to assume that the widow has

¹¹⁸ See especially Richardson's chapter on "Coleridge and the New Unconscious" (58-65).

¹¹⁹ As Miller notes, this term was coined by Benjamin Carpenter, whose first works of physiology appeared in 1839.

crumbled in despair when she warns: “She is no sculptured form of woe.” The problem here is not that Stefania cannot live without her husband but that she cannot cognize the turn of events that has installed a vicious, imperial tyrant over the rightful, republican Roman consul.

The brain science schema additionally helps Hemans to blur the difference between reason and affect, compiling them as perceptions and sensations that might lead to either thought or feeling. Moreover, instances of cognitive paralysis—as opposed to hysteria—present women as being just as capable of feeling *and* thinking as men. One upshot of the materialist model, as Richardson has argued, is that brain-based versions of the mind helped to underwrite a more universal rather than a gendered view of the brain itself, at least initially.

A good case in point of this gender dynamic occurs in “The Abencerrage,” a poem that first appears in the 1819 volume but replaces “The Widow of Cresecentius” as the title poem in the 1823 edition. In that poem, it is the male protagonist, Hamet, who falls into a trance, only to have his imperial prerogatives shattered. Set during the Muslim wars of the fifteenth-century, as imperial Spain attempts to recapture Moorish Grenada, the poem depicts star-crossed Muslim lovers from different tribes. When Hamet tells his lover Zayda that he has made a pact with Spain against her tribe, he falls into a trance, “awe-struck and amazed,/ In silent trance awhile the warrior gazed” (II.349-51). This occurs not as he watches his brothers die but as he looks upon Zayda, “In form so fragile that unconquer’d mind” (356). Unlike Stefania, Zayda already possesses an “unconquer’d” mind that resists both Spanish imperial hegemony and tribal ideology that would prevent her from being with Hamet. He, unlike Stefania, however, has to

experience this perceptual overload twice for it to destroy his imperial fantasies. Later in the poem, this idea of “unconquer’d, uncontroll’d [...] unsubmitting thought” exists only as “lofty dreams [...] / Where tyranny is near” (III.278, 282, 285-86). The unarranged, uncontrolled mind is antithetical to tyranny’s lofty dreams, which insist on fitting every perception into its conceptual, ideological system. Though Zayda’s mind displays an infectious cognitive resistance, Hamet refuses to relinquish his lofty dreams until Zayda dies, which finally ushers in a more permanent cognitive ruination. It may be that Hemans eventually places this poem in the second edition’s privileged spot because males like Hamet need to experience the revolutionary trance-state much more than women, who are often already undone by imperial ideologies.

The material unconscious, nevertheless, seems a somewhat apt figure for women’s lopsided role in the public sphere when it represents hidden power. As Miller writes: “if the situation calls for a high-level managerial decision, the Unconscious will freely deliver the necessary information to awareness” (par. 56). High-level wives like Stefania (or even Zayda) could be seen as stealthy providers of information or uncommon perceptions to a husband and public executive. In terms of a gendered division of labor in the brain, after the masculine will has been stymied by the failure of its imperial plots, the feminine material archivist of information is able to infiltrate the ideological superstructure and change it from the inside out. When the trance-state suspends the impetus to act, the widow, as a high-level wife, is revealed to have access to both the unconscious and conscious material. Hamet never incites a revolution as Stefania does, and Hemans seems to argue, at least in the dialogue between the two poems, that it is the

onus of women to bring action and ideology critique together, if only under the auspices of state disaster.

If Stefania is stunned by her husband's death, it paradoxically allows her a moment outside thought altogether, which effectively supplies her with the possibility of refiguring both her reactions to and her thoughts about such extraordinary events.¹²⁰

Hemans presents a model of distancing similar to our own contemporary cognitive behavioral models, which theorize that feelings are not innate but only come into being as we cognize sensations and perceptions into specific feelings, particularly through the language we use to describe emotions or thoughts. Cognitive psychologists argue that we develop emotional and intellectual analyses based on *behavioral* patterns of cognition, and we might also label these patterns ideology, or ideologically conditioned responses.¹²¹

In these paralytic moments, the tale's usual history—the stories for all these poems were taken from well-known histories—is likewise stunted and rewritten. Hemans' "historic scenes" stem the usual patterns of narrating such tales by stopping narrative action with the poetics of the trance state. While, as Jason Rudy has argued, later in her career Hemans becomes heavily invested in poetic techniques that help her portray feminine historical figures with lyrical, if emotionally controlled, subjectivity,

¹²⁰ Jason Rudy, in his article "Hemans's Passion," similarly argues that Hemans was renowned during her own time for an "aesthetic of restraint" that muted passion in favor of "reasoned feeling" (5, 4). He demonstrates how Hemans used formal techniques, especially the narrative gloss on poems like "Arabella Stuart" "to frame and give structure" to the series of emotional monologues that follow (11).

¹²¹ See for example, popular behavior therapy handbooks such as Windy Dryden and Michael Neenan's *Essential Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy* (2000), Albert Ellis's *A Guide to Rational Living* (1975), and Martha Davis's *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (1997). Many of these teach distancing techniques to refute a patient's "irrational ideas."

these poems attempt to distance readers from narrative or history with shocking lyrical moments. The ensuing pauses act as a referendum on the received understanding and worn-out narration that occur when well-known stories are told. Through the poetics of vacancy, Hemans's remediations of older histories seek to undo given ways of understanding those plots, characters, and themes.

Even more than simply laying bare the inner-workings of the unconscious, these moments of paralysis have the startling ability to redirect thought itself. This point is Hemans's final figurative gesture at the end of the first part of the poem, when she states that the widow's mind is not just figuratively but literally or materially ruined:

But in the glow of vernal pride,
If each warm hope *at once* hath died,
Then sinks the mind, a blighted flower,
Dead to the sunbeam and the shower;
A broken gem, whose inborn light
Is scatter'd—ne'er to re-unite. (279-84)

After Stefania's husband dies, she is left destitute. The blown flower image here is certainly evocative of notions of ruined femininity such as hysterical deaths or ritual sati that had women following their husbands to the grave. Nanora Sweet has discussed Heman's repeated use of the blown rose image as an emblem of feminized, historical evanescence, but the passage emphasizes the extent to which the widow's tragic state occurs because her "mind" "sinks." The second metaphor, the broken gem with its light imagery, transfers the tenor of the passage from an emphasis on the destruction of nature or natural femininity to the disruption of reason.

Many poems in the volume are dominated by light imagery, most often in the form of destructive, revolutionary flames, which are analogous to the frenzied or overwhelmed visages of the poem's characters. Zayda's unconquered light eventually becomes a "wasted," "burning glow" (III.449), and "The Wife of Asdrubal" ends with the suicidal widow who "Lifts one appealing, frenzied glance on high,/ Then deep midst rolling flames is lost to mortal eye" (67-68). This light imagery figures both inflammatory insurgency but also the dissipation or destruction of mental clarity. In "The Widow of Crescentius," the mind's light—that classic Enlightenment metaphor for reason or ratiocination—fragments into shards of various and conflicting thoughts or erupts into an uncontrollable frenzy of perceptions. While from the point of view of the 1790s Revolutionary agenda, this scattering or immolation is a tragic figure for the failure of the Enlightenment, the widow of Crescentius' ruination is a necessary shock that will smash the ideological system itself into shards.

If Stefania's mind has been shattered, she paradoxically teeters between knowing too much and knowing nothing at all. While hallucinations or reveries in De Quincey and Coleridge allow poets to construct fantastical meaning, Hemans's trances function to block cognition and in doing so refuse conceptual thought or those imperial "lofty dreams" that ascribe meaning to Crescentius' murder.¹²² If cognitive overload leads to conceptual blockage, it is because Hemans's model of the brain converges with a model of the mind. With the Enlightenment imagery of the ruined mind as scattered light, Hemans invokes an important connection between the materialist ideas about the brain

¹²² See for example, Frederick Burwick's "Romanticism as Cognitive Process," which argues that male Romantic poets used a "top-down" model of cognition where visual perception was shaped by non-volitional memory as much as sensory data.

and current philosophical discourses about the mind. In the wake of the Kantian legacy, many philosophers of the early nineteenth century were attempting to bridge the gap between English empiricist doctrine on the one hand, with its epistemological reliance on sensory experience, and continental philosophy on the other, with its positing of transcendental categories arrived at through subjective reasoning and judgment. Rather than discounting perceptual data, Hegel in Germany, Charles Peirce in America, and Whewell in England sought to reconcile sensory perception of the world with the mind's ability to conceptualize ideas.¹²³ Though Hegel, Whewell, or Peirce may not have influenced Hemans directly, she works through similar problems in her verse. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not she read Kant, but it is unlikely that she was unfamiliar with him. She read avidly in German and was intimately familiar with works by Coleridge, Goethe, Madame de Staël, and Schiller among others, writers who were influenced either by Kant or by German Idealist thought.¹²⁴

¹²³ Richard J. Bernstein makes this point about Peirce in an essay comparing John MacDowell to Hegel. MacDowell is a contemporary British philosopher attempting to reconcile Hegel with analytical philosophy, particularly through MacDowell's reworking of Kantian receptivity and spontaneity, or the sensory world and the mind's conceptuality. Bernstein points out that MacDowell reads Hegel through a post-Kantian lens, much like Peirce's own post-Kantian ideas (19). It may be helpful to note that the philosophic community is still split in its views of Hegel. The quintessential Romantic philosopher was long regarded by many as a metaphysician, whose idealism and theories of the absolute reconciled Kant's noumenal and phenomenal realms. More recently, many philosophers have begun to account for a more critical Hegel who accepts Kant's critique but rather than putting pressure on the subject's need to access the noumenal, concentrates instead on the subject's understanding. MacDowell is only one of many contemporary philosophers who read Hegel as a post-Kantian, the most important of whom is Robert Pippin. My argument here is that Hegel, along with Peirce, Whewell, and Hemans were all engaged with the epistemological problems that Kant had made so vital.

¹²⁴ Hemans' epic poem about the mind, *The Forest Sanctuary*, which I discuss below, especially reveals the poet's tarrying with continental thought, with its epigraphs from Schiller and Coleridge. Though Hemans' Italian and Spanish influences have been well-

In England, though a bit later than Hemans was writing, Whewell advocated for a return to Baconian induction as a means to renovate the scientific method. To do this he formulated the concept of “colligation” in which conceptual inferences or intuitions might be tested by sensory or experiential data.¹²⁵ Not unlike Whewell, Hegel was attempting to retool Kantian epistemology by claiming that though conceptual knowledge could not be verified by immediate experiences of the world, sensory data ultimately did shape and pre-figure those claims.¹²⁶ Both Hegel and Whewell end up on the side of conceptuality, however mediated or legislated by the self-authorizing subject. Slavoj Žižek, in his cognitivist reading of Hegel, argues that it is abstraction or conceptualization that resists the unseemly barrage of sensory information or perceptions Hemans portrays: “This is where Hegel comes in, with his praise of the infinite negative power of abstraction that pertains to understanding: consciousness is possible only through this loss, this delay with regard to the fullness of immediate experience—a ‘direct consciousness’ would be a kind of claustrophobic horror, like being buried alive with no breathing space” (*Parallax View* 241). Hegel’s abstraction leaves out the wealth of sensory data that might interfere with conscious decisions or conceptualization, even as it belies the hegemonic tendencies of abstraction. In “The Widow of Crescentius,” Hemans’s moments of paralysis enact precisely this “claustrophobic horror” of “direct consciousness” and cognitive over-abundance. Žižek points out that “the function of

explored by Nanora Sweet, her German reading has not been the subject of much scholarly investigation.

¹²⁵ The best account of Whewell’s epistemology, along with its political consequences is Laura J. Snyder’s *Reforming Philosophy*. Snyder argues that Whewell’s rehabilitation of Kant and *a priori* conceptuality, in the face of J. S. Mill’s democratic utilitarianism, went hand in hand with Whewell’s aristocratic politics.

¹²⁶ For a good summary of post-Kantian readings of Hegel, see Simon Lumsden’s “The Rise of the Non-Metaphysical Hegel.”

blocking is an elementary function of consciousness,” but for Hemans, the fullness of immediate experience induces a different sort of blockage, creating so much brain activity as to block the mind’s ability to conceptualize, which in turn refigures the relationship between mind and world.¹²⁷ Not until “The Forest Sanctuary” will she begin to explore fully the shock that the imposition of conceptuality places on sensory experience as a kind of Hegelian negativity, which disrupts ideology by producing those moments when consciousness dwells within the imperfect fit between abstraction and sensory data.

This “claustrophobic horror” also implicates some interesting political nuances in Hemans’s system of revolution. If ideological concepts are disrupted by brain activity, the frenzied brain’s commotion figures a kind of bottom-up overthrow of tyrannical and aristocratic ideological and political structures, or perhaps simply the disruption of hegemony. Hemans refutes conceptual tyranny for its conceptual hegemony, perhaps due to the aristocratic aura of Kantian philosophy, yet her moments that stop thought dead in its tracks cannot simply be made to fall into line with experiences, which also need to be collated and conceptualized into Humean common sense, Burkean habits, or J. S. Mill’s prescriptions. As Laura Snyder points out, Mill adopted a position reconciling Bentham’s empiricism with Coleridge’s inductive philosophy precisely because

¹²⁷ Colin Jager, in “Can We Talk About Consciousness Again?” raises the important question about the relationship between the traditional Romantic concerns over the mind and the world and more recent debates, in both literature and neuroscience, about consciousness and the relationship between mind and brain. Jager also astutely points out that Richardson’s research about nineteenth-century brain science often stops short of offering interpretive schemas about how consciousness works in literature, at which point scholars have often reverted to continental philosophy. My argument tries to explain how Hemans proactively uses the way brain science stumps interpretation to rethink certain problems in continental philosophy.

deductive empiricism and categorical idealism tended to regard frequent experiences as the way things should be, not simply the way things were due to bad habits. Hemans's poems repeatedly point to moments that vacate thought altogether whether inductive or deductive, empiricist, or idealist.

Stefania is an aristocratic upstart, yet the myriad sensations clogging her mind might be read as a figure for the masses, like those at Peterloo, which attempted to wrest control from an aristocratic oligarchy. As Stefania hurries to her husband's execution, the poet's descriptions of the crowds coming to watch the gruesome event seem to foreshadow the form that the widow's brain dysfunction eventually takes.

She traverses in breathless haste;
And by the tombs where dust is shrined,
Once tenanted by the loftiest mind,
Still passing on, hath reach'd the gate
Of Rome, the proud, the desolate!
Throng'd are the streets, and, still renew'd,
Rush on the gathering multitude. (I.174-80)

Rome's literal and figurative desolation—it is no longer occupied by lofty minds—exists in paradoxical relations to the multitudes that fill the city's streets. Likewise, Stefania's mind is about to be emptied by the shock of Crescentius' death even as it is filled with a host of rushing perceptions.

“The Abencerrage” also often stops its story of Hamet and Zayda to picture the swarms of Muslims armed in battle and consequently absent from the joyful, peaceful banquet hall. As in “The Widow of Crescentius,” empty spaces often allude to

overwhelming, chaotic fields of battle, as the crowded physical battlefields correspond to the conceptual overload that will overthrow imperial ideologies. At first the narrator says: “Avenging crowds have lit the mighty pyre/ Which feeds the waving pyramid of fire” (I.156-55). About a hundred lines later, the speaker similarly describes the mind of Hamet’s foe, Abdallah: “Of thought that ill th’ indignant heart can veil/ And passion, like the hush’d volcano’s power/ That waits in stillness its appointed hour” (I.246-48). Both the angry mobs and Abdallah’s own brain muster a chaotic, inflammatory force, which will attempt to combat the Spanish army and vacate Grenada of its imperial power. In these poems, Hemans describes both mind and mob with a material power to route the status quo.

In the second part of “The Widow,” it is the physical and figurative refusal of conceptual cognition that eventually topples the poem’s tyrant, activating the political and ethical stakes of Hemans’ epistemology. In effect, the wife’s usual role as loving companion is destroyed as Stefania, out for revenge, cross-dresses as a minstrel in Otho’s train at the beginning of part two of the poem. This subterfuge may represent the necessity of a woman poet who must don the cloak of anonymity in order to get attention as an artist, as Sweet suggests.¹²⁸ However, the second part of the poem takes as its subject the transmission of cognitive confusion that rails against conceptual normativity in general when it pointedly deconstructs ideological categories such as gender. As a young boy, Stefania comes to represent a certain kind of androgyny or polymorphous sexuality sometimes associated with adolescence, and we might therefore read Stefania’s transformation into the boy-minstrel, “Guido,” as the facial and bodily signifier of

¹²⁸ For this reading see Sweet’s “Hemans’s “The Widow of Crescentius”: Beauty, Sublimity, and the Woman Hero.”

cognitive confusion, particularly over gender and sexuality. As an embodiment of uncertainty, Guido's role as minstrel is to transmit the contents of his mind—its ruination—to his listeners, particularly Otho, but also to the larger reading audience.

As part two begins, Otho, guilty and melancholy over the murder of Crescentius, has been roaming the outskirts of Rome and looking for solace in nature or in his new minstrel's songs. Stefania, disguised as Guido, a ruminative Byronic figure, likewise wanders along the Tiber's banks singing "[s]o wild a grandeur in each tone,/ 'Tis like a dirge for empires gone!" (201-02). Before heading to the poem's murder-suicide *denouement*, Hemans pauses to describe Stefania as Guido, once again concentrating on the state of woeful Guido's mind:

Oh! where can ruins awe mankind,
Dark as the ruins of the mind?

His mien is lofty, but his gaze
Too well a wandering soul betrays:
His full dark eye at times is bright
With strange and momentary light,
Whose quick uncertain flashes throw
O'er his pale cheek a hectic glow:
And oft his features and his air
A shade of troubled mystery wear,
A glance of hurried wildness, fraught
Whate'er that thought, still, unexpress'd,

Dwells the sad secret in his breast; (153-68)

Stefania, even as a cross-dressed boy, is still described with a “hectic glow” and a wild glance. Her fraught appearance may be signs of mourning, the despair she feels over her own degraded position, or the guilt she feels as she plots another human being’s death. Yet the mystery and frenzy in her appearance may again be signs of cognitive chaos. Those thoughts “still, unexpress’d” fester in her breast precisely because she cannot conceptualize them—an act most often done through language itself. She does, however, emote them musically:

In music’s eloquence alone;

His soul’s deep voice is only pour’d

Through his full song and swelling chord. (170-2)

What Guido cannot communicate through language he can transmit through the extra-linguistic vibrations of his chords. Here Hemans makes an interesting if implicit distinction between poetry and music. While poetry’s rhythmic and aural qualities have a certain kind of music, they are always formed through discursive, socialized, ideological, rhetorical language. Music’s “eloquence” and “full song,” on the other hand, have the capability of transmitting unconceptualized sensation. This typically Romantic notion of expressive music evokes something like Hegel’s “dark night” of abyssal, immanent subjectivity. It also appears similar to mesmerism’s use of liquid or animal magnetism to captivate (or seduce) people into a trance. In Hemans, however, the idea is not to return from the abyss of pure subjectivity back into the conceptual and symbolic, nor is it intended to be coercive or manipulative, as much hypnosis was, especially on women. Instead, the widow passes along the neuronal deadlock, as a meta- or anti-meme. In

effect, Guido's songs facilitate the spread of the raw, chaotic perceptual data that Stefania had originally refused to colligate. If Otho already appears troubled and confused at the beginning of part two, it may be because he has already been listening to Guido's poisonous songs even before he is introduced to readers. Stefania's songs enable her literally to "awe mankind"—most notably Otho—with her "ruined mind."

In this way, the widow's musical eloquence is a figure parallel to the actual poison she eventually puts into Otho's drink to kill him. In the final scene of the poem, Otho calls again for Guido's song at a feast, and, in the same breath, he raises his goblet to banish his recent woe, unaware that both song and wine contain his death. The idea of poetry as a drug that provokes thought or challenges habituated ideas is not an uncommon trope in early nineteenth-century writing.¹²⁹ Shelley uses nitrus and nepenthe in *Prometheus Unbound* to vacate the mind of its social and linguistic habituations, and nepenthe in Keats often helps to stimulate or stagnate his fantastical sensory trips. De Quincey famously confessed to opium addiction, which David L. Clark argues may be about the habituations of "infinite deliberation" (281).¹³⁰ Similar to instances in both Shelley and Keats, Hemans's liquid poison and music's mellifluous eloquence allow for the easy consumption and ingestion of a substance that has the power both to stimulate and destroy consciousness through the excessive brain activity such drugs induce. Both Keats and Shelley use drugs to vacate old ways of thinking about either Apollo's human state or Asia's submission to Jupiter's tyranny. Though Shelley depicts Asia as peacefully purveying revolutionary drugs in *Prometheus Unbound*, both poets eventually

¹²⁹ See especially Orrin N. C. Wang's "Romantic Sobriety" for a full-bodied discussion of sobriety, intoxication and Romanticism.

¹³⁰ See David L. Clark, "We 'Other Prussians': Bodies and Pleasures in De Quincey and Late Kant."

seem to excoriate the violence certain mind-altering drugs inadvertently produce, as both Rousseau in “The Triumph of Life” and the poet in “The Fall of Hyperion” become paralyzed by drugs—and the knowledge—proffered by women.

Hemans’s drugs, alternately, seem like a desperate but necessary ploy. She purposely employs this contemporary trope, and we can see proof of this in how she alters certain details of the epigraph that she borrows from Sismondi, which narrates a general, historical account of the widow. As Susan Wolfson points out in her editorial head note to the poem, Hemans changes certain “improper details,” namely the fact that Stefania disguises herself as a doctor but then seduces Otho and becomes his mistress in order to administer the painful poison (70). This rewriting of the seduction plot into a story about drugs and music shifts the trope from one of sexual transmission (with its exchange of bodily fluids) to narcotic or poetic transmission. With this change, Hemans most notably exonerates Stefania from any kind of sexual license yet, at the same time, transfers the metaphor’s tenor from the body to the mind and brain.

Though Otho thinks that poetry (as well as drinking) should “banish all resembling woe” and lull his pain, they have the opposite effect when they literally and figuratively enflame his brain (230).

Now crimson’d with a hectic dye,
The burning flush of agony!
His lip is quivering, and his breast
Heaves with convulsive pangs oppress’d;
Now his dim eye seems fix’d and glazed (239-43)

Stefania stuns him to death with her “hectic dye,” which finally brings on convulsive pangs in the breast of the villain. Her unmanageable state of mind has finally transmitted itself to Otho, in the form of a painful paroxysm. As she finally unmask herself to the tyrant and his minions, Stefania has the last word in a final speech that includes these lines:

Deem'st thou my mind of reason void?

It is not phrensied,—but destroy'd!

Aye! view the wreck with shuddering thought,—

That work of ruin thou hast wrought! (269-72)

At the poem's finale, the widow finally articulates what has been going on in her head all along. She refuses to be seen as insane, out of control, or “phrensied” with violent emotion, and instead insists that her audience understand her mind as something that cannot be understood—as “destroy'd,” shattered into a mess of non-understandable perceptions. She calls on Otho to look on her face as a sign of her ruined mind and “view the wreck with shuddering thought,” that is, to replicate this state of mind in his own brain. The accusation itself becomes a performative act, as it overwhelms Otho—to death. The word “wrought”—not unlike the phrase “hectic dye”—creates a crucial pun. It both connotes the act of artfully making something yet also references an older use of the word, meaning made rough or agitated.¹³¹ The paradox suitably describes the artful act of disquieting the mind, which might also describe Hemans's poetics of vacancy in “The Widow of Crescentius.”

¹³¹ Though, according to the OED, the participial use of this meaning was obsolete by 1604, the adverbial use through the phrase “wrought up,” was still very much in use. This usage, in fact, has an entry by Hemans from “The Siege of Valencia”: “The deep..feelings wakening at their voice, Claim all the wrought-up spirit to themselves.”

Stefania touches on the radical consequences of her drug peddling in the poem's final speech, where she addresses those who will be left to rule Rome:

Yet that around me shuddering stand,
Ye chiefs and princes of the land!
Mourn ye a guilty monarch's doom?
—Ye wept not o'er the patriot's tomb!
He sleeps unhonor'd—yet be mine
To share his low, neglected shrine.
His soul with freedom finds a home,
His grave is that of glory—Rome! (295-302)

Not only has the widow's poison contaminated Otho's mind, but those around them stand "shuddering." Stefania's diagnosis comes in the next few lines when she contrasts the followers' feelings about their dead dictator Otho with those sentiments they have about Crescentius, the widow's murdered husband and rightful consul. This cognitive dissonance provokes her into an encomium not only for Crescentius's patriotism but also the Romans' failure to properly monumentalize him. Without a proper shrine, his soul paradoxically finds "freedom." In contrast to Roman tombs, with their defunct infrastructure, Crescentius's unmarked grave actually bequeaths him an existence in history beyond institutional glorification. Rather than understanding Hemans's reiterated tropes of forgotten patriots, unwritten histories, and unmarked graves as a piece of history that she attempts to resurrect, the reader is directed to think of Rome as vacated of all leadership. Its buried glory paradoxically offers the possibility of rethinking leadership,

as shuddering citizens and on-lookers have the opportunity to reevaluate their ideas of “patriot” and “freedom.”

The poem ends on a similar note of vacancy: “We struggle, and we pass away,/ Like the wild billows as they sweep,/ Leaving no vestige on the deep!” (328-330). On the surface, these final lines signify the erasure of Stefania from Roman history along with her uprising against the Pope-backed German dictator. The poem could be read as the attempt to uncover from the dominant imperial history the republican story about a failed revolution. Read as an allegory about how the mind works, however, the blank sea swept clean of these vestiges by the wild billows of history comes to signify less erasure and recovery than an historical or conceptual vacancy. The wild billows, like the flames that signal the conflicting and quasi-unconscious processes of the mind, overwhelm historical conceptuality, or any narrative that might dictate historical meaning.

Brainy Hemans: Footnotes, the Poetic Unconscious, and Textual Overload

Before she ends the poem on the outskirts of the Roman republic with the waves crashing down neuronal and mental vacancy, Hemans first dallies a bit with history in a more material way. By attaching a slew of historical footnotes, she injects a morass of historical information into the poem, overburdening readers with the text’s unconscious. This reader-response technique involves readers directly in a synthetic experience and parallels Stefania’s own story, infecting them, somewhat mimetically, with what perceptual overload might look and feel like. The footnotes refer the reader to episodes from Roman imperial history, complicating the number and kinds of narratives told about tyranny and freedom. It is through the unfolding of the text’s unconscious that

conceptual and historical meaning for the reader is both reified and refused. Hemans also pointedly uses the paratextual material to convey a complex notion of historicity, which rather than simply employing the historicist technique of using one history to understand another, constructs a web of references that offer competing historical claims as a means of vacating imperial histories.¹³²

The best examples of this textual overload occur at the very beginning of the poem, when Hemans starts by describing the “luxuriant glades” (1) of the Roman countryside, with a particular view to evoking the ruined monuments and statuary of the Roman empire. Perhaps because Crescentius’s stand against Otho took place at the Mole of Hadrian, Hemans points to Hadrian’s tomb as an example of the Roman ruins she wants to typify in the poem.

Sunk is thy palace, but thy tomb,
Hadrian! hath shared a prouder doom,
Though vanish’d with the days of old
Its pillars of Corinthian mould;
And thy fair forms by sculpture wrought,
Each bodying some immortal thought,
Which o’er that temple of the dead,
Serene, but solemn beauty shed,
Have found, like glory’s self, a grave
In time’s abyss, or Tiber’s wave. (I.43-52)

¹³² For a reading of Hemans as a quintessentially historicist poet, see Ted Underwood’s “Romantic Historicism and the Afterlife.”

Two footnotes bookend this passage: the first, attached to “prouder doom,” details the history and significance of Hadrian’s tomb and the second, attached to “Tiber’s wave,” comments on the Tiber’s role in helping to both wash away and recover the significance of Hadrian’s tomb. Both notes deal with Roman statuary’s dual role as art and martial monument, and more importantly, how it might figure attitudes toward imperialism and conceptuality.

The footnote, providing some history of Hadrian’s tomb, reads as follows:

The mausoleum of Hadrian, now the castle of St. Angelo, was first converted into a citadel by Belisarius, in his successful defence [sic] of Rome against the Goths. “The lover of the arts,” says Gibbon, “must read with a sigh that the works of Praxiteles and Lysippus were torn from their lofty pedestals, and hurled into the ditch on the heads of the besiegers.” He adds, in a note, that the celebrated sleeping Faun of Barberini palace was found, in a mutilated state, when the ditch of St. Angelo was cleansed under Urban VIII. In the middle ages, the moles Hadriani was made a permanent fortress by the Roman government, and bastions, outworks, & c. were added to the original edifice, which had been stripped of its marble covering, its Corinthian pillars, and the brazen cone which crowned its summit. (*Selected* 78n6)

The passage primarily concerns the transformation of various statuary, bronze, and other art decorations into weapons, used at various times to defend Rome from the conquering Goths and Spaniards. Hemans goes so far as to quote Gibbon to make the point that these works of art, some of them famous even in the eighteenth century, were “hurled into the

ditch on the heads of the besiegers.” In the hands of republicans protecting themselves against invaders, ornamental statuary becomes more useful for its materiality than for its formal, aesthetic qualities. Art literally gets thrown on the heads of imperial marauders and becomes a suggestive allegory of Hemans’s cognitive overload, where the brain is showered with painful perceptions, or, in Otho’s case, is over-stimulated by drugs and poetry.

The footnote itself works in a slightly imitative way, as it overwhelms readers with a wealth of information about the relationship between Hadrian’s tomb and imperialism. The syntax of the note poses the history of the tomb less as a linear progression from art as ornament to art as weaponry than as a non-hierarchical web of contradictory impulses. That Hemans chooses Hadrian’s tomb as the site of this historicizing is not simply coincidental, since Hadrian famously presided over a major rebellion in Britannia, and then proceeded to build Hadrian’s wall. The wall’s significance in British history itself has been debated as both a signifier of Hadrian’s imperial conquest and imposition of Roman rule in Britannia and also as a defensive structure against invading Caledonians. Similarly, Hadrian’s mausoleum, as it becomes a citadel guarding against Goth and Frank attacks, signals both the beginning of the fall of the Roman empire in the West as well as its glorification. The irony would not be lost on nineteenth-century readers that the tomb “now the castle of St. Angelo, was first converted into a citadel.” The structure becomes a castle, a sign of aristocracy, by first being transformed into a military bastion. Thus what seems to be a sign of the natural-born rule of aristocratic privilege only becomes so through imperial conquest or

defense—which is strikingly similar to castles erected in England after the Norman conquest, an event not too distant from Otho’s invasion.

The odd sequencing of the note further exacerbates the confusion as to what Hadrian’s tomb represents. It first refers to the mausoleum’s construction, beginning in 135, then to its transformation into a castle (in the fourteenth century), to its conversion into a citadel (536), to the recovery of the Faun of Barberini (in the seventeenth century) and to the Faun’s creation (second century BC) and finally its conversion into a fortress (fifth century). This temporal hodge-podge not only defers any linear narrative about the tomb and its art but also confuses the three uses of the tomb for republican, imperial, or artistic purposes. The tomb has been used as an imperial institution, a fortress against Gothic attacks, the site of Crescentius’ republican stand against Pope-backed tyranny, a castle during the middle ages, and finally a refuge for the Pope. The temporal confusion in the footnote prevents the reader from privileging any one of these narratives that might stabilize the tomb’s meaning. If anything, the note emphasizes the extent to which all imperial symbols, despite their aesthetic value, eventually get taken apart.

The final sentence of the note enforces exactly this kind of cognitive play. Describing how the tomb first became a fortress, the sentence begins by explaining that the government added “bastions, outworks &c. [...] to the original edifice.” This additive logic is seemingly undermined by the “&c” but is then replicated in the next clause, which attests to the fact that the tomb had already been “stripped of its marble covering, its Corinthian pillars, and the brazen cone which crowned its summit.” Though the note ends by conceptualizing the tomb as having its aesthetic attachments stripped, the final description acts to reinstall the covering, pillars, and the crowning cone. Thus the tomb is

never seen in its “original” state, stripped of its ornaments, which the footnote also ends up recovering, though in parts, through the last clause of the sentence. The “brazen cone” comes to signify less imperial tumescence than an unstable piece of national historiography constantly being erected, altered, and reconstructed.

The passive voice adds to this instability by making the architecture seem to be almost changing on its own. In this way, Hadrian’s tomb signifies a macrocosm of how the unconscious brain works, while the footnote serves as a microcosm of a textual unconscious that causes cognitive overload in readers. Zizek summarizes this model of the brain in his discussions of cognition and freedom in a way that sounds close to what Hemans might be doing with her footnotes:

It is the prominent *doxa* today that the microcosm of interacting agents spontaneously gives rise to a global pattern which sets the context of interaction without being embodied in any particular agent (the subject’s “true Self”): cognitive scientists repeat again and again how our mind does not possess a centralized control structure which runs top-down, executing designs in a linear way; how it is, rather, a bricolage of multiple agents who collaborate bottom-up, that is, whose organization is shifting, “opportunistic,” robust, adaptive, flexible. (*Parallax* 241)

Zizek’s summary of this flexible, shifting bricolage of multiple agents seems an apt way to characterize the way Hemans’s notes tend to act on the text itself, as well as a model for the way that material might contingently impinge on a train of conceptual thought.

When the main text of the poem states that Hadrian’s tomb “might have shared a prouder doom,” rather than pointing directly to the historical or aesthetic signifier of that “prouder

doom,” the footnote refuses to construe that glory without question. Instead, the note substitutes a host of different factual data and historical threads that resist any reifying concept connected to the tomb. Like Žižek’s assemblage of multiple agents collaborating from the bottom-up, the Goth and Frank tribes effectively dismantle the tomb and the Roman empire in the West. They, like Crescentius, represent the republican ethos, and perhaps even more drastically posit revolutionary activity as necessarily occurring chaotically, from the bottom up.

This conceptual resistance is precisely the subject of the next footnote, which superficially explains how the Tiber has acted as a grave for the fallen statuary, and by extension, a tomb for the glory of the Roman empire in the West. Here Hemans attaches a quote from Madame de Staël’s *Corrine*, without any of the extra paraphrase or context that she used with the Gibbon quote.

The most beautiful monuments of the arts, the most admirable statues were thrown into the Tiber, and are hidden beneath its tides. Who knows if, to find them, one will not one day divert it from its bed? But when one reflects that masterpieces of human genius are perhaps there in front of us, and that a sharper eye would see them through the waves, one feels that indescribable emotion that is ceaselessly reborn in Rome, under many forms, and that brings about one society for thought among physical objects, which everywhere else are mute. (*Selected* 79n7)

This excerpt from *Corrine* highlights not only the power of the Tiber and Rome’s monuments to evoke sentiment and thinking, but also evokes a meta-commentary on the process of reading itself. To begin with, the main text of the poem helps us to read the

sculptures themselves as signifiers for thought: “And the fair forms by sculpture wrought,/ Each bodying some immortal thought” (47-8). The “wrought”/“thought” rhyme points out Hemans’s attempt to redefine just how thought works, but here it is the varied forms of sculpture that stir up, enliven, and embody various thoughts. The passage in the poem ends with these immortal thoughts buried in the Tiber’s wave, but the footnote suggests that these objects are not hidden forever. This contradiction implicitly asks the reader to consider again how something seemingly vacant is actually filled with a cadre of statuary that stirs up thought.

In the context of the poem, de Staël’s question about whether or not future Romans might divert the Tiber to get a look at the statues buried beneath its waves figures the problem of whether and how they might resurrect certain thoughts from the graveyard of the mind. The passage at first might seem to lend itself to a model of the Freudian unconscious, with the statues symbolizing the repressed historical memories of Roman defeat at the hands of Germanic tribes slowly dismantling the Western empire, but de Staël’s passage suggests otherwise when she decides that access to the statuary is restricted not because the art is submerged or even forgotten but because we are not good enough thinkers to see through the Tiber’s waves. As an allegory about the pre-Freudian unconscious, the statues represent those unconscious and conscious cerebrations, while the waves figure that conceptuality that puts individual thoughts to death beneath a larger abstract pall. Though the waves first appear as “time’s abyss,” in the footnotes, they are refracted as a figure for something like conceptuality that refuses us access to the “many forms” of thought, the many, sensory instances of material statuary that might allow readers access to a different kind of thinking. By refusing to divert the river and instead

insisting that attentive readers see through it, de Staël's quote prods those readers to use the footnotes to help see through the obvious conceptual, imperialistic veneer of the poem to the more complicated, material thoughts lying underneath it. Though everywhere else these monuments (or thoughts and perceptual data) "are mute," here—in this interstitial reading moment—they provoke "one society for thought." Like the waves in the poem's final passage, here too the Tiber's vacancy does not merely insist on a project of historical recovery from the river's depths. Instead, seeing through the Tiber's waves at the beginning of the poem ultimately pushes readers to play with historical and cognitive contingency and to emerge at the shores of historical and ideological vacancy at the poem's end, watching the waves sweep the surface of the mind clean.

"The Forest Sanctuary" and the New World of the Mind

Where "The Widow of Crescentius" uses drugs and a barrage of footnoted ancillary material to drive cognitive overload, "The Forest Sanctuary" turns to figures rooted in the New World of the Americas to critique the Old World's reified brain and political architectures and, most importantly, to construct new, open spaces for thought. While the earlier poem was concerned with staging revolution, by 1825, Hemans is preoccupied with mapping new geo-political landscapes following the revolutions in the Mediterranean, Spain, and Latin America occurring in 1820-24. While the first part of the piece in some ways replicates the widow of Crescentius's cognitive overload when the unnamed Spaniard comes to consciousness about Catholicism's "destruction of mental independence," the second part of the poem documents the mental fallout of his decision to emigrate to the forests of North America. This poem is less about the exigencies of

Spanish politics or religious upheavals than the “mental conflicts” of a Catholic Spaniard, a point that Hemans makes clear in her preface (*Selected* 269). Though she is interested in the plight of the masses and the development of liberal ideology as it was being played out both through the Spanish revolts and the Spanish debate in the British periodical press, in this poem Hemans ultimately provides a commentary on ideology itself. The *New World* presents the lure of a space that is free from ideology, and if Hemans remains self-reflexive about the propensity for characters to end up in new ideological structures as they capitulate to the romance of the New World, the poem ultimately provides interstitial moments that manage and struggle against—not get beyond—ideology.

The poem plots the conversion of a sixteenth-century Catholic Spanish conquistador, who, after a traumatic homecoming, becomes a Protestant, American exile. As Wolfson points out, Hemans germinated the idea for the poem after reading the *Letters* of Don Leucadio Doblado, pseudonymously known as Joseph Blanco White, along with an article he wrote on the history of Spanish Protestantism in the *Quarterly Review*.¹³³ A priest who eventually moved to England and converted to Anglicanism, White repeatedly calls Catholicism a “source of mental perversion” and an “insuperable obstacle to the improvement of the mind” (“Review” 241, *Letters* 59). Similarly, in the manuscript version of the poem’s Advertisement, Hemans writes that the poem is “intended more as the *record of a Mind*, than as a tale abounding with romantic and extraordinary incident” (*Selected* 292n3, Hemans’s emphasis). In other words, Hemans uses Catholicism as a model for the mind too steeped in patriarchal ideals and idolatry,

¹³³ Hemans and Doblado also frequently corresponded about Spanish literature. See Wolfson’s note on the connections between the two authors, in her edition of Hemans’s *Selected Poems* (296n35).

putting forward Reformation-era Protestantism as a form of free thinking. Not simply a narrative proselytizing Protestantism in the New World, “The Forest Sanctuary” plots the Spaniard’s conversion as a cognitive event that maps North America’s vacancy as a new kind of cognitive terrain.

Hemans’s use of German Protestantism as a counterpoint to an ideologically conservative and claustrophobic Catholic Spain could be part of what Marilyn Butler and David Simpson have identified as a post-Waterloo, conservative use of German metaphysics. Simpson locates de Staël, one of Hemans’s favorite authors, and Coleridge, who supplies one of the poem’s epigraphs, as two writers who helped publicize German organic metaphysics and proper religiosity as the ideological backbone of late-Romantic conservatives.¹³⁴ As Sweet argues, however, de Staël’s Coppet salon represented for Hemans the politics of “disestablishment,” based on bourgeois intellectualism rather than intellectual clerisy.¹³⁵ Diego Saglia has eloquently argued for both Italy and Spain as “displaced representations of liberal ideologies that were slowly emerging on the British political scene before 1832” (“Vespers” 366).¹³⁶ Likewise, White’s use of Martin Luther, as well as Hemans’s own depiction of Spanish Protestantism, would seem to resurrect the radical Protestantism associated with Martin Luther, Kant, and the spirit of 1789. The poem blatantly invokes a cosmopolitan spirit associated with disestablishment Protestantism that ties together the United States, Germany, England, and renegade Europeans. Moreover, the nameless Spaniard represents a democratic or popular

¹³⁴ See Simpson (102-3), who discusses Butler.

¹³⁵ See her “‘Lorenzo’s’ Liverpool and ‘Corrine’s’ Coppet: The Italianate Salon and Romantic Education.”

¹³⁶ Saglia’s comment is directed toward Italy as a model for liberal ideology, but he makes a similar argument about Spain in the introduction to *Castles in Spain*.

conversion of the mind available to any foot soldier who might turn against Spain's ancient regime.

While Hemans might be accused of drawing America as a romanticized space, her pointed use of history reveals her to be doing something more than simply installing an imperially-minded immigrant into an idealized second Eden and an American landscape too often seen as virgin land by nineteenth-century settlers. The poem hails an unusual moment in sixteenth-century Spanish history, when “the German reformation made its first active and sincere proselytes at Seville” (246), as White narrates. Set during the Inquisition under Phillip II, yet reminiscent of the dictatorial-style of rule instituted during the restoration of the monarchy under the return of Ferdinand to the throne in 1814, the poem juggles Spanish-British relations in the sixteenth century—not the least of which is the religious conflict and the struggle for naval dominance between Phillip II and Elizabeth I—along with Spanish-British relations after Napoleon and the policies of both countries in the New World (North and South America) during both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The position of the New World in the poem is a particularly complex one, as it straddles the so-called golden age of the Spanish empire, important English ventures to North America (such as Sir Walter Raleigh's) in the sixteenth century, as well as in the nineteenth, the era of the Monroe doctrine in North America, the Latin American revolutions for self-determination, and the British turn from imperial control of the Americas to the governmental consolidation of their territories in India. Hemans is again constructing a complicated web of references that moves beyond a simple historicist contrast between different time periods.

Unlike the crushing historical overload that she developed with her footnotes in “The Widow of Crescentius,” however, this poem attempts to create counterfactual histories for historical actors. Hemans specifically borrows from Isaac D’Israeli’s essays—the first modern version of counterfactual or virtual history—where he hypothesizes whether Protestant countries might have become Catholic had the outcomes of certain wars been reversed. By writing a Spaniard into the North American imaginary of New England in the sixteenth century, Hemans figures America as Spanish imperial influence was beginning to fade, sometime around the defeat of the Armada, but before English colonists had begun to settle on the continent with their own imperial agendas. Her odd use of the Spaniard’s immigration suggests that the second part of the poem corresponds to a future that might have occurred in the North American past but did not.

Though the Spaniard’s retreat to the Americas may signal the beginning of a new romance, filled with even more virulent ideologies about the saving graces of a deracinated frontier, this new vacancy also represents what happens to the mind after it resists old world ideologies through interstitial moments like cognitive overload. The Spaniard straddles several hybrid identities—male and female, civilized and non-civilized—and in doing so he begins to represent the shock between abstract concepts and isolated cognitive experiences. Not unlike certain readings of Hegel’s negativity, Hemans finally posits America as a space that provides moments to manage ideology, through the character of the exile who cannot fully cognize perceptual events into an American imaginary or into conceptualized language. In this way, vacancy comes to be structured around a productive lack of the symbolic, as the Spaniard escapes overwritten imaginaries and lights out for the territories, so to speak. By learning a form of mind-

emptying meditation, he tries to remain in the quasi-meditative space of the forest sanctuary and hold the pastoral in his mind as a sensory experience that refutes or delays ideological incorporation.

As a retrospective retelling of the Spaniard's mental conversion, the poem first describes the new-found forest sanctuary before returning to recount his traumatic homecoming. As he stumbles upon an *auto-de-fe*, where his childhood friends, Alvar and his two sisters, are being marched to the stake, he uses the "wrought"/"thought" rhyme to signal that he is describing a cognitive event: "They move'd before me but as pictures, wrought/ Each to reveal some secret of man's thought" (194-5). This "sullen mass" with its procession of people that each figure some thought, foreshadows the cognitive catastrophe that is about to occur when the narrator recognizes his childhood friends as Protestant victims of the Inquisition (190). Though Hemans does take a few stanzas to frame the Spaniard's relationship to Alvar and his crime of turning from Catholicism, the description of his reaction constitutes a moment of physical and cognitive paralysis: "I could but gaze/ On him" (244-5, 249-50). The narrator's trance-like state induces a reverie about the two friends' time together fighting native Indians in Peru, when he was struck down in battle.

But a lance met me in that day's career,
Senseless I lay amidst th' o'ersweeping fight,
Wakening at last—how full, how strangely clear,
That scene on memory flash'd—the shivery light,
Moonlight, on broken shields—the plain of slaughter,
The fountain-side—the low sweet sound of water—

And Alvar bending o'er me—from the night
Covering me with his mantle!—all the past
Flow'd back—my soul's far chords all answer'd to the blast.

Till, in that rush of visions, I became
As one that by the bands of slumber wound,
Lies with a powerless, but all-thrilling frame,
Intense in consciousness of sight and sound,
Yet buried in a wildering dream which brings
Lov'd faces round him, girt with fearful things!

Troubled ev'n thus I stood, but chain'd and bound (253-268)

Alvar's appearance certainly provokes the Spaniard to remember his friend's kindness and care for him at a moment of great physical danger. It also offers the narrator a chance to consider and perhaps consolidate who he was in a past life. At the same time, since the Spaniard is recalling how he lost consciousness after fielding a lance blow, the memory also mimics and evokes a moment of cognitive and sensory disorientation. The top-down cognitive process of memory, which might provide him with a template for reacting to Alvar's imminent death, ironically ends up replicating an experience of bottom-up mental chaos. The lance blow lays the narrator unconscious, and when he awakes, it makes him susceptible to a flow of sensations that he had unwittingly absorbed, and subsequently they flood his conscious mind. Thus the trauma of seeing Alvar tied to the stake both figures and acts like another blow to the Spaniard's brain, bringing back into consciousness all these past sensations, as if they had never been

processed. The lance blow not only instigates cognitive overload but also allegorizes how history or memory might likewise mimic the interruption of cognition. The momentary gap in consciousness allows the subject to temporarily be free of thought, and when he awakes the rush of “direct consciousness” leaves him unable to process Alvar’s death as anything but unconscionable.

In the next stanza, the Spaniard attempts to explain his paralysis or “powerlessness” as an “intense” “rush of visions” that overloads his consciousness with visual and auditory perceptions. Richardson has described similar instances of blows to the head in Austen’s *Persuasion*, which, he writes, “mark the collision of conscious awareness with unconscious thoughts and feelings and the intense physiological sensations that accompany them” (102). In Richardson’s account, Anne Elliott demonstrates a heightened rationality and sensibility, in a continuum from rational thought processes to instinctual, cognitive brain activity. If Anne makes heroic the ability to deal with an intense influx of emotional sensations, unconscious volitions, and other perceptual data, Hemans’s Spaniard, like Stefania, is patently inept at processing unconscious thoughts that are made conscious. Rather than viewing the Spaniard or Stefania as weak-brained (like *Persuasion*’s Henrietta), we might understand the paralysis and powerlessness as a means of shocking their brains and changing the way they process the world. The Spaniard sidesteps virile, heroic action and instead comes away from Alvar’s death a changed man who refuses to support a state that polices religious ideology with death. At this point he begins his transformation from a soldier in the Spanish military into a free-thinking American immigrant.

If the lance episode presents an image of phallic, patriarchal violence, it also serves as a death blow to the ancient regime. The Spaniard's defining cognitive event, his conversion to Protestantism, is eventually literalized as the crumbling of patriarchal towers, in a text laden with phallic figures of violence. For example, we might contrast the lance's blow with the "arrowy pillars of the firelight" (614)—the burning stakes of the Inquisition. Hemans similarly musters other phallic imagery throughout the poem, beginning with an image of an oak tree falling prey to a rapacious vine several stanzas into the poem. This, the narrator declaims in an alexandrine line, is "An image of man's mind, land of my sires, with thee!" (99). The narrator's image of the strangled oak tree foreshadows the paradigm of patriarchal power succumbing to its own mental "bondage" of the serpentine vine of the Catholic religion, not unlike some of Blake's illuminated imagery (95). The tirade against the "image" in the mind specifically speaks to English distaste for Catholic idolatry as a sign system that imbues images with supernatural powers. Though Hemans may be one of W. J. T. Mitchell's iconoclasts, on a mission to stamp out the irreverent worship of idols, she would probably find iconoclasm distasteful for its own orthodoxies.¹³⁷

Just after the Spaniard flees from the scene of the auto-de-fe, he again uses another image of the material, phallic structures of the Spanish empire crumbling.

There are swift hours in life—strong, rushing hours,
That might do the work of tempests in their might!
They shake down things that stood as rocks and towers
Unto th' undoubting mind;—they pour in light

¹³⁷ For discussions of Romanticism, idolatry, and iconoclasm, see W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*.

Where it but startles—like a burst of day
For which th' uprooting of an oak makes way;—
They sweep the colouring mists from off our sight,
They touch with fire, thought's graven page, the roll
Stamp'd with past years—and lo! it shrivels as a scroll! (480-9)

This stanza dramatizes tempests and fire wreaking havoc on both the global macrocosm and the mind's microcosm. The strong, vacating winds “shake down” the towers signifying Spanish imperial power, just as the oak tree is uprooted. Similar to many of Shelley's metaphors in “Ode to the West Wind,” Hemans employs climactic forces of nature to figure the toppling of patriarchal and signifying systems. These dramatize the contingency and life-altering changes such events cause, yet in Hemans they also figure a bevy of sensations that represents the clash between conscious and unconscious perceptions during moments of cognitive overload. The deluge of weather, like the Spaniard's unconscious, occurs without volition even as it seems to figure historical necessity.

Even more to the point, the vacating winds and tempestuous times erase “thought's graven page.” The cognitive paralysis caused by Alvar's death scene eventually acts to obliterate the writing in the mind, eroding patriarchal architectures by expunging thought, writing, and ultimately the knowledge they produce. In this short phrase, Hemans reveals that she, like Shelley, conceives of epistemology as produced by writing. Thought becomes habituated and problematic once it is “graven” or engraved into the mind. Similar to Robinson, Hemans summons a violent and physical force to consign these old habituations to oblivion.

If Hemans seeks to destroy the phallic writing on the wall and those “things that stood as rocks and towers,” she puts in their place a skeptical, doubting mind. In doing so, she seems to court “feminine lack,” which she privileges over material signifiers of phallic power, like trees or writing. As the Spaniard turns from the death scene, she depicts him literally on the run from the phallus: “the kindling city seem’d/ To speak, float, wave, as on the wind they [*the arrowy pillars*] stream’d/ With their wild splendor chasing me!” (617-19, emphasis mine). Even the city up in flames still represents phallic power—an institution large enough to light up the night sky when attacked. When the Spaniard lights out for the territories of America, he runs toward an emptied landscape and imaginary that might be described as a symbolic void. It should come as no surprise that Hemans would actively seek this vacancy as a liberating solution. At the same time, the idea of lack, as Hemans details when the Spaniard arrives in America, involves existing—and thinking—outside any system, especially a system of assigned gender roles or expectations. So we might say that Hemans attempts to envision a lack that also lacks a feminine stigma.

Hemans’s America: Emptiness and Negativity

The remaining stanzas of the first part of the poem narrate the Spaniard’s decision to abandon the Catholic faith and convert to Protestantism, even at the cost of exile. The second part of the poem then proceeds to describe the protagonist’s shameful homecoming in the eyes of his father and, most importantly, his voyage to North America. Here Hemans moves beyond the narratives of Smith and Robinson, who envision their exiles on the edge of the nation, as she, and Maria Jane Jewsbury after her,

plots a course of exile or journey outside the nation. Hemans's transatlantic imagination may very well posit North America as an idealized, virginal space, awaiting inscription by male colonists, yet this poem reads less like a New World romance of discovery than the troubled journey of a Caleb Williams-type figure constantly on the run from England's romance narratives. As such, this epic does not develop a narrative about a hero (or even an anti-hero) and neither does it exist as a series of lyrical "spots of time." Instead the forest sanctuary posits an interstitial space that straddles both lyric and narrative impulses. If the first part of the poem stages the Spaniard's cognitive overload, then his emigration to America represents the moment of possibility *before* he—and the New World—will settle into conceptual alliances or overwritten narratives.

The Spaniard first travels through South America, but its Spanish, Old World influences again create a cognitive space too overwritten with ideological leanings. With his son in tow, he contritely traces his steps through past killing grounds:

The high Peruvian solitudes among;
And o'er the Andes' torrents borne his form,
Where our frail bridge hath quiver'd midst the storm.
—But there the war-notes of my country rung,
And, smitten deep of Heaven and man, I fled
To hide in shades unpierc'd a mark'd and weary head. (623-28)

The sixteenth century saw the Spanish empire take control of South America, which the Spaniard alludes to when he mentions braving presumably Incan arrows with Alvar. The irony of this setting would not be lost on English readers, who were well abreast of the recent revolutions to throw the Spanish out of their Latin American colonies. The

Spaniard's nomadic life "o'er the Andes" and "Through the wide Llanos" of Peru and South America brings the conquistador back to revel in the beauties of a land, though one emptied of the Incan empire and its native inhabitants. The reminders of imperial war, however, eventually drive father and son to North America. These remembrances come in the form of "war-notes" or other "smitten" sounds, not unlike Stefania's destructive minstrelsy: "a harping tone,/ Lovely, yet ominous to mortal ear,/ Such as might reach us from a world unknown,/ Troubling man's heart with thrills of joy and fear" (638-41). The landscape issues a native music that thrills the heart with a confusing mixture of sound that might evoke either joy or fear. The echoes of imperial conquest are both exciting and shameful; this music, says the narrator, "oppress'd/ My soul with stillness, like the calms that rest/ On melancholy wave" (643-4). This kind of ethical paralysis resembles the Spaniard's earlier bouts of cognitive overload, and it is South America's overwritten relationship to imperial Spain that eventually propels him north.

His immigration to North America, however, represents a historical anachronism, a strange piece of history that marks Hemans's peculiar and inventive historical-poetic methodology. According to both White's article on Protestantism during the Inquisition as well as the references in Hemans's poem to the conquistadors' battles to secure the Andes, the Spaniard most likely comes to North America at the end of the sixteenth century, before either Jamestown or Plymouth Rock.¹³⁸ The Spanish had already settled Florida, New Mexico and Arizona, and the French had established Jacksonville as a

¹³⁸ White narrates the *auto de fe* of a priest named Gomez and his two sisters, which is a close parallel to Alvar and his sisters, particularly because they join in singing as the final defiant act while they die. These deaths most likely happen in the first or second *auto de fe* of Seville, in either 1559 or 1560 (255-6). The Andean consolidation occurs between 1542 and the final battle between the Spanish and the Incas in 1572. So it is likely that the Spaniard leaves Spain at least after 1560 or, at the latest, in the years after 1572.

haven for Huguenots, but the Spaniard does not flee to any of these settlements. Hemans conspicuously does not state where in North America the Spaniard establishes his “bower of refuge.” She does use several footnotes to reference works about North America, and each of these allude to particularities of the American landscape that she uses to describe the forest sanctuary: the cane grass of Tennessee, the torrent waterfalls of New York, and the arcades of trees in New England.¹³⁹ It would be easy to argue that this historical ambiguity indulges in the romance of America as a homogeneous, blank, virginal space, with the more material, colonial history of the United States abjected to the poem’s footnotes. Yet the specificity of the references within the footnotes, culled from recent travelogues, refuses to let the idea of America become co-opted into anything so blandly romantic by bringing attention to landscape features that are markedly northern.

While in the first part of the poem the Spaniard is rooted in a very secure and historical context based on Doblado’s account of sixteenth-century Spanish Protestants burned at the stake, his iterations through the forests of New England and New York have no connection to historical accounts of Spaniards. His journeys represent a migratory oddity, since the Spanish are not thought to have traveled so far north during the sixteenth century. If his mere presence disallows any easy narrative about English claims to North America, the arrival of a Spanish Protestant in New England suggests something of a virtual or counterfactual history, presenting a case of immigration to America that might

¹³⁹ An early note (n6) to the Spaniard’s description of the American forest’s “feathery canes” points readers to a passage about Tennessee from Adam Hodgson’s *Letters*. The final note to part one (n44) annotates the Spaniard’s description of the “high arcades” with a quote from Daniel Webster’s bicentenary speech celebrating the Plymouth Rock landing. The first note on the text of part two (n3), however, further describes the “sounding of the torrent-water” with an allusion to a description of upstate New York in Anne Macvicar Grant’s *Memoirs of An American Lady*.

have happened but did not. The Spaniard's existence navigates a path between the historical actuality of the footnotes taken from nineteenth-century American travelogues and the fictionality of an idealized America. As the notes prevent Hemans's depiction from being ahistorical, so the fictionality of the Spaniard plots a new history through the American wilderness.

Isaac D'Israeli uses a similar method his 1823 essay "Of a History of Events Which Have Not Happened," which can serve as a parallel to how Hemans reinterprets White and builds her own fictional history of North America. D'Israeli's piece has been regarded as the first instance of counterfactual history, a historical methodology that recently regained credibility at the end of the 1990s.¹⁴⁰ Much of D'Israeli's article discusses historical events that might have changed the religion of nations during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and thus the geo-political landscape of nineteenth century Europe. He includes a citation to White's article: "We have lately been informed by a curious writer, that Protestantism once existed in Spain, and was actually extirpated at the moment by the crushing arm of the Inquisition. According to these catholic politicians, a great event in catholic history did not occur—the spirit of

¹⁴⁰ Catherine Gallagher makes this claim for D'Israeli's essay in a talk she gave at the University of Jyväskylä (par. 5). See the paper posted on website of the University's Political Thought and Conceptual Change Centre of Excellence, <http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/PolCon/coepolcon/PolTCH/events/gallagher.pdf>. Two seminal, critical works of virtual history are Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (2000) and Philip Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow and Noel Geoffrey Parker's *The Unmaking of the West: "What-If" Scenarios That Rewrite World History* (2006). It may also be useful to make a distinction, as some historians do, between "virtual history" and "alternate history," the first being the historical inquiry into whether or not an event might have occurred differently and the second a fascination with what kinds of situations a virtual history might have produced. Alternate histories are thought to be the jurisdiction of contemporary fiction writers such as Phillip K. Dick, Newt Gingrich and Harry Turtledove, and it is this legacy of fiction as historical methodology to which Hemans belongs.

catholicism, predominant in a land of protestants” (189-90). The counterfactual event D’Israeli refers to is the Spanish Armada’s defeat of the English navy, which would have resulted in Catholicism, rather than Protestantism, being the national religion of England in the nineteenth century. D’Israeli perhaps uses many of these counterfactuals to launch a satire on sectarian Christianity, but his comments most forcefully undermine teleological or fatalistic views of the history surrounding the spread of religious ideology. Hemans employs a historical method similar to D’Israeli’s, essentially concocting a counterfactual about what might have happened had some Spanish Protestants survived the Inquisition. This proposition then lends itself to a fictional scenario about America—a break or narrative crevice that occurs between the tapering off of Spain’s imperial history in America and the start of England’s Protestant, colonial process. The Spaniard’s forest sanctuary exists in a brief moment of lyrical time placed between two national histories and their colonial narratives, temporarily freeing America from its imperial manifest destiny. Hemans does not merely obviate history from the American frontier but writes an impossible history that momentarily suspends both English and Spanish imperial narratives. This logical crux creates a moment of cognitive pause—and confusion—that is lyrical in the way it temporarily stops time and encourages questions about the way time and history work.

If his existence figures a counterfactual narrative, the Spaniard’s characterization in the New World is strange to say the least, and he represents two kinds of hybrid identities whose presence in the New World complicate any interpretation of America as the Protestant promised land. First, he represents Hemans’s notions about androgyny in a conquistador turned maternal, and second, he skirts a highly contested political issue of

the day, the dispute between Whigs and Tories about Spain's constitution. Both Gary Kelly and Nancy Goslee have argued that the poem tells a story about the consolidation of "an androgynous, nurturing father, and a female sexuality that is displaced and depersonalized in the natural setting" (Goslee 244).¹⁴¹ Rather than illustrating a woman, like the widow of Cresentius, taking up a male role, infiltrating ideological systems, and transmitting destructive, unconscious thought processes, "The Forest Sanctuary" depicts a male conquistador who takes on a feminine, nurturing position as he flees patriarchal Spain for the vaginal space of a forest sanctuary. The Spaniard's emigration and Alvar's *auto de fe* mark the death of aggressive heroism, as Kelly notes, but he then turns into a maternal teacher by tutoring his son in his new religion as he nurtures him: "Thou that hast breath'd in slumber on my breast" (l.68). The sentiment echoes Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," another poem with a maternal-male speaker who teaches his son to hear the "trances of the blast" yet advises him to "Fill up the interspersed vacancies/ And momentary pauses of thought" (76, 51-2). In "The Forest Sanctuary" the Spaniard more fully keeps gender roles suspended—including those ways of relating to the landscape that gender often reifies. Occurring not at the end of the poem, but at its beginning, his maternal comments build a kind of gendered cognitive confusion into his voice from the start, not unlike Guido's presence. The Spaniard becomes both mother and father but in doing so rejects the antithetical roles of domesticating mother and conquering father. He neither carves out a post-Edenic, domestic garden, as many women of the nineteenth

¹⁴¹ Susan J. Wolfson was the first scholar to discuss Hemans's tendency to put both genders in play in "'Domestic Affections' and 'the spear of Minerva': Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender."

century attempted to do in the American wilderness,¹⁴² nor does he lay claim to the political or economic legacies of the imperial conqueror; instead, he chooses exile: “We have been wanderers since those days of woe” (620).

While the Spaniard’s emigration represents his resistance to the tyrannical monarchy of Spain reinstated after Napoleon’s demise, his Daniel Boone mentality goes even further to resist both Tory notions of civility and Whig demands for new markets in nineteenth-century North America. In light of the raging debate in British periodicals about the liberal Spanish constitution of 1812,¹⁴³ which mitigated monarchical power and sparked the Spanish Civil War during 1820-23, Hemans’s depiction of the exile in an unchartered land may signal her suspicion of institutions—liberal, conservative or otherwise. The vision of the sixteenth-century North American wilderness helps to elaborate Hemans’s juggling of conservative and liberal, political and economic policies in the nineteenth century. Even after the American Revolution, the United States presented models for a new England. In an 1823 article in the *Quarterly Review* on Dwight’s *Travels in New England*, Robert Southey argues that there were, in fact, two New Englands.¹⁴⁴ In the one, small towns, with their settled urban architecture and market culture, became places for the civilized reproduction of middle class English

¹⁴² Annette Kolodny examines the letters and diaries of frontier women in the early nineteenth century, arguing that the circulation of these written materials among women helped them “to domesticate the strangeness of America” through gardens built into the forests and wilderness (37). See especially her chapter “Gardens in the Wilderness” in *The Land Before Her*.

¹⁴³ See, for example, “Public Affairs.” *Blackwood’s*. January 1823. (43-46); “The Tory. Letter I.” *Blackwood’s*. July 1823. 76-80; “South America.” *Blackwood’s*. January 1824. (134-43); Robert William Hay’s “The Crisis of Spain.” *Quarterly Review*. January 1823. (536-60); William Jacob’s “Chili, Peru & c.” *Quarterly Review*. January 1824. (441-72).

¹⁴⁴ Robert Southey. “Dwight—*Travels in New England and New York*.” *The Quarterly Review*. October 1823. (1-40).

values and virtues. These quickly growing towns were directly contrasted with other “new settlements,” which were built by a different class of men, “foresters, or pioneers” (Dwight qtd. in Southey 37). Southey quotes Dwight explaining that “[t]hese men cannot live in regular society” because “[t]hey are impatient of the restraints of law, religion, and morality; grumble about the taxes, by which rulers, ministers, and school-masters, are supported” (37). Though they “understand medical science, politics, and religion, better than those who have studied them through life” these men, “finding their efforts in vain,” particularly efforts in altering the social and political fabric of their societies, “leave their native places, and betake themselves to wilderness” (37).

Like the Spaniard, these men know too much to operate within the civilities of the country and are forced into what Southey terms the “outlet” of the American wilderness (28). In Southey and Dwight’s view, “A nation planted in this manner, can scarcely be more than half civilized; and to refinement of character and life must necessarily be a stranger” (39). In this typical rhetorical battle between the civilized English and the uncivilizing effects of the wild, foreign countryside, Southey and Dwight both warn their English readers of the necessity for society, especially the habituating institutions of church, school, and the tea table. Hemans’s Spaniard, however, presents a case of the civilized man tramping through uncultivated forest. Through this figure, Hemans dramatically rejects not only the unreformed English imaginary, with its ancient insistence on primogeniture, but also the middle class civility of New England for the strange and foreign unnamed American wilds. The Spaniard roams like a Rousseauvian nomad outside constitutional governments, perhaps enacting something like Deleuze’s deterritorialization, committing to no alliances but the movement through a landscape.

His constant itinerancy purposely undermines any subjective positions rooted in a national or regional notion of home. Even so, the Spaniard retains a code of conduct built on finding the vacancies offered by the American wilderness. Rather than teasing him into an exculpatory confession, the Spaniard's experiences tease him temporarily out of thought and out of time.

When Hemans alludes to yet displaces the Spanish immigrant from normative gender, political, and historical references, the Spaniard is, as Slavoj Žižek would say, "included out" of the American symbolic as a subject who is "included at the very point at which signification breaks down" (*Ticklish* 109). He neither lays claim to what he names the "wilds of the red hunter's land" nor does he seek acceptance in the settlements offered by either his own countrymen or the French Protestants (II.646). The positioning of the Spanish immigrant wandering anonymously in North America essentially posits a parallax or hybrid solution to the dilemma of finding oneself either in or out of ideology and its institutions. Žižek's explanation of Hegel's negativity is suggestive: "Hegel made this point long ago, when he described the double movement of, first, radical self-withdrawal into the 'Night of the World,' the abyss of pure subjectivity, and then the rise of the new order through the capacity of naming: symbolic order and its homeostasis is the human substitute for the loss of natural homeostasis" (*Parallax* 210). After the Spaniard rips himself from the "natural homeostasis" of Spain or a violent state of nature battling in the South American wilds, signification, naming, and language situate the subject in a new homeostatic, or balanced social environment, which can monitor and process cognitions. The "Night of the World," on the other hand, aids the subject in

refusing (or hiding from) those structures and ideologies instantiated by language that define and limit subjectivity.

If Hemans's trope of cognitive overload aims at jolting the subject out of the homeostasis of society into the "Night of the World," then Hemans's immigrant Spaniard does not then become sublated into a new symbolic order. Neither does he find himself in an abyssal, vaginal space that remains forever unscribed. Hemans's construction of America, like Žižek's reading of Hegel, attempts to posit the relationship between the two as a problem that the Spaniard represents. As Žižek goes on to argue: "The standard dialectic between homeostasis and shocks (traumatic encounters) is not enough—in a properly Hegelian perspective, we should bring this opposition to its self-relating: *the ultimate shock is that of the violent imposition of the homeostatic order itself, the drawing of the limit between Inside and Outside*" (Parallax 210). This shock of the imposition of the social homeostatic may be precisely what America presents. Since the Spaniard cannot forever remain in a state of cognitive overload, the conceptual and symbolic realm eventually tries to reassert itself. Yet the Spaniard in America presents the impossible and uncomfortable co-existence of the two, and Hemans finally figures vacancy as the rift that makes conceptual language an uneasy fit onto cognitive data. That is to say, America's emptiness does not represent either access to or negative knowledge of the Absolute but the Absolute as negativity itself. Rather than mimicking a Hegelian dialectic between ideology and its absence, Hemans's move from Spain to America initiates a movement from a vacillating dialectic to negativity, or the crux of

contradictory possibilities that forever imbalance the subject and the subject's ability to symbolize reality.¹⁴⁵

The Spaniard's partial symbolization of America, which effectively refuses ideological structures, is most aptly figured through the Spaniard's final descriptions of the sanctuary itself. If Hemans's America is denuded of other inhabitants or settlements, it does have a certain natural architecture, which posits a new cognitive map for the Spaniard. He does not assert ownership of the North American land so much as he looks to the air and "whispery woods" (I.58) that allow him to properly educate his son with an independent mind. The former conquistador appears in no way preoccupied with tilling or bettering the land through any sort of Lockean proprietary interest. Instead, he is engrossed with the types of perceptual and cognitive encounters this wilderness nurtures: the "magnificent and ancient wild; and mighty rivers, ye that meet the main/ As deep meets deep" (I.84-6). Nancy Goslee has noted Hemans's use of vaginal imagery in the final passages of *The Forest Sanctuary*: "Maternal, sexual, and natural merge as 'night' fulfills all possibilities with its dark vacancy" (244). Yet similar to Robinson's caves in

¹⁴⁵ When the Spaniard finally arrives in the North American wilderness at the end of the poem, his locale is conspicuously evacuated of everything but the somewhat erotic and thought-provoking characteristics of the landscape. Though native populations are nowhere mentioned in Hemans's descriptions of either the South and North American landscape, neither are the other white settlers. Although Hemans does a disservice to Native Americans, the emptiness of the landscape in a poem about cognition is an attempt to clear the mind more than any guise to erase Native Americans from American history. Hemans had certainly read accounts of the Americas that detailed native populations, including Adam Hodgson's *Letters* and Alexander Von Humboldt's *Voyage*, both of which she cites in the poem's footnotes. Moreover, Tricia Lootens argues that the poet, in another poem about America and the Plymouth Rock landing, uses the figure of pilgrim burials in New England as a means of retroactively claiming the land through a poetics of sentimentality, though Lootens also argues that Hemans may complicate this claim with her changing choice of epigraphs. It is the Spaniard's position both within the landscape and outside the English's American imaginary, however, that presents a problem for ideological formations of America and its frontier.

“To the Poet Coleridge,” Hemans’s vacant spaces fill with isolated cognitive events that remain unincorporated into language. The abyss of subjectivity hosts elements of the outside world that present themselves as cognitive problems yet to be solved. This turn to vaginal solutions likewise could be seen as Hemans’s positing feminine lack as a solution to the problem of phallic symbolization. Increasingly, she uses periodic moments of non-signification “as deep meets deep” that stem the return to any phallic signification.

At the poem’s end, the most prominent of these natural materials or “institutions” are the phallic trees combining with or creating a vaginal space of sanctuary. These trees demonstrate that the forest sanctuary is not completely non-symbolized but instead becomes marked with certain material, sensory experiences that spur on further emptying of the symbolic, or moments of vacancy. As opposed to the staunch oak that represented the Spanish aristocracy, here there is the “most secret tone/ Drawn from each tree, for each hath whispers all its own” (II.663-4). In his essay on *The Vespers of Palermo*, Saglia has remarked on Hemans’s use of choric sound to figure the public sphere as a community of voices negotiating social and political problems, and here the forest of trees with its many individual tones might figure a land of religious tolerance, with space enough to give voice to “varying creeds,/ With all that send up holy thoughts on high!” (685-6). This public choral freedom, however, exists in the poem before juridical law or parliamentary procedure instantiates it, and as such seems to place a referendum on the ability of any government to ensure the “secret tones” of free speech and the possibility of full representation. As in Charlotte Smith’s vision of Beachy Head, the landscape offers a vibrant vacancy which cannot be subsumed by conceptual ideologies that

objectify America's natural features. Unlike Smith who finds a "lawfulness outside the law," Hemans turns to subjective experiences that undermine the rules of concepts or laws.

In her final descriptions of the forest sanctuary, Hemans presents readers with cognitive events that both represent and cannot be fully inscribed into a grand American landscape. The Spaniard first acknowledges the danger of filling the bower's emptiness with nostalgic memories of his deceased wife and his Spanish homeland, which are, in part, the detritus of old ideological structures.

In this fresh waste, the breath of whose repose
Hath cool'd, like dew, the fever of my brow,
And whose green oaks and cedars round me close,
As temple-walls and pillars, that exclude
Earth's haunted dreams from their free solitude;
All, save the image and the thought of those
Before us gone; (II.648-53).

Here he reflects on the fact that the bower excludes "Earth's haunted dreams" except his own nostalgic thoughts about his past. He understands that it is his own desire for his past that might mar the "free solitude." The quasi-domestic space creates a circle of trees like a temple around the Spaniard and his son, yet it forms less a hearth than a place where the airy woods can present isolated cognitive events, a schema most fully represented in the final stanza of the poem.

At eve?—oh! through all hours!—From dark dreams oft
Awakening, I look forth, and learn the might

Of solitude, while thou art breathing soft,
And low, my lov'd one! on the breast of night:
I look forth on the stars—the shadowy sleep
Of forests—and the lake, whose gloomy deep
Sends up red sparkles to the fire flies' light.
A lonely world!—ev'n fearful to man's thought,
But for His presence felt, whom here my soul hath sought. (II.692-700)

Only after the Spaniard awakes from those dreams that cloud his view—not only at night but “all hours”—can he “look” and “learn” with some modicum of truth-bound sight. What the Spaniard finally sees is the deep, vaginal spaces of the “breast of night,” the “shadowy sleep/ Of forests” and the “gloomy deep” of the lake, whose darkness represents not repressed memories but cognitive silence or emptiness. These mental gaps are then sprinkled with sensory materials like the stars or the light of fire flies, which rather than unify, outline, or abstract the landscape, represent distinct, individual sensory or subjective positions within an open cognitive terrain. Rather than completely vanquishing signification with absolute silence, Hemans's version of feminine lack constructs experiences of sensory or partial perception that are not subsumed into symbolic meaning. Unlike Kristeva's semiotic, vacancy aims to isolate the movement of perceptions, rhythms, or tones and defer symbolic or semiotic meaning-making. Although the special features of the land generate encounters that can only be interpreted by the mind, the Spaniard's inability or refusal to fully process or conceptualize these moments allows him to remain free from formal or ideological determination, if only in this protected space. In effect, this land cannot stop yielding up its unconscious

cerebrations, which the meditative Spaniard lets pass him by, or refuses to process, suspended in moments of non-meaning.

Hemans likewise signifies these linguistic and neuronal gaps through the rampant use of dashes, which draw the reader's attention to the large number of interlineal pauses in any one stanza—larger than in any other of her poems. The observation of starlight and its correlative in the fireflies is followed in both cases by dashes. More than mere placeholders for the speaker's pause or breath, Hemans's repeated accent on caesurae and other lineal pauses throughout the poem signifies cognitive gaps as part of the Spaniard's thought process. Since the poem consists of a retrospective account, the entire poem is told through the new cognitive perspective the Spaniard has already achieved. He narrates with a poetic voice that includes rampant caesurae as a means of signaling how he has incorporated vacancy into the texture of his thought. As Hemans has the Spaniard proclaim at the poem's start: "Peace—I will *dash* these fond regrets to earth,/ Ev'n as an eagle shakes the cumbering rain/ From his strong pinion" (l.37-39, emphasis mine). She depicts the Spaniard as seeking to rid himself of his nostalgia for Old World Spain, Catholicism, and its patriarchal security, but, with the pun on "dash," she hints to readers that she has a poetic agenda as well. The use of dashes does not simply help make the protagonist's voice lilting and introspective, intensifying the poem's status as a proto-dramatic monologue. The dashes signify—and emphasize—cognitive stutters. Her technique is not too different from Emily Dickinson's own dashes, which often stymie a reader's cognition when they are forced to traverse a dash linking supremely abstract and

particular experiential details.¹⁴⁶ In “The Forest Sanctuary,” perceptual data from starlight or fire flies, which could light up the sky or lake’s “gloomy deep” with meaning, remains to some extent suspended and unconceptualized when surrounded by dashes.

In one sense, this luminosity could represent the resurgence of Enlightenment reason or progressive abstract thought, and it certainly signifies Hemans’s Protestant God—which would, of course, give transcendent meaning to the light’s perceptual *qualia*. For Hemans, the world is lonely and fearful to meaningful thought but for the presence of God. This resuscitation of meaning through a patriarchal religiosity seems again to wrap America (not to mention England and Germany) in a veil of syncretic surety.¹⁴⁷ Hemans ends the poem, however, by qualifying the nature of her Protestant God, a presence “whom here my soul hath sought.” The final “thought”/“sought” rhyme overturns any definitive meaning that God might secure and instead becomes that kind of thought which is always sought after yet never truly pinned down or defined. As each reader might give different meaning to perceptions of starlight, so he might conceptualize the God he seeks as individualized and largely unaccountable. God, like the wild American landscape, cannot be fully identified or incorporated with the perceptual material of its unconscious, which leaves America, like the Spaniard’s mind, partially unsymbolized. It also perhaps renders the landscape, like God, as feminized by lack—

¹⁴⁶ For a summary of scholarship on Dickinson’s dash, see Deidre Fagan’s essay, “Dickinson’s Unutterable Word,” where she argues that the dash represents a linguistic, cognitive blankness.

¹⁴⁷ Discussing Hemans’s earlier poem “Superstition and Revelation” (1820). Daniel White argues that Hemans’s project is wrapped up in a cosmopolitan religiosity that attempts to “see back, through a historical consciousness, to a period when Christian truth was immanent” (275). See his article “‘Mysterious Sanctity’: Sectarianism and Syncretism from Volney to Hemans.”

something sought but never found, which continually marks the limits of understanding as well as the limits of oppressive phallic signifying structures.

America's emptiness figures the incomplete ability of the Spaniard to incorporate it, as the embodiment of the Spaniard's greatest material and idealistic desire, into a signifying system. At the same time, pre-conceived ideas of America—from both the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries—do not offer the Spaniard any solid place in the symbolic realm of the New World. Even at the end of the poem, he remains nameless. In this way it would be easy to suppose that America is the Spaniard's, if not Hemans's, *objet petit a*, the unattainable, only partially symbolized object of desire that carries with it a trace of the Real, the abyss of subjectivity, and the vortex of uncollated cognitions. America, through the Spaniard's eyes, is always about to be symbolized, yet can never fully be accounted for, in large part because it is, ultimately, the "red hunter's land," the sign of the Other.

If Hemans's Spaniard first encounters free thinking through the trauma of trance-like paralysis, then he ends in a meditative state that cognizes without complete cognition itself. Most commentators discussing Hemans's use of voices, song, or sound eventually rely on models of either transcendence or immanence,¹⁴⁸ yet Hemans's final, visual movement in "The Forest Sanctuary" seems closer to a version of meditation that partially empties the mind. Unlike Buddhist versions of meditation that seek to encounter

¹⁴⁸ See especially Saglia's excellent article on Hemans's voice, "'A deeper and richer music': The Poetics of Sound and Voice in Felicia Hemans's 1820s Poetry." There he argues that voice's disembodied yet situated character allows Hemans to straddle the human and the divine, which further enables her "resist and correct" notions of the transcendent through culturally emplaced voices (366). See also Jason Rudy's chapter on Hemans in his forthcoming *Electric Meters* and John M. Anderson, "The Triumph of Voice in Felicia Hemans's *The Forest Sanctuary*."

the wholeness of the subject and the world, Hemans's new cognitive geography seems to rest in the gap of cognition or the caesura of articulation. As a final figure for the mind attempting to release itself from ideological and linguistic habituations, the forest sanctuary comes to offer not the nothingness that then must be inscribed with European values, but instead an emptiness that resists full co-optation by those very agendas.

The Spaniard's narrative accomplishes this with some unusual temporal maneuvers. The forest sanctuary exists in a future anterior time, a place that would have been had a Spanish Protestant migrated to America in the late sixteenth century. The second part of the poem drifts into a future that might have happened in the past, but did not. Not unlike Robinson's potentiality, Hemans posits historical change as a counterfactual, which rather than reading current knowledge or archeology back through historical accounts, attempts to alter or anticipate any reified futurity by creating an interstitial moment in the past. Her use of the retrospective account, then, with a narrative speaker who has always already experienced cognitive overload, infiltrates the reader with a voice already ruined with historical contingency, even as he recounts the shock and trauma that led him to that type of knowledge. Similar to Guido's infiltration of the tyrant's ranks through the cover of "wrought" music, Hemans's poetry carries with it the historical ruination that constantly posits an interstitial moment in the past that poses futurity as itself a counterfactual. Readers cannot help but be infected with a feminine lack of knowledge that destabilizes their own long held narratives or beliefs.

The freedom inherent in this temporal gap comes by way of Hemans's work to provide instances of cognitive liberation. Vacancy, as a cognitive pause that lies in the friction between sensory data and conceptual abstraction, gives Hemans's characters an

unusual sort of freedom. She grants unconscious cognition as much credence as conscious thought processes and gives her characters agency through the material and mechanical inner-workings of their brains, even as she privileges non-volitional thought and action, such as the trance or meditative state. Unlike gothic (or Freudian) models of repression, which depict emotional and sexual desires released into outrageous ways, the unleashing of unconscious cerebration in Hemans's poetry redefines freedom as a cognitive refusal. Perhaps prefiguring John Stuart Mill's notion of freedom as a negative "freedom from" rather than a "freedom to," Hemans's notion of liberation does not encourage readers either to do whatever they want, as their instincts dictate, or to follow the institutional law as a guarantor of universal rights. Instead, vacancy cedes them the freedom to refuse those desires and laws imbued with linguistic and ideological habituations. Ultimately, art, like the forest sanctuary, offers her characters pause to manage ideology or to be momentarily freed from its necessity.

Chapter 5. Maria Jane Jewsbury's Childlike, Ethical Vision

Felicia Hemans was not the only writer who attempted to envision a place outside England as a means of vacating patriotic, domestic roles for women. Maria Jane Jewsbury, a good friend and correspondent of Hemans's, chooses a similar tactic when she poetically represents her own journey from England to India as she accompanied her husband to his new post as a chaplain of the East India Company. She publishes a series of twelve poems in *The Athenaeum*, entitled "The Oceanides" (1832-33), sending each part back to England from various ports along the way. The sequence begins with the speaker lamenting her departure from her family and England but ends as she says goodbye to friends found at sea. The bulk of the sequence recounts the undoing of an English woman's subjectivity as she faces a dearth of nationalistic reference along the sea and increasingly looks forward to an encounter with the exotic, Indian other. Jewsbury's poems go even further than Hemans's Spaniard or Charlotte Smith's hermit of *Beachy Head* when they plot an escape from geography altogether for the groundless seascape of a transnational journey. In doing so, she dramatizes the speaker's exuberance and terror at being ripped from the English imaginary, a tactic that in turn offers her new ways of viewing the Indian landscape and thinking about her Indian life yet to come.

In one of the few scholarly pieces written on "The Oceanides," Diego Saglia has testified to Jewsbury's "mobile domesticity," arguing that the poem "dramatize[s] the contact with otherness and the dismantling of absolute points of reference" (220). He goes on to suggest that "the very act of self-location, of looking for a place, becomes a form of dislocation—the site of the subject is that of a vacuum that cannot be filled" (220). This encounter with the exotic other, he suggests, repeatedly and increasingly

vacates both self and home such that they must be constantly recreated and must remain at least partially open-ended or averse to ideological prerogatives. While this reading goes a long way to credit Jewsbury with an alternate response to empire and the Romantic imperial imagination, I would like to discuss more specifically how Jewsbury's poem involves a much broader attempt to alter perception and visual epistemologies as she sets her sights on unknown oceans and foreign soil.

Similar to Smith's tactics, Jewsbury's mode of vacancy seeks to undermine naturalized British and especially Indian landscapes, displacing literary and visual culture's avowal of pastoral representations that saw women and colonial natives as unthinking, natural objects. Rather than Smith's aporia, however, Jewsbury uses verbal images and the technology surrounding gothic and popular image production to distance representations from their naturalized referents or embodied realities. In this way, she models vacancy as a verbal tool that destabilizes pictorial representation and the biological, scientific ideologies about the body such representation accrued. This visual brand of vacancy uses language or verbal images to disrupt the power of the gaze even as it highlights visual representation as a sign system that can be manipulated. By playing with pliant images of the human body and the landscape, she demonstrates how ontological differences marked on the body by nineteenth-century sciences from phrenology to evolution are actually representational ones.¹⁴⁹ Jewsbury's images are pictures with certain details left out, visual representations that always exist in asymptotic relationship to their referents. In the imaginary world concocted adrift on the ocean, she

¹⁴⁹ Though the nineteenth century has long been discussed as a period that consolidated biological racism and classism under the auspices of Malthus, Darwin, and sciences like phrenology and anthropology, Peter J. Kitson has recently written specifically on the Romantic context in *Romantic Literature, Race, and Colonial Encounter*.

develops a skepticism toward images that has to do with their partially immaterial nature and their ability as representations to occlude meaning.

The methodology of this chapter thus shifts from placing poets in conversation with contemporaneous philosophers or philosophy and instead discusses Jewsbury in the context of the nineteenth-century material culture. This poet necessitates a slightly different method because she channels her philosophical thinking about vacancy, perception, and high Romanticism through the popular gothic genre and visual culture's innovations such as the phantasmagoria. Yet her use of images as a sign system to produce skepticism about visual meaning places her in a continuum with other authors who employ language to produce non-knowledge. As Jewsbury stands at the end of a long line of Romantic poets grappling with language, it makes sense that this model of vacancy poses another medium, the image, as a means of undermining pastoral, gendered, or racialized language. She imbues poetry with the ideological critique amassed from both gothic culture and the tradition of Romantic meditations between the word and the image.¹⁵⁰ More importantly, in her playful stance toward icons, images, and illusions, she presents the road not taken by Hemans. In "The Forest Sanctuary," that poet eschews Catholic idolatry and sets out to obliterate images and signs that shore up patriarchal, imperialist credos. Jewsbury, quite playfully, takes an opposing position. Rather than consuming images or being consumed by the male gaze, she proactively produces a host of images to vacate women's complicated position as an overwritten visual object.

¹⁵⁰ See especially Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*.

While recent studies on Romantic visual culture have plotted the “return of the real” in the material culture of paintings, political cartoons, and picture shows, easy connections between pictures, material culture, and social relations only exacerbate women’s confinement as the scopophilic object of male viewing.¹⁵¹ As Teresa de Lauretis has argued in *Alice Doesn’t*, woman is both the “telos and origin” of viewing, the material (unthinking) grounds of a picture and the idealized object of male desire (13). Jewsbury’s epistemology resembles de Lauretis’ suggestion that women might combat cinematic fantasies produced about them by intervening in visual semiotics with their own liberating illusions. Rather than denying the hold images had on women and their perceptions, Jewsbury stymies consumption with a creative production of her own images. This visionary production grapples with ideological ways of perceiving as she tries to reimagine other “conditions of visibility” (de Lauretis 68).

One of these conditions is the potential for images to manifest non-knowledge and vacancy. By the end of the sequence, Jewsbury comes to picture two different but related types of vacant images. First, she constructs a double vision by superimposing European and Indian landscapes onto each other, a technique reminiscent of the diorama that initiates comparison and undermines visual myths and stereotypes. By asking what it might mean to put pictures of the Indian Himalayas and the European Alps in conversation, she prods her viewers to look on the “world as childhood new” (IX.17). Second, she ends the poem with a final image of an infant, which serves as an allegory for those moments before reified knowledge of the world. As a kinesthetic image,

¹⁵¹ Both Gillen D’Arcy Wood’s *The Shock of the Real* and William Galperin’s *The Return of the Visible* are two such representative histories.

moreover, the growing infant presents the provocation for a type of visuality that exceeds or refuses to submit to codified viewing.¹⁵²

Jewsbury arrives at these solutions by experimenting with and rejecting several different models of vacancy, which resemble types of vacancy explored by Robinson and Wordsworth. When the speaker first comes into contact with the ocean, and its terrifying threat of literal and figurative death, she attempts to tie herself down to reality through the material objects in her cabin brought from England. Eventually, however, she turns to embrace the alterity of the Ocean by depicting her encounter with it as a conversation with multiple oceanic personas—including the Ocean, the Waves, and the Oceanides. Through this strategy, Jewsbury not only explodes the notion of a patriarchal, domineering, wrathful sea that works as the weapon of a justice-seeking Old Testament God, but she presents ethics as an encounter with a multiplicity of others. In constructing something like Byronic or Robinsonian multiplicity, the excessive heterogeneity of these representations surpasses similitude or the confines of reality, ensuring difference while idealistically hoping to shape alternate realities.

After this potentially freeing but problematic projection, Jewsbury subsequently plots the speaker returning to visions of England once more, only now, rather than turning to domestic objects, she composes nostalgic images of family and friends upon the blank surface of the ocean. This version of the imagination vacates the limitations of reality, such as the body, place, and time and tends toward Wordsworthian transcendence, allowing people to connect over great distances. When disembodied connection finally fails, however, the speaker shifts back in the other direction, looking toward India for

¹⁵² For further reading on Romanticism and the anamorphic image, see Wang's "Coming Attractions: *Lamia* and Cinematic Sensation."

new kinds of encounters. In a move typical of Romantic women poets, the breakdown of this Romantic trope propels Jewsbury toward a third solution that mediates between transcendence and multiplicity.

She finally settles on a model for the production of images that focuses on how imagined encounters with the colonial other might create both an ethics of encounter and skepticism about alterity itself. Using the language of dreams and visions, Jewsbury imagines images of English and Indian landscapes that are tenuously connected to reality and readily malleable to provoke comparison between the two cultures. Rather than underlining either universal similarities or important, untraversable distances inherent in comparisons, the poet uses similes to make apparent the gap of the unknown between two images that remain twinned in perception. Thus vacancy ultimately presents poetry itself—the “as” of comparison—as the witness and provocation for an ethics of viewing. These unthinkable analogies, for Jewsbury, are precisely the point, highlighting the extent to which one can never fully see or fully know the Other. This way of seeing offers a self-conscious awareness that the responsible way of approaching the Other is without preconceptions, in a childlike state of wonder. Her technique preserves and highlights the special vacancy of imagined pictures, whose only partial representation present blind spots that keep us looking and reevaluating our ways of viewing. In this way, Jewsbury’s ideas about spectral images might be compared to Jacques Derrida’s “new international” with its bond of affiliation. It might also be compared to his use of Emmanuel Levinas to consider how phantasmic, visual encounters with others productively rupture one’s own totalizing, signifying system. Rather than Levinas’s authentic approach to the other,

however, Jewsbury summons the final figure of an infant as an allegory about how to greet the image of the Other with new eyes, in friendship.

“Waking Dreams of—Far away”: Vacating Reality

From the moment of its inception, “The Oceanides” is a poem about the literal and figurative dynamics of transport, a meditation on how the act of traveling gives rise to newer, playful models of thought. Though the few scholars who have written on Jewsbury have taken this poem as the record of her actual, emotional journey from Manchester to India, she wrote another account of the trip that might fit this role much better. Her “Extracts from a Lady’s Log-Book” were printed in the *Athenaeum* in December 1832, before the first part of “The Oceanides” was published there.¹⁵³ The shift from prose to poetry, among other things, might be viewed as a movement from the genre of realistic travelogue to that of poetry exploring a cognitive sea change, as sensory perception gives way to imaginary images tenuously moored to reality. Perhaps most intriguing, the poem’s mode of production inherently enacts this separation from reality. Jewsbury, composing as she went along the voyage, sent the poems back in parts from ports to the periodical, so that the poem was published intermittently. Whatever number a reader might be perusing in England through the pages of the *Athenaeum*, Jewsbury had already vacated that spot and left behind whatever semblance of reality the poem might have aggregated. Not only are these individual poems belated, but they already bear an estranged relationship to their original site of composition.

¹⁵³ Two excerpts from the Log-Book appear in *The Athenaeum* on December 1, 1832 and December 22, 1832. The first poem in “The Oceanides” sequence appears there on December 29th.

The first two poems in the sequence detail the fear and excitement of both dislocation and transport from England. More powerfully, they describe the initial loss of the English symbolic and the speaker's knee-jerk response to secure her English identity through domestic objects. As introductory poems, they reveal the mutual responses that simultaneously pull the speaker back to English reality and toward the ocean imagination. She begins by describing the ship that will carry her away.

She is on her way, a goodly ship,
With her tacklings loosed, her pilot gone;
Behind, beneath, around, the deep,
And far the land where she beareth on:
Fading, fast fading, yonder lie

The last of her home, the hills of Devon (I.1-6)

The first lines depict a vessel that has lost its tacklings and its pilot. The last, tenuous ropes anchoring the ship to the English shore are “loosed,” and the navigator charged with steering the ship out of its port has vanished. Yet the poem as a whole cuts much larger, figurative ties to England, which is “Fading, fast fading” and by the end of the poem will disappear almost completely. The ship not only pulls away from the hills of Devon but creates a new world amid the empty symbolic of the ocean. The vessel becomes a mechanism of transport that will alight upon the other realities created when signification and identity are intrepidly unmoored from familiar, English terrain. The poet goes on to describe the ship: “To those who watch her from the strand,/ She is but a cloud ‘mid sea and air!” (I.9-10). To those English on the docks, the ship already appears groundless, like a “cloud ‘mid sea and air,” floating between earth and sky.

The second half of this poem foreshadows the tendency for the confines of the ship to evoke both nostalgic images loaded with ties to the past and also more productive attempts at imagining a relationship with the Indian Other, waiting at the other end of the journey. At first, any sensory stimulation transports the speaker into a waking life of the past. Listening to the ship's band, she remarks, "Tunes gathered from the north and south" seem to call out "Arouse thee," evoking "waking dreams of—Far away" (I.27, 25, 32). Even more than the music, "the sea itself wakes more," stimulating dreams of England "With her rills, and flowers, and steadfastness,/ Till sick thoughts in the soul have birth,/ And loath'd is the foaming wilderness" (I.38-40). By the end of this introductory poem, the virtual Indian tropics win out over a romanticized England:

No more, no more: we are on our way:
The tropics are gained, and who would pine
For the pallid sun of an English day?
For the glittering cold of its night's moonshine?
No more, no more—why pine for flowers,
If DUTY our Indian amaranth be?
If we look to the land that shall soon be ours,
A land where is "no more sea"! (I.41-8)

On first reading, the sea appears to vacate the stability of English domesticity and feminine life, which landing in India would, in turn, ameliorate by eschewing the uncomfortable, ungrounded the seascape. This double vacancy would define India in the negative, as a paradise gained by virtue of the fact that it is not the chaotic imaginary of the sea. It would represent "A land where is 'no more sea'," even if it cannot not offer

the security and stability of England. Yet the rhetorical structure of the stanza belies a more important discovery, which the sea and India eventually afford this English traveler. The first quatrain sets up a paradoxically pro-English, nostalgic structure with its initial rhymes of “No more, no more” with “For the pallid sun” and “For the glittering cold,” both references to England’s climate. The second “No more, no more” is answered, however, with two conditional “If” statements that point to a vision of India as a conditional state of mind, vacated of English expectations or norms. The English inherit a “DUTY,” or ethical responsibility, to face the Indian landscape without the burden of the English imaginary.

This ethics simultaneously doubles as a tax associated with Indian amaranth, or grain. The parataxis of the line makes it unclear whether there is a duty exacted on the amaranth or on the “freighted” English passengers themselves, a payment that essentially exchanges English flowers for Indian amaranth. This relationship is connected rhetorically, moreover, by the repetition of “pine” in lines forty-two and forty-five. In the first instance, the speaker nostalgically asks who would pine for either England’s barely sunny days or its cold nights. In the second, she contrasts English flowers and Indian amaranth. This relational, comparative rhetoric signals the ends of Jewsbury’s tactics of vacancy, as a mode of imaginative thinking that rips both English and Indian signifiers from their rooted, signified, nationalized status and allows linguistic or visual analogy to put them into conversation, in an imagined world that holds both English and Indian flowers. Amaranth, which in Greek means “the never-fading flower,” was used as a food source in the Americas especially by Aztecs and Native Americans yet was widely known throughout the world as a cosmopolitan grain and herb in a number of different

varieties. It may be no mistake that the speaker sets her sights on this ubiquitous, cosmopolitan flower, which cannot solely signify an essential India. This imagined representative of India is by definition linked to relationships of exchange and opposed to British flowers that remain rooted objects of beauty. Amaranth's versatility does not signify India as a vacant, blank slate; instead, it suggests a fruitful image that abounds with comparative references.

As the speaker begins number II, "My Sea-Hermitage," however, fear gets the best of her. In the face of "Seas that have for man no ground," she nostalgically tries to recreate a piece of England on board the ship (II.4). In this poem, the speaker struggles to isolate real objects from perceptions, representations, or images, and realizes how any visual representation is already one step removed from reality. This revelation, however, rather than propelling her to deny vision altogether, starts her down the path of inventing images that will wrest representational control from the patriarchal gaze.

In the face of the sea's vacancy of landed referents, the speaker attempts to create a sea hermitage, or a domestic space that might stem the tide of the ocean's threatening, tumultuous squalls.

Yet a wanderer o'er thy waves,
(Call them liquid land of graves)
Frail as feather in the breeze,
I am in my cot at ease!—
All thy dreaded storms forgot,
All thy strength as it were not,
Heaving with thee, as a child

With its mother's pulses mild,
Looking on thy billows' sway
As that child on lambs at play;
Not a shore from east to west,
Not a fear within my breast (II.31-42).

These “dreaded storms” can, as in other women writers, be seen as the fits and starts of sensibility—her fear of drowning at sea but also the *terra incognita* that lies at the end of this oceanic road trip. As a kind of prophylactic, the speaker sketches a scene from the English pastoral as a refuge from both the sea and the greater “city” of the ship. She feminizes the ocean billows as a mother's gentle breathing, recreating a domestic tableau where a child rests on maternal breasts or rides on young lambs. By likening herself to a child who playfully sways along with the ocean, the speaker domesticates the scene, grounding the waves as either a mother's breast or an animal's back, which are already secured by their material nature. To combat the vacating force of the ocean, the speaker summons the tropes of sympathy, as well as its tangible, affective atmosphere. While here the infant figure is nostalgic, attached as it is to a quintessential English childhood spent playing in a romanticized pastoral, later in the poem, the child comes to represent a less-grounded, inquisitive, non-teleological way of interacting with the increasingly foreign world.

This poem eventually coalesces around the speaker's recapitulation of the objects that might recreate a feminine hermitage:

And my cabin full of all
That may lessen sense of thrall;

Books, read last amid green hills
With their poetry of rills; —
Miniatures of friends afar,
Each a fond memorial star; —
Birds that singing in their cage
Make my ocean-hermitage
Have a sound and look of hours,
That once tread on moss and flowers (II.43-52).

The speaker desires to fill the oceanic depths of vacancy with a cabin full of things. Each of these objects—books, miniatures, and birds—lessen the speaker’s fear of the sea’s thrall by anchoring her to a familiar version of feminine embodiment. They likewise supply crucial visual and aural material reminiscent of better days in England. Like Wordsworth’s “sad still music of humanity” that shores up his identity through the memories that poetry preserves and recreates, the speaker superficially claims that her books will preserve that self last seen “amid green hills.” Her “poetry of rills,” moreover, might act similarly to Wordsworth’s daffodils, which “flash up on the inward eye” while he is “in vacant or pensive mood” filling his heart with the transcendent pleasure that only a fragile, imagined union with nature might give.¹⁵⁴ Yet even as the speaker

¹⁵⁴ Jewsbury admired Wordsworth so much that she dedicated her first book to him, and this request for patronage eventually amounted to a correspondence with his daughter Dora and a short visit to Rydal. Wordsworth encouraged Jewsbury to stop writing poetry and instead concentrate on prose, particularly an account of neglected British women poetesses. Though Jewsbury may have been in favor of treating feminine writers separately while in England, her poem written abroad seems to engage with Wordsworthian poetics in a way she perhaps could not as she sought the patronage and favor of the great poet at home. For biographical accounts of Jewsbury’s personal and literary relationship to the Wordsworths, see Dennis Low, “Gold and Silver Fishes in a

amasses these sensations that might lead her to recapitulate memory and a consolidated English (or pre-oceanic) identity, she has revealed the already-simulated quality of memories, whose instability grows with each league placed between the speaker and her longed-for green hills. Her books and birds cannot be sufficient in and of themselves but must always refer to a nostalgic past, that elusive romanticized pastoral of moss and flowers.

This slippage of the pastoral into the imagination comes close to Jean Baudrillard's delineation of simulacra, as images that "mask and denature" and eventually vitiate reality (6). Unlike Baudrillard, however, Jewsbury increasingly establishes simulation as a subversive tactic, one which has the potential to change reality by loosening it from the iron-clad grasp of the real and its gender-bound epistemologies and embodied stereotypes. Though these images of cabin objects attempt to nail down British domesticity even upon the ocean, these books, miniatures, and birds cannot but help to evoke a picture of past days spent lounging in the pastoral. Jewsbury's contemplation of domestic objects ultimately evokes the pastoral as an imagined place that marks it as impossibly unreal. Directed at England and the English pastoral, Jewsbury's descriptions enact what Baudrillard calls the "liquidation of all referentials" (2), yet unlike Baudrillard's simulacra they become an important libratory technique for women writers, who were too often tied down to their embodied roles as purveyors of sympathy, charged with reproducing English habits and domestic spaces within the

Vase: a Portrait of Wordsworth and Maria Jane Jewsbury." See also Norma Clarke's study of the Jewsbury-Hemans-Clarke literary circle, *Ambitious Heights. Writing, Friendship, Love—The Jewsbury Sisters, Felicia Hemans, and Jane Carlyle*.

“wilderness” of the subcontinent.¹⁵⁵ As de Lauretis has suggested about feminist cinema, Jewsbury’s imaging does not “negate illusion and destroy visual pleasure, but [acts] to problematize” the terms of vision (63). In the next several poems, the poet turns to do just that when she undermines the patriarchal hold over images of women and domesticity, asserting representational control by creating her own images of the ultimate patriarch, God.

Oceanic Debates, Imagined Conversations

In the following three-poem sequence (numbers III, IV, and V), Jewsbury brilliantly troubles a most powerful anchor in representational schemes, the Old Testament God. Opposing his commandment against idolatrous representation, she produces several images or idols of the sea, which act as God’s proxies, and these representations undermine his ability to establish an ultimate point of reference. At first the ocean appears as merely a figure for the sublime that terrorizes the speaker as she weathers several storms. Soon enough the sea speaks, announcing himself as the judicial hand of God: “By me his wrath is oftenest hurled” (III.11). One would expect this version of the Kantian sublime to threaten the speaker with fragmentation, dissolution, and the ultimate alterity, death, but then lead the way for her to shore up a unified, human subjectivity as a moral being. In “The Oceanides,” however, it is the sea that becomes a multiple, unstable entity at the hands of the poet. Jewsbury explodes the singular, Christian, sublime, transcendent God when she orchestrates a series of apostrophes by

¹⁵⁵ As Betty Joseph has recently argued, there has come to be a rich literature about the power and place of memsahibs as the British settled India and increasingly began using ideologies of cultural superiority (often modeled by white women) to justify British rule in the subcontinent (*Reading the East India Company, 1720-1840* 106-8).

Homeric deities, constructing the sea as Oceanus-Isaiah, the sirens, and then the Oceanides.¹⁵⁶ Jewsbury thus foregrounds the constructed nature of visibility, gender, and even our notions of God with her own rampant production of idols.

In this section, vacancy deracinates unitary subjectivity, reality, and most importantly any single image that would represent transcendent meaning and instead offers a Robinsonian multiplicity of images, each pointing to a different aspect of godliness. This colloquy of gods and humans lends itself to the form of the multi-part poem, which allows different speakers to take center stage. Through this imagined roundtable, Jewsbury constructs a multi-voiced perspective that Michael Macovski calls “a proliferating matrix of tongues” in his book, *Dialogue and Literature* (5). More historically, Jewsbury’s formal dynamics are certainly influenced by phantasmagoria and moving picture shows. In the nineteenth century, phantasmagoria were often used for religious instruction or deemed acceptable entertainment for those middle-class families who felt the theatre was too crude or controversial (Altick 220, 229, 182-3). Moreover, the Greek undertone of the poem is apt not only as a religious counterpoint but, as Wang has discussed in relation to *Lamia*, “Greek antiquity provided a ‘surface of inscription’ for all these heterogeneous social and epistemological energies” (477).

Finally, because Jewsbury represents the Ocean destroying ships involved with capitalistic or imperial prerogatives, her vacancy is replete with skepticism for material goods and materiality. Her duplicitous “imaging” becomes a critique of both imperial

¹⁵⁶ Since the sea nymphs go by the name “Oceanides,” it would follow that their Greek god and father would be Oceanus, not Poseidon or Nereus. Poseidon was technically the ocean god of the Mediterranean, but Oceanus represented as ruling over all earthly waters, so he would make sense as a figure of the ocean during a voyage from England to India.

histories and the imperial imagination. She uses the excess and exchangeability inherent in commodity culture and channels it into an abounding spirituality—less a communion with supernatural ghosts than with anthropomorphic spirits. This self-reflexive embrace of anthropomorphic idols not only brings God closer to humans, and vice versa, but this series of poems crucially imports into the poem the connection between the phantasmic nature of commodity, encounters with alterity, and ethics.

Despite the speaker's attempt to anchor herself in a domestic hermitage, she displaces her fear of the sea onto what she imagines to be an angry, destructive deity. As the speaker says in the first lines of number III, the ocean, as God's hand, wields an even more powerful vacancy than man's own violent nature:

And thou—world's curse and blessing—MAN,
Creating, desolating all
That mind may gather in its span—
Stand forth, and bear a mightier thrall! (III.5-8)

The injunction to “stand forth” and “bear a mightier thrall” forces man to bow under the destructive force of the Ocean, who institutes God's justice. In comparison to man's own destructive (and creative) force, which desolates so that his “mind may gather in its span,” the ocean vitiates the possibility that the mind could regroup. At the very beginning of the passage, Jewsbury signals that her sequential representations of the vacating, devouring sea, will come to bear on the mind, which will not be able to recapitulate itself so easily.

After this description, the first of the oceanic speakers announces himself, as part Greek god Oceanus, part Old Testament prophet replete with power and rhetorical

reasoning, threatening the speaker's life and general constitution. "The Burden of the Sea," begins with an epigraph from Isaiah XXIII, describing the Lord's destruction of Tyre and its merchants who return to their port city only to find themselves without a fortress or a harbor. Jewsbury presents the Ocean here as a similarly wrathful prophet: "I am thy prophet—puny world,/ 'Tis God himself that speaks by me" (III.9-10). Just as Isaiah announces the demise of world-famous merchants, so the sea proclaims, "my weeds are mightier things" (15) and "I mock at man—the same to me/ The royal fleet, the pirate vile" (32). The Ocean mocks human "weeds," clothing or other material merchandize, equally disgusted with both piracy and sanctioned government trading. One might go so far as to see Jewsbury mocking the distinction between the East India Company's trading policies and those of the British government in the post-Hastings era. Regardless, the Ocean stands as the ethical corrective to England's imperial superiority and exceptionalism, based as it was on its royal fleets and its merchant marines, especially those ships that helped to create both the middle class and the British Empire through trade with India.

If the Ocean vacates the earthly desires associated with capital and comes to represent the ultimate alterity inherent in death, as an anthropomorphic personification, the Ocean brings this alterity into proximity with the speaker. This great oceanic force and puny mankind are repeatedly described in relation to one another. First the Ocean explains: "Yet I am one, or calm or heaving,/ The changing or the changeless sea" (37-38). In the next lines, the Ocean describes itself as an instrument of God's justice striking down and equalizing all men: "And victor, vanquished—joyous, grieving/ But one, is mortal man to me" (39-40). As the Ocean reveals its long history of drowning

merchants at sea and denuding them of their material commodities, this speech likewise navigates the Ocean and men into a conversation, or more accurately, into an analogical relation with each other. Both Ocean and man are at once diversely represented as changing or changeless, joyous or grieving, yet both are “one,” representations of universality related to the eternal, vacating hand of God. Both possess a materiality that puts them at the mercy of God—man’s mortality and the Ocean’s liquid power—and both ultimately crave the immaterial knowledge of that which is beyond their physical dimensions.

In essence, both exist in an asymptotic relationship to God, or knowledge itself. As the Ocean proclaims in the following stanza: “I know not little, know not great—/ [...] / The hollow of his hand I know” (45, 48). Knowledge of God is unavailable, even for the Ocean, who only knows “the hollow of his hand” or an empty space just next to God. In this way representations of the ocean and man travel toward but cannot arrive at that empty “one” or “hollow” that consistently displaces signification or concrete knowledge. It is this void that encourages Jewsbury to concoct multiple images of God such as the figure of the Ocean.

This multiplicity of the sea speaks to the notion that whatever God might be, he is already an image to be tarried and played with at the level of signification. Her position comes close to Derrida’s when he disputes the idea that fatherly specters shore up the patriarchy and suggests that they in fact map a way out of the ultimate patriarchal signifier.¹⁵⁷ As he writes in *Specters of Marx*: “The religious is thus not just one ideological phenomenon or phantomatic production among others. On the one hand, it

¹⁵⁷ Orrin N. C. Wang, in “Ghost Theory,” sides with Derrida’s claim that hauntology might provoke revolution, arguing that this legacy remains paramount for Romanticism.

gives to the production of the ghost or of the ideological phantasm its originary form or its paradigm of reference, its first ‘analogy.’ On the other hand, [...] the religious also informs, along with the messianic and eschatological, be it in the necessarily undetermined, empty, abstract, and dry form that we are privileging here, that ‘spirit’ of emancipatory Marxism” (166-7). Derrida divulges the structure of specters, first manufactured through representations or analogies of God not simply as nostalgia for the past but as specters that conjure up what might be, in the future-to-come. Though Jewsbury does not necessarily view vacancy as a mode of futurity, as does Smith, the point to be made here is that she does use the simulated nature of the deity as an emancipatory structure—rather than a defensive one—precisely because the of the way phantasms produce a critical distance from materiality, history, and imperial realities. Ultimately, Jewsbury’s specters of the ocean critique the ocean’s domination and related British imperial prowess underwritten by Christian superiority.

The possibility that these images of God lead to ethics or to freedom becomes apparent once the poet represents the ocean’s other faces, which also characterize the voices of others. In part IV, “The Sunken Rock,” the ocean continues to speak to the seagoers in a domineering voice, but with a more taunting, manipulative agenda. The specter of the prophet transforms into something like a siren. The “waves” increasingly mock the passengers for their anxiety along with the cautious “seaman grey” for his fear of rocks “sunken or seen” and his rational use of “chart and line” (6, 36, 37). Then they attempt to entice passengers to give up on the pilot and let them take the helm:

We will love and leave thee never;

We will tell our secrets thee;

And thou shalt be for ever,

Our nursling of the sea! (47-50)

If, in part III, the Ocean acted under the reasoning and rhetorical paternal sign, this new incarnation of the Waves attempts to charm the passengers with love, sympathy, secrets, and the care of a governess or mother figure. Yet directly in the next stanza we see that this is merely a seductive ploy to capture the ship: “She sinks in our arms as if drunk or asleep; —/ Down with her, fathoms, fathoms deep,—” (53-54). The Ocean that turned its nose up at acquisition in number III now reveals another face, with a plot to possess the ship, drowning passengers in a suffocating embrace. This domineering, feminine voice lulls voyagers with her songs even as she seduces them not with sex but with the promise of palliation and comfort. The Waves are part possessive mother and part sirens whose acquisitive, manipulative nature leads travelers to their deaths.

At this point the eponymous Oceanides appear, another feminine aspect of the sea, to lament the fate of the passengers and the ire of their “father sea.”

We are daughters of the deep,

Yet, because his daughters, weep

That the sound of human woe

Through our caverned halls should flow (84-87)

Thus the Oceanides step in not to mediate but to express their woe, pitying men and lamenting the Ocean, who is “stern and full of death” (90). These voices can do nothing but express their regret and sympathy for “a mightier race than we!”:

We would save, but we are weak

[...]

We may pity their great need,
And, when hushed is foam and surge,
Sing, as now, their funeral dirge;
Hide awhile the limbs of youth
From some monster's ravening tooth,
Bind sea blooms round beauty's locks
[...]

But 'tis all that we can do (92, 97-102, 106)

The daughters of the sea, then, serve as the affective balm to the sea's wrathful, deathly prerogative. Without any power to act against him, all they can do is lament the fate of the humans, save them from further mutilation by flesh-eating sea-dwellers, and, most interestingly, augment their beauty with flowers. These characteristics help to frame the Oceanides as the sympathetic feminine voice (as opposed to the Waves' false promise to take the ship as its "nursling"), but more pointedly the Oceanides represent feminine writing. These water nymphs mourn their way through rhyming couplets, and their speech articulates the sensibility, sympathy, and high emotion often associated with women writers in the Romantic period. The Oceanides view their proper place as dwelling among the graves of the dead, memorializing them with dirges and preserving their bodies as long as they can. Most significantly, they transform dead humans into aesthetic objects, decorating them with flowers, or marks of ineffectual, impotent, material beauty.

The Oceanides, as the eponymous protagonists of the poem, pose a feminist critique to the masculine, wrathful, rhetorically minded Ocean.¹⁵⁸ These female voices, however, do not simply reassert the necessity for pitying, affective sympathy. Together the differing aspects of the sea show the ineffectuality of both material acquisitions and embodied sentimentality. In their place, the speaker develops a new kind of sympathy through the techniques of visualization, where one vision or perception of the ocean does not overwrite another but is placed next to it, as one of many neighboring images. This phantasmic production of anthropomorphic images of God, which speak as if they were living, not only resembles Derrida's hauntology but W. J. T. Mitchell's call for iconology. As he puts it in *What Do Pictures Want*, "Critical idolatry involves an approach to images that does not dream of destroying them ... but [plays] upon them as if they were musical instruments" (26). The phantasmagoria evoked by the sea and put into play by the speaker enacts a cognitive multiplicity of voices, replacing excessive, material acquisition with a spiritual plethora, a diversity the Oceanides implicitly represent. Moreover, by vacating the commandment for singularity, Jewsbury likewise undermines the Old Testament's vengeful, univocal, law-based justice.

If the Ocean represents the fatherly injunction doling out blind justice, and the Waves portray seductive material greed or a mother's insatiable need to comfort others,

¹⁵⁸ In her prose article on Felicia Hemans published in the *Athenaeum*, Jewsbury delineated what she saw as a clear difference between poetry by men and women. Where men's poetry works through "power" and "passion," women's poetry operates through "beauty." As Joanne Wilkes has argued, these two categories are not always mutually exclusive as Hemans might be seen as manifesting "the power of beauty" (qtd. in Wilkes 114). Jewsbury's review of Hemans was written before she embarked on her transcontinental voyage or she began writing of *The Oceanides*, and I would argue that her binary thinking about male and female poetry itself may be vacated in the writing of this poem.

then the Oceanides become the scene's extra pair of eyes, the witnesses, or what Levinas has called the third party. They watch what the Ocean and the Waves do to "Beauty's queens and kings," those humans who are denuded of material wealth, who from the Oceanides' perspective *are* the Others (69). As Levinas says of the third party in *Otherwise than Being*, "It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice" (157). The Oceanides, when they make themselves unnecessarily responsible for humans, act as the third party, observing the interactions between God, the sea, and humans. They witness the Ocean's cruelty and domination of humans, and their observations act, in part, as a protest, exclaiming, "none know their graves but we!" (83). With this knowledge about actual and symbolic death, they enact an aesthetic prowess, marking the dead with their sea flowers and their flowerets of poetry. The daughters twine beauty with the ethical imagination, and the songs and flowers of the Oceanides present aesthetics as the ultimate ethical witness. Their flowers and their poetry essentially mark what is not visible: death, alterity, and the inability of truly seeing the Other.

This vacancy, or the blind spot of alterity allegorized by an invisible God, produces images of his various faces. This type of viewing encourages a "brotherhood" built through imagined encounters rather than universal commandments or categorical imperatives. In number V, "Address to the Deep," the speaker comes to terms with these multiple models for justice. She constructs the poem through the repetition of the question, "Wild, ferocious, restless Sea,/ What have I do to with thee?" (23-24), combining the exhortatory tone of the Isaiah poem with the rhyming couplets of the Oceanides verse. The speaker accuses the ocean of physically separating "many lovely

lands” with its “thousands hands,” isolating people on islands, such as Britain, that ultimately leave them “harborless,” or without connection to other people (38). Without the wrathful sea, man would supposedly remain in a state of “perfect brotherhood,” no longer limited or apportioned by the sea, a disconnection that leads to human evil.

This theodicy culminates in the final stanza, when the speaker reverses her position:

Gloomy, weary, restless Sea,
Yes, I have to do with thee;
Not on frame, nor yet in power,
But on evil’s sadder dower:
Have I called the one dark name
Human spirits may not claim? (V.47-52)

Acknowledging the constructed nature of her own anthropomorphic poetics, the speaker must finally admit that all the bad intentions she has ascribed to the sea, all that has caused “brotherhood’s admeasurement,” are really modeled on human evil and greed.

This reversal invokes a certain amount of persecution or guilt—“evil’s sadder dower,” and it is this complicity that ultimately brings man in proximity to other men, in brotherhood. This idea of guilt bears a strong resemblance to Levinas’s argument that guilt and persecution put the self in proximity with the other. He writes, “The subject resting on itself is confounded by wordless accusation. [...] The accusation is in this sense persecuting; the persecuted one can no longer answer it. More exactly, it is the accusation which I cannot answer, but for which I cannot decline responsibility” (127).

Both Levinas and Jewsbury similarly invoke a certain amount of guilt and skepticism that

in turn propel the self to repeatedly encounter the Other. In Levinas, the inability to answer to this responsibility—or to ever truly know the other—propels an infinity of ethical encounters. The philosopher and poet part ways, however, because he advocates for an authentic, face-to-face encounter with the other that would largely be antagonistic to her technology of the image. Even more, it would essentially throw women back into a mode of knowing through embodied sensibility that too often trapped them as unthinking, feeling subjects of the nineteenth-century. In place of authenticity, Jewsbury alternately produces images and illusions that allow alterity to speak, though imperfectly, in the attempt to break out of pictorial representations that might define the Other before she has a chance to speak.

One presumes that the speaker of “The Oceanides” cannot literally answer her own accusation, that she cannot claim a “dark name” for herself, and yet she cannot decline responsibility for human hostility and persecution, especially as a consuming English woman. The speaker at sea cannot completely separate herself from British trade, the excessive nature of these poems, or the proselytizing efforts of civilizing missionaries who would call out God’s justice to Indians. It is this—initially—wordless accusation lodged by the sea (as the Other and on behalf of the Other) that helps to create the speaker’s longed-for proximity and brotherhood. In effect the act of representing the Ocean spawns images and enables dialogue between the guilt-ridden Britain and India. Rather than figuring an ultimate paternal signifier for God, the multi-faceted sea becomes a libratory force vacating the attachment to reference or reality, especially a reality that restricts more ethical encounters with the Other.

The Voyager's Regret: "Pining after things that were"

Before Jewsbury can begin to realize any imagined utopia that might host British-Indian interaction, the speaker must finally relinquish her English past left ashore. In these next few poems, the speaker longs once more for images of family members that connect and anchor her to reality, and in doing so she learns the difference between haunting ghosts that only reproduce the English past and images that produce dialogue, difference, and the ability to construct other ways of seeing outside the English imaginary. Her memories plague her and rise up in numbers VI, VII, and VIII as an uncanny's double relationship to "homeliness" and "unhomeliness" that persists in threatening to undo the speaker's move toward India. Jewsbury's approach to the gothic aboard the cloistered ship bears a resemblance to Katherine Ellis's feminist approach to the genre in *The Contested Castle*, where she argues that the gothic becomes a site of ideological resistance to separate spheres.¹⁵⁹ We might view the turn away from the gothic, uncanny images at the end of this mini-sequence as a final move away from images that pine for referents grounded in realities such as English domesticity.

After the multiplicity of the previous poems, the speaker draws back in fear at the infinite possibilities promised by skepticism and the production of images. Instead, in these poems, the speaker sketches a transcendent connection that would unite her with relatives in England. This virtual communication, which transcends the body, resembles Wordsworth's consolidation of the self over time as well as episodes in novels such as Smith's *Old Manor House* or Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* when lovers wander in the

¹⁵⁹ For other sources on the gothic as a genre of domestic terror see Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness*. Michael Gamer in *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* discusses the gothic as Romanticism's other, whose haunted domestic scenes are the inverse of the open pastorals of the Romantic imagination.

woods pining for each other and unexpectedly meet. By the end of this series of poems, however, the speaker eventually rejects these nostalgic images because of the way they serve to reify a woman's place in the private sphere and, at the same time, obscure visions of non-European landscapes.¹⁶⁰ Seeking to become one with these images—to live inside an idealized picture of the English home, the speaker temporarily allows these “bad idols” to stamp out all other voices or images the oceanic seascape might produce.

After her jarring encounter with the ocean, the speaker cannot help but to wish for a more familiar semblance of reality. In number VI, the speaker dwells on “The Voyager's Regret,” specifically travelers pining for absent family and friends.

THEY are thinking far away
Of their loved ones on the water;
The mother of her son,
The father of his daughter; (VI.1-4).

Though it is the mother and father who are “on the water,” the syntax estranges the clause from its antecedent, placing it closer to the “loved ones,” the son and daughter, such that they seem to appear as images on the water itself. The voyager's regret itself is double—

¹⁶⁰ For a reverse of this argument see Joseph's use of Homi K. Bhabha's reading of the uncanny in *Location of Cultures*. Bhabha argues that for the dislocated colonial subject, the uncanny is less a nostalgia for home than it is a blurring of home and world that reveal future political alternatives. Joseph uses Bhabha to reveal how the home itself becomes a microcosm of the world, offering colonial and English women new access to power and subjectivity (94-95). Jewsbury's poem plots the reverse motif of dislocation, of the Englishwoman moving into colonial territory, and I would argue that in shedding these simulacra of home, she also sheds at least some of the limited trappings of English domesticity. For reasons that I hope will appear clear later in the chapter, Jewsbury likewise refuses the racial “identity tourism” that Edward Said first chastised Kipling for and which Lisa Nakamura, in “Race In/for Cyberspace,” has recently observed in cyberspace MOOs.

the speaker misses her family and at the same time repents her remembrance of them as an uncanny haunting that positions her as always in pursuit of an irretrievable past.

A prisoner on the ocean,
How oft my cabin-room
On this wilderness of motion,
Reminds me of a tomb!
Yet through its windows streaming,
Flash daybreaks rich as noon;
And on my couch comes gleaming
Full oft a sunlike moon. (VI.17-24)

The nostalgic, haunting thoughts of family members eventually transform the formerly comforting, domestic cabin into a gothic space. The “tomb” of domesticity here resonates with gothic imagery of the English domestic hearth in number VIII, which both wards off and becomes the site of “foe or demon dire” (VIII.11). The speaker, now a prisoner of her own memories, views her room as a tomb, housing not only the phantasmagoria of family and friends but her own spectral English identity. A bit like Jane Eyre in the red room, whose ruminative and artistic subjectivity is produced from the pressure of enclosed spaces, the speaker likewise resembles Ann Radcliffe’s Emily from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, who is constantly looking out of the castle window onto the outside world to escape the confines of her physical and intellectual imprisonment.

In this passage, the speaker signals her self-consciousness about creating images of her family for her own comfort when she theorizes her nostalgia by describing it in competing terms of gothic and Enlightenment imagery. She does not dwell for too long

in her tomb before the bright light of the tropics comes through the cabin windows, as if the powerful “sunlike moon” might remedy the dark, gothic atmosphere with reasoned—if slightly inverted, non-European—Enlightenment thought. Yet even this light, like Robinson’s invocation of Enlightenment light in “To Sight,” all too powerfully flashes and gleams, and either arrests the speaker’s mind or provokes temporary blindness. Likewise, the starry sky, which should display scientifically proven marks of guidance to oceanic travelers, is replaced by an unreadable text when the speaker finds herself under tropical skies “unseen, unknown before,” without the aid of familiar constellations (18). Not only have “constellations vanished” but “The heart’s star of the banished,/ The Pole Star, is gone” (29, 31-32). The crucial, guiding light of the heart, the northern star, has disappeared, and along with it both the speaker’s emotional center as well as the scientific ability to plot a course through a real relation to the stars. The speaker finds herself adrift, without affective or rational knowledge.

Though she should be able to see new, Eastern constellations in this perceptual vacancy, she cannot help but recreate images of loved ones onto the tropical sky.

Strange birds the blue air cleaving
Attract the wanderer’s sight,
And strange creatures weaving
Their path, through waves as bright; —
But I, grown sick with pining
After the things that *were*,
Over the deep reclining
But see ‘mid strange or fair,

My sister's sweet face shining!—

My father's thin grey hair! (VI.33-42)

Like the new constellations that the poet cannot yet see, the strange birds and creatures remain estranged from the viewer's ken. The poet, finally, acknowledges that it is because she has "grown sick with pining/ After the things that *were*," that she cannot see anything but spectral images of her sister and father (italics, Jewsbury's). Grown insightful to her own blindness, she admits that she is too homesick with nostalgia to take in any new perceptions.¹⁶¹ Rather than attending to those objects "strange or fair" before, she instead projects visual images of her sister's face and her father's hairline onto the ocean's vacancy. In this way she turns this gothic scene into a moving picture show replete with entombed shadows and looming solar, lunar, and stellar lights.

The self-reflexive nature of these images in part draws from contemporaneous visual illusions concocted by popular, mechanical, moving-picture devices. While shows such as the diorama were still fashionable in the 1830s, Jewsbury's technique here resembles more the phantasmagoria, which used a magic lantern to revolve figures across a screen. Her first published work was actually entitled *Phantasmagoria; or Sketches of Life and Literature* (1825). Commentators have mostly dismissed any relationship between this miscellany and the magic lantern show, yet Jewsbury is clearly working within the genre of phantasmagoria, "a rapidly transforming collection or series of imaginary (and usually fantastic) forms, such as may be experienced in a dream or

¹⁶¹ In the "Log-Book," Jewsbury writes of her seasickness: "I have done little, but say with Mariana in 'The Moated Grange,' "I am weary, weary.... An active mind may countervail much of this" (824). The reference to Mariana's imprisonment inside a defunct, quotidian domesticity in Tennyson's poem may further point out not only Jewsbury's self-reflexivity about her familial ghosts or the entrapment of their domesticity but also the remedy—an active mind producing the simulations it chooses.

fevered state, or evoked by literary description” (*OED* 2). Both the genre and the optical illusion present figures for the imagination as a dreamy collage of illusions.

Perhaps responding to Keats’s interrogation of dreaming in “The Fall of Hyperion,” Coleridge’s infamous composition of “Kubla Khan,” and DeQuincey’s own fears of suddenly appearing figures like the Malay, the speaker of *Phantasmagoria*, somewhat tongue in cheek, riffs on dreaming in her meta-poetic piece “A Vision of Poets.” She muses: “Authors are your only accomplished dreamers; —they can dream when and what they please—by day as well as night; —awake as easily as when asleep. Indeed it might in many cases be said with truth, that authors dream to live, and live to dream” (Book I, 55). In this particular piece, the author dreams up a colloquy of Britain’s famous poets and attends to their conversations about the state of literature and its canons. This fantasy of a grand British writers’ conference both illustrates Jewsbury’s idea of the imagination as a magic lantern beaming the specters of British poets across the mind and also portrays poetry as a great, virtual conversation between writers of many ages. At the end of the essay, famous poets, probably Milton and Shakespeare, hand down their wisdom and laurels directly to the next generation of poets—one of whom is most likely Wordsworth.¹⁶²

This successful imaginary transmission of inheritance might be countered with the water-bound speaker’s impossible knowledge of her relatives in England, or Jewsbury’s later, largely failed *poetic* relationship with Wordsworth. Though she and the poet did correspond through the medium of Dora Wordsworth, he largely cut off any poetic

¹⁶² As if to further add to the imagined nature of the conversation, none of these poets are named. Instead, readers must intuit who these figures are from contextual clues about their styles and reputations.

exchange when he suggested that she stop writing poetry and stick to prose. Perhaps she, seven years later, finally decided that dwelling in the past does not, in fact, make for good poetry. Yet perhaps in “The Oceanides,” Jewsbury throws off the idea of familial legacy, rejecting imagined inheritances for more mutual, forward-looking encounters. While Jewsbury does not give up the logic of phantoms, in “The Oceanides,” she does seem to place an injunction on dredging up past visions that only serve to restrict the imagination and keep her enclosed in the tomb of antiquated thought.¹⁶³

The speaker’s other extensive projection of English nostalgia, in number VIII, creates an even more self-conscious meditation on the dangers of nostalgic images. Similar to the techniques in number VI, this poem contrasts the dark, melancholy, enclosed spaces of English winters, with the over-powering “too fiercely bright” light of the tropics (VIII.17). “A New Year’s Day Song” contemplates the material comforts offered to the English in the winter, which now would be unnecessary and even disgusting for the English at sea in the torrid zone:

The blazing Christmas fire
Is but a name of cheer,
As from foe or demon dire
Should we shrink, if it were here:
And robes defying cold,
Are but treasures in the North;—

¹⁶³ In an 1831 essay on Percy Shelley’s “Wandering Jew,” Jewsbury writes that while Wordsworth represents the past, Shelley is to be admired for looking toward the future. This might lead us to believe that she eventually turned from the impinging model of Wordsworth to a more open-ended Shelleyan one. Her essay on him is characterized by both admiration and dissent, perhaps a sign that his model is one of mutual encounter, rather than a haunting anxiety of influence.

From the muslin's snowy fold

We languidly look forth. (VIII.9-16)

The modest luxuries of fire and robes, still so valuable to those the speaker has left behind, now pale in comparison to Indian muslins, an imperial fabric that not only supplies light clothing but the ship's sails, for which "muslin" is slang (*OED* 2). Though England houses the tranquil Christmas scene, it paradoxically evokes the "foe or demon dire" against which it must protect. By contrast, "the muslin's snowy fold" enables passengers to "languidly look forth," calmly and without fear toward the future. This reversal gives way to the realization that the enclosed, memorialized domestic space and its bulky, material trappings.

Closed doors, and shutters fast,

The joys of winter eve,

They are numbered with the past;

Or, when the heart would weave

Some fond memorial spell,

(For some beloved one nigh,)

Of all that distant dwell—

Are remembered with a sigh! (VIII.25-32)

In the first three lines of the stanza, the speaker puts aside the memories of the "closed doors, and shutters," which now are "numbered with the past." She nearly admits that writing of England's wintry domestic—and its need to protect women, especially, from nature's elements—is itself a nostalgic verse form. Likewise that "fond memorial spell," the verse or narration that creates the trance-state or enchantment and produces images or

memories of “all that distant dwell” only further separates the speaker from the English hearth. Rather than “spelling” out or representing clearly those family and friends, all the speaker has access to are the spells reproducing dreamy, illusory remembrances.

As the final lines of the poem suggest, the problem with this type of imaging is not the imaginary nature of memory, but what happens when the speaker wants to connect these images of her family back to their real referents. She poses a final question, “Do they think of us to-day?” and at first answers, “They do!, our own,/ Where’er their homes may be” (33, 41-2). Yet in the poem’s final lines, she admits that the loved ones cannot really respond: “Alas! none answer, but above/ The clouds—the waves below!” (47-48). The attempt to simulate a relationship ultimately fails when “none answer.” This imagined, visual relationship, unlike the telepathic and nearly telegraphic communication between Jane Eyre and Rochester at that novel’s end, fails to transmit overseas.¹⁶⁴ Only the clouds and waves reply, with their changing rhythms and airy, unstable forms.

This failure of the Romantic imagination, the repeated logging of the impossible connection between the speaker adrift at sea and her grounded relatives back home, recurs not only because the speaker increasingly becomes more distant from England. Unlike Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” or “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” who can preserve himself in an eternal recollection, Jewsbury is attempting to imagine and commune with images of family presently celebrating a holiday. All she has to construct the image of her family are her memories, which cannot be fully truthful to the events

¹⁶⁴ Richard Menke connects the commonplace reading of Jane and Rochester’s telepathic connection to the advent of the telegraph in his recent book, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*.

taking place in the present or future—because they do not account for changes that necessarily have happened since the speaker had access to her family. She has traveled so far as to invalidate her memories as anything but past images, and she is all too aware that her family has most likely moved on since she has last seen them. Thus, the moving waves and shifting clouds allegorize kinesthetic images, like people, whose growth and change necessarily garbles communication. One might commune with memories, but memories cannot stand in for present, living people.

Moreover, Jewsbury's speaker cannot use the unchanging pastoral of the Lake District to anchor the up-to-date images of herself or her family. The repetition of "wherever" in line 46 emphasizes the extent to which the speaker is unclear where she might be at any given moment in her journey, except in terms of relative positioning. Neither can she easily locate the English homestead with any certainty—"where'er their homes may be." As the speaker moves forward in her journey, the past can no longer help to establish the locations of the present and vanishes as a point of reconnection. Jewsbury, however, is able to reuse this idea of relative position when she links the speaker with India by correlation and juxtaposition, creating another kind of doubling that moves beyond uncanny notions of the homely and unhomely.

Ethics, Friendship, and the Infant: "To trace/ The lines of brotherhood afar"

When the speaker can stop trying to use the unknown of the sea to recreate England, she looks in the other direction, toward India and those strange birds and constellations that might project other lessons for her upon the sky. Jewsbury eventually uses the technique of producing images only tenuously tied to reality to create pictures of

England and India simultaneously, which in turn offers a means of modeling or visualizing what interaction with India might be like. This approach straddles the all-or-nothing approaches of multiplicity and transcendence for a type of comparison that necessarily produces vacancy's non-knowledge about the other as part of an ethical, imagined encounter.

In her comparisons of English and Indian landscapes, Jewsbury employs visual analogies that do not simply exchange similar features, forming friendship upon the erasure of difference. Rather than the model of fungibility or exchangeability produced by commodity culture, she explores a quite different visualization built from an ethical substitution or reciprocity between images of India and England. Her consistent deployment of poetic analogy places England and India into insoluble proximity. Both Fred Botting and Bill Nichols before him have pointed out that the use of metaphor to compare humans with animals, gothic monsters, and cyborgs modifies human identity (Nichols qtd. in Botting 110). Yet Jewsbury employs the more self-reflexive simile, with an insuperable "like" or "as" that always foregrounds itself as an aesthetic manipulation of two images—of local landscapes, fauna, or animals—that cannot fully be conflated. Behind the reciprocal, imagined bodies of England and India, the analogy always raises its own specter as the third, poetic witness of both parties.¹⁶⁵ The non-coincidence of

¹⁶⁵ Derrida's late turn to Levinas helps to theorize the connections between friendship and difference (not to mention loss, hospitality, the gift and the Other). One particular strand of this conversation dwells on the ethics and difference that surround human-animal interactions, and I am loosely drawing off these works because of the way Jewsbury focuses her ideas about encounter around comparisons between features of the landscape as well as indigenous animals. See Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am," Levinas, "The Name of the Dog" in *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, David L. Clark, "On Being 'the Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Dwelling with Animals after Levinas," and Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

these images produces a perceptual gap or blind spot, a vacancy in representation that capitulates in skepticism about visual knowledge of India, which Jewsbury finally allegorizes as childlike wonder or through the image of an infant. This unscripted, youthful mode of viewing resists romances of scientific discovery but instead temporarily suspends the ideologies that persist in prefabricated, overdetermined images of the Other.

By Part IX, the speaker disembarks at the port on Ceylon, or modern-day Sri Lanka. Jewsbury clearly signals that this initial encounter does not provide the speaker with access to Indian reality. “The Eden of the Sea” begins with the speaker exclaiming: “A dream! A dream!” announcing the fantastic quality of the poet’s description of Ceylon. Though she is certainly enthused to have landed on solid ground and proceeds to document the material aspects of the isle respite—particularly its animals and fauna, Jewsbury’s new Eden is constructed much like Keats’s encounter with the nightingale. The poet disembarks at the island port, which she describes as an escape from the enclosed space of the ship, with its “narrow walks and small abode,/ Exchanged for roaming, land, and ease” (IX.7-8). Her illustrations, though they often focus on small details of the landscape, together account for broader ways of seeing.

Ceylon, thy wooded shores are fair!
I love the land left far behind,
Its glorious oaks, and streamlets clear,
Yet wherefore should mine eye be blind,
My heart be cold to beauty here?—(IX.13-16)

In Ceylon, the poet finally throws off the addiction or habituation to watching the ghosts of England rise up everywhere at sea, and instead aims to see both glorious oaks and

Indian beauty simultaneously. This double vision occurs a few lines later, when Jewsbury describes Ceylon's cocoa trees. This project of simultaneous viewing is once again reminiscent of pre-cinematic entertainment, particularly the diorama. As Sophie Thomas argues, the diorama often replicated grand landscapes or the great monasteries, cloisters, and churchyards of Europe. Not only did these shows push the viewer toward an immersive experience by blurring or obscuring the edges of the viewing platform or picture frames (par. 8), but the diorama, as opposed to its predecessor the panorama, "by shifting the image between multiple oppositions, was based increasingly upon a principle of doubling: before/after, day/night, winter/summer, light/dark, vacant/occupied, surface/depth, and so on" (par. 13). William Galperin, however, in his discussion of the diorama, suggests that the interruptions caused by changing images led less to a "suspension of disbelief than a resistance toward illusions ordinarily fostered by art" (35). Contemporaneous reviews (especially those in the *Athenaeum*) mocked the diorama, and Galperin uses these to suggest that dioramic perception makes viewers aware of the mechanisms of their own viewing. This self-reflexivity may shatter the illusion of a magical vision, yet as a perceptual poetic device in "The Oceanides," the jarring imposition of two images serves as a method of ideology critique.

Jewsbury's own views of Ceylon operate by putting in proximity two supposedly antithetical images, highlighting their mediation by the text's rhetoric and the speaker's machinations. These views of Ceylon constantly shuttle back and forth between references to India and to England and entail several interruptions. One might go so far as to claim that Jewsbury's preoccupation with repetition and rhyme in this sequence—from the "no more, no more" of number I to "A dream, a dream" of this poem—

allegorizes the difference between lyrical nostalgia and the irony created through juxtaposition, which visually (and aurally) draws the reader to take another look. Jewsbury's rhetoric of doubling privileges the gothic's tendency toward skepticism, critique, and parody over its subconscious and uncanny aspects when it seeks to make apparent and then vacate long-held fears about Easterners.

This creation of a virtual world aims to put to bed the savage preconceptions readers might have about the Southeast Asian wild. First, however the speaker positions herself as an inquisitive child immersed in the rich sensory landscape and freed from adult-like presuppositions.

No, in a world as childhood new,
Is it not well to be a child?—
As quick to ask, as quick to view,
As promptly pleased, perchance as wild? (17-20)

This representation of Ceylon, as a possible earthly representation of Eden, seems rather close to nineteenth-century fears about racial ideology and de-evolution. The Indian isle, like Tahiti, at first seems to promise the reader a glimpse of noble savages at play.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, the tints of savagery and utopia become entwined when, two stanzas later, the speaker has a Crusoesque fear of “creatures strange and fierce” (33). Yet, as in Hemans, Jewsbury's new world serves not as a space of pre-lapsarian innocence but as a wild, cognitive vacancy, created through childish thinking on the part of the speaker. She is inquisitive—asking questions of this new world rather than dominating it—and takes

¹⁶⁶ James C. McKusick's “The Politics of Language in Byron's *The Island*,” discusses Byron's depiction of Tahiti as a site for license and responsibility. He similarly characterizes the South Seas as a basis for Coleridge and Southey's pantisocracy in *Romanticism and Colonialism*.

views quickly without previous notions of how she might see the landscape. Rather than infantilizing the Orient, Jewsbury creates Ceylon as an Edenic place potentially free from Western preemptive notions of the East—a world “as” childhood, related to the concept through simile not metaphor. The repetition and anaphora of “as” makes visible the distance between racial infantilization and the simile as a self-reflexive act of comparison that prods the viewer into a childish state of viewing. The grounds of knowledge in Ceylon are those of unknowing not dominance, as she attempts to reframe the island as something not yet seen by Western eyes and thus not yet known.

Jewsbury repeatedly enacts this discarding of old preconceptions of Ceylon, beginning with the speaker’s rejection of the isle as a space for savages:

I know that creatures strange and fierce
Here lurk, and here make men afraid;
But let the daring hunter pierce
Their hidden lairs—in this bright shade,
Let me forget save what I greet,
The air alive with glancing wings;
Tame creatures pecking near my seat;
Resplendent flowers, and happy things. (33-40)

This passage is not a simple turn toward domestic quietism in the sunnier spaces of a strange place. Instead, Jewsbury depicts the speaker dismissing the uncanny specters of her own fears about humanity, typically displaced on the savage or racial other. What she “knows”—what she has been told or subconsciously fears—is that savages lurk in places like Ceylon, yet twice she decides to “let” those fears go. Though the “daring

hunter” reacts with an aggressive, masculine attempt to pierce the savage’s hidden lairs in an Enlightenment prerogative of discovery, the speaker decides on a different reaction, represented as a cognitive break marked by a caesural dash. After this pause, she vows to forget both the fears of the unconscious and the rational domination of the consciousness. She clears her mind of all preconceptions save what she “greet,” letting herself welcome or be influenced by these other beings before imposing herself on them.

Just as Jewsbury rejected the dark, enclosed gothic spaces of the ship along with blinding Enlightenment light in number VI, she likewise rejects the gothic and the quotidian here. The pastoral becomes a model of representation of a different type of place. For Jewsbury, Ceylon does not simply represent that lost, utopian Romantic past but a virtual space of contact. This animal and vegetal reserve does not represent an intransigent reality; instead, her imaginary pastoral provides the opportunity for the transnational traveler to wonder what it means to perceive and understand a new landscape. Distanced from experience in this way, the speaker can suspend pre-images of Ceylon and to create other representations whose meaning is not yet completely codified. She signals this resistance to reification in part by creating kinesthetic images of India. The animals that she reacts to are also involved in their own responsive actions, with their wings “glancing” off the speaker and their beaks “pecking” near her seat. The pun on the word glance seems to signal that the speaker too is being looked at in an interactive world where both parties curiously glance, prod, and peck at each other.

Representations of India, like the one Jewsbury explores, dangerously risk overwriting the real India with an Orientalist view that such a European gaze might entail. Moreover, one might note that Jewsbury, like Hemans, portrays no Indians at all

in the poem. Yet she does not really portray the English either but her own simulations of them, a point of which she is increasingly self-aware. The speaker's earlier simulations of the Ocean and the English essentially help her to understand that her ideas of the East are merely images as well, but as such, have the potential to make Europeans aware of their own ideological ways of seeing themselves and others. This stance is an ethical one when the speaker self-reflexively admits to not knowing India, only her preconceived fears of it. Like Levinas, Jewsbury retains a healthy skepticism about every image of the Other presented to her, committing only to seeing, repeatedly, with the fresh eyes of "childhood." Moreover, by using self-reflexive representations of the landscape, she can create pliable illusions of both spaces—something that might be less ethical if exercised on people she had or had not yet met.

After clearing these grounds, the speaker finally works through images that explicitly and implicitly call up the geography of both countries:

The squirrel at his morning meal,
And morning sport—so lithe and free,
No shadow o'er the grass may steal
With lighter, quicker steps than he,
Racing along the cocoa leaf
You see him through its ribs of green;
Anon, the little mime and thief
Expanded on the trunk is seen.

These cocoa-trees—not fair in woods,

But singly seen and seen afar,
When sunset pours his yellow floods,
A column, and its crown a star!
Yet, dowered with wealth of uses rare,
Whene'er its plummy branches wave,
Some sorrow seems to haunt the air;
Some vision of a desert grave! (41-56)

At first the speaker locates an animal found in both England and India—the tree squirrel. The dioramic potential of the speaker's visual scenes fades at the prospect of an animal that can seemingly straddle both European and Asian landscapes. No leap in perception is necessary to make the squirrel “seen.”

The next stanza, however, disrupts this single vision when it turns to the cocoa trees, implicitly in comparison with the “glorious oaks” mentioned earlier in the poem. Unlike the awe-inspiring forests of oaks that compose the grand, rolling English countryside, these cocoa trees are not grouped in woods, but are “singly seen” from a distance. The trees are singular, as if they cannot be conceptualized or generalized like English oaks. The star imagery figures the treetop as a thing of the sky severed from its earthly bounds. At the same time, the column reference overlays the tree with images of Greek edifices while the crown allusion frames this Indian treasure as the jewel in the crown of the British empire, ultimately relating the Indian fauna to Western imagery. It is no surprise, then, that the final lines of the poem turn to those “uses rare” that convert the tree's beauty into wealth, or commodified chocolate. Thus the tree, when put into conversation with Western imagery, unleashes sorrow and death that “haunt” the

landscape. This collocation of English imagery evokes similarity that might make the Indian trees readable, yet at the same time, the cognitive attempt to understand cocoa trees within a Western context provokes the “vision of a desert grave.” The confluence of Western and Eastern representations ends in a vacancy of sight, the desert of the real pastoral filled with nothing but guilt for those imperial prerogatives that raze the Indian landscape of its natural wealth and beauty.

These images of the tree together manifest what Mitchell has called the composite of the Romantic image, the totem and the fossil. Mitchell argues that Romantic natural objects and images manifest both “a longing for an intimate relationship with nature, and the greeting of natural objects as ‘friends and companions’” as well as the drive toward death, mechanism, and modernity (184-5). For Jewsbury, however, this dialectic transforms into something more than the twinned desire for sentimentality and irony. The superimposition of both intimate and destructive images of the tree engenders a parallax of viewing that can never meet and thus reveals a blind spot in the images’ visual semiotics. The abutting of the two images of the cocoa tree—as a singly seen star and as a pillar of the British economy—throw the entire representational system into an ethical mode that vacates the tree of its ability to be seen or known. Because Westerners cannot yet see the tree without thinking chocolate, they cannot yet know it. Unlike the universal squirrel valued for its exchangeability or the oak tree revered for its English beauty, cocoa trees exist as a double vision. This dioramic sight provokes vacancy as a comparison that restricts codified images or any single, dominating gaze.

The rejection of a pre-determined Ceylon further prompts the speaker to discard literary or biblical versions of the place, which end, again, with a visual analogy between England and Ceylon's mountainous geographies.

Ceylon! Ceylon! 'tis nought to me
How thou wert known or named of old,
As Ophir, or Taprobane,
By Hebrew king, or Grecian bold:--
To me, thy spicy-wooded vales,
Thy dusky sons, and jewels bright,
But image forth the far-famed tales—
But seem a new Arabian night.

And when engirdled figures crave,
Heed to thy bosom's dazzling store—
I see Aladdin in his cave;
I follow Sinbad to the shore.
Yet there, the least of all thy wealth,
Thou heiress of the eastern isles!
Thy mountains boast of northern health;
And Europe amid Asia smiles. (57-72)

Here the speaker tries out fabled antecedents that might plot Ceylon in Biblical, Greek, or Persian stories. Ophir was a port said to send King Solomon riches every few years, and Pliny writes of Taprobane as an idyllic refuge that rejected inherited monarchy. This

outpost has been productive of a variety of storied tales that allow for exchanges between cultural histories and geographies, especially those that are traded in bad faith. Ceylon, with its dazzling riches and lush greenery traffics in the material and sensual. These characteristics—its “spicy-wooded vales . . . dusky sons, and jewels bright” help to “*image forth* the far-famed tales” that mark India as racially other and merely available for sensual pleasure or the production of commodity wealth (emphasis mine). The evocative nature of the landscape lends itself to visual worlds like those created through iconic stories purveying Orientalist stereotypes and racial tourism.

Ultimately, though, the speaker insists on creating a “new Arabian night,” a newer tale that replaces the export of older narratives. As she states at the outset, “‘tis nought to me/ How thou were known or named of old.” Even more pointedly, the material wealth hidden in Aladdin’s cave, which Sinbad covets to make his fortune, is “the least of all thy wealth.” Rather it is the “northern health” that strikes amity between Europe and Asia. The framing vista of mountains—a visual analogy—creates overlapping views in both geographic regions. In this way, the dazzling riches of Ceylon seem less desirable than its mountainous vista that might correspond to the European Alps. Older tales that encourage Orientalist habits of viewing the East are jettisoned for a mechanism of visual analogy that allows for comparison and contrast.

The underlying capitalist structure and critique of the poem enables a mode of substitution, rather than commodity exchange, that ultimately underwrites an ethical space of the imagined landscape. Jewsbury, with her repeated reference to India’s dazzling wealth, jewels, and spices, is exceedingly aware of how India’s bountiful landscape produces and reproduces global commodity culture—including Eastern tales—

at the whim of desirous British and European subjects. However, as the speaker rises from Aladdin's cave and Sinbad's shore to the mountains of both East and West, it is as if the airy mountains provide a vacant, intellectual and speculative space through which to imagine non-transcendent, reciprocal contact between two geographies. The "phantasmagoric form of the social relations between men," as Derrida says (166), evokes an imagistic exchange based on value, which Jewsbury then modifies into a form of contemplation based on insuperable proximity. Mountains and their airy peaks are not physically exchangeable as commodities, except of course through poetry. Yet Jewsbury's poems stymie any mystical fungibility, and instead repeatedly ask, without definitively answering, what it might be like to put the Alps next to the Himalayas. Thus this skeptical resistance to materiality and to skin-deep appearances ends with a cognitive interruption in the imperial, storied imagination.

This airy climate—and "northern health"—comes to a head in number X, "Sunset and Night," where the speaker describes the spectacular and rich seascape at dusk. This poem illustrates the "BEAUTIFUL! O beautiful!" as the sun sets on the ocean, and the invocation of the beautiful signals this poem as a meta-poetic gesture, finally worked through at the end of the sequence (1). Jewsbury playfully suggests how the sun might, in fact, set on the British Empire when a British egalitarian speaker sets her ethical sites on East as its otherness provokes a meta-visionary experience. The sunset evokes especially beautiful colors and vibrant scenes, as the intense gold, purpled air and the "crowds" of clouds create a visionary moment: "Each some form of glory taking;/ Each some splendid vision waking" (13-14). This sensory, visual experience trips the mind into a mode that once again supercedes reality. The subsequent descriptions of the

seascape proceed to blur the boundaries between the sea and sky, revealing a structure of substitution, mutuality, and the imaginary rearrangement of signifiers. The speaker engineers a visual analogy between ocean and sky as the dusk light refracts equally on both: “Sea and Heaven, depth and height,/ Met in such harmonious light” (15-16).

Eventually this comparison allows for more drastic contact between the two:

There, in that cloud-garden glows
All the richness of the rose;
There, meandering, seem to run
Rivers that have washed the Sun,
Or, instead of common mould,
Wandered over beds of gold. (23-28)

The speaker sees rose gardens in the clouds, rivers washing the sun, and clumps of mould texturing the skies. Similar to her imagining the faces of her father and sister on the sea, she paints the screen of the sky with elements from the material landscape, distorting real and imagined, material and immaterial. Those things that usually populate the earth now find themselves, or representations of themselves, in the sky. The passage suggests, however, not the erasure of embodiment but its simulation in the sky to make the physically impossible possible—the comparison between physical features that are materially distinct. This substitution reveals that physical differences—such as color—may not be ontological ones. Alternately, if water and air are two different substances, they are still comparable, if only through poetic invention that deals in reciprocal images. The movement of the material into the immaterial, virtual realm demonstrates how

virtuality might finally bring together—without unifying—two worlds that cannot yet physically meet.

As an allegory about cultural exchange, vacancy presents a model of friendly comparison that still retains much of the stranger about it. This metaphoric of friendship continues throughout the rest of the poem and becomes the true legacy of the “New Eden.” As the speaker disembarks from Ceylon in the last lines of this poem, she takes leave

Not as the stranger of a day,
Who soon forgets where late he dwelt,
But like a friend, who, far away,
Feels ever what at first he felt. (IX.77-80)

Here the speaker doubles as friend and stranger and as such traces the wonky temporality of vacancy. The speaker’s future thoughts of Ceylon—her next approach to this place—will not be characterized by a kind of forgetting that renders the virtual subject a complete amnesiac. As a friend, the speaker will connect with this new Eden from far away, through the auspices of camaraderie, yet she will retain “ever what at first he felt,” or the intermingling of distance and proximity, estrangement, and affiliation. The speaker’s relationship with this space will archive a history of their actual and literary interactions. Yet unlike the images of the speaker’s family members, Ceylon forever retains an otherness that forces the speaker repeatedly to greet it, and its inhabitants, anew. As in Levinas, true friendship involves a responsibility for the other as a stranger that the self does not understand and that she repeatedly cannot resist. In this way, Jewsbury’s Ceylon highlights the ever-changing nature of encounters and, more

pointedly, the preservation of a non-understanding about the Other that shapes the way we envision her.¹⁶⁷ The entire poem seems to devolve on the repetition of “feels” and “felt,” when the future, as a projected present, is channeled back to the past. This doubling sends the reader back to the beginning of the poem and initiates a circular temporal and structural logic, not unlike Hemans’s use of counterfactual history to reorient what we might know about both past and future colonial landscapes. The intensely visual nature of the poem ends up returning the speaker (and the reader) to a place just before vision, to her exclamatory first words, “A dream! a dream!” which themselves signify a suspended cognitive state somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness. In these last lines, Ceylon finally allegorizes virtuality as a mode of vision that suspends vision and perception, only offering partial sight.

This insistent returning to a beginning point of strangeness, non-understanding, or perceptual confusion is encapsulated in the penultimate poem in the sequence, “To An Infant Afar.” This vision of an infant in England becomes a final meta-image for vacancy as a virtual form of knowledge. At first the poem appears to resort to the kind of nostalgic virtual imaging the speaker had recourse to earlier in the poem. She begins by lamenting the distance between herself and the infant, a “home-encircled little one” (XI.10).

Yet, how oft I see a thing,

Gentle one! fragile one!

¹⁶⁷ Significantly, Levinas terms this occurrence the “saying,” an exposure to the other’s ineffable, unreadable expression or face that interrupts the “said,” a propositional statement of signification about the other. In a sense, the subject’s formation is always a response to a non-signifying, vacant expression or image, which perhaps might be characterized as an interruption in the visual nature of the face.

That, before mine eye can bring
Thee, by Fancy's symboling
Gentle one! fragile one! (XI.16-20)

Though the poet's imagination once again conjures an image of an English relative, this virtual infant is quite different from Jewsbury's other family figures because the infant may never know the speaker. The poet hardly knows this relative either, so it becomes an image almost entirely without a referent. The speaker repeatedly compares herself to the child: "I am sailing on the sea,/ .../ And long years must come and flee,/ Ere I look again on thee/ Changing, growing little one" (11, 13-15). As projected years "come and flee," the infant represents a perpetual unknown, who most likely will never be looked upon. Similar to Wordsworth and Robinson's idiot figures, it presents an allegory of non-knowledge. Forever poised on the brink of growing up, the image of the infant pauses time and the accumulation of knowledge.

Just as the speaker's own relative position undermines her ability to create reified images of family, the infant is also a moving target. This "symboling" kinesthetic image of a "growing one" cannot be easily consolidated, and the infant embodies the technology of shifting images, which resists perception and any definitive meaning images might offer. Jewsbury highlights this paradox when she describes the child as representing multiple states at once—fragility and intrepidity, health and weakness, sensibility and freedom from care.

All things that are weak and fair,
Rosy one! merry one!
Image infants everywhere,

Careless, amid cause for care,
Ever helpless little one! (31-35)

This paradoxical “carelessness, amid cause for care” represents an intrepid approach to the unknown even in the face of danger. Rather than promoting sensibility’s “care,” the speaker offers the cheerful, active, and curious infant who perhaps learns through fearless errancy. The infant models a precarious yet carefree existence, but even more generally the virtual comparison of two superimposed images, carelessness and care. By engendering simultaneous reciprocity and contradiction, this double vision projects non-knowledge and the partially unreadable image.

During the remainder of the poem, the speaker compares this child-like way of being in the world to other things beside herself: “tiny birds,” “flying fish,” “baby billows,” the “cloud at morn,” and the “moonbeam’s quivering light” (23, 24, 25, 26, 28). The poem manages to “Image infants everywhere” announcing the infant as the meta-model for vision and visualization. This poem no doubt indulges in the Romantic obsession with childhood, not to mention its use of other empty-headed figures such as idiots and savages.¹⁶⁸ Rather than resorting to memorialized innocence, like

¹⁶⁸ For an exploration of this trope and its ideological uses in Romantic authors, see especially Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood*. One might look to critics on Wordsworth and infancy in the Intimations Ode, such as Linda M. Austin, “Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy,” who argues that childhood represents a mnemonic vacancy to be filled in by autobiographical narrative. Likewise see Alan Richardson’s “The Politics of Childhood: Wordsworth, Blake, and the Catechistic Method,” for a consideration of childhood indoctrination. One might also cite recent queer theorists such as Lee Edelman who critiques childhood as the possibility of futurity against which queers are positioned as nay-sayers of the social and biological order. See his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Alternately, Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests childhood is always queer, both in terms of sexuality but also as a time suspended before adolescence or adulthood when children might envision other ways of growing beside growing up. “Growing Sideways, Or Versions of the Queer

Wordsworth's Lucy, or the possibilities for transcendence, like Wordsworth's idiot boys, Jewsbury, like other women writers, crafts childhood as a model for constantly encountering strangeness, resisting judgment, and understanding oneself through reciprocal relationships with others that one does not quite understand. The infant might be like fish, birds, the waves, or even moonlight, and yet it is not any of these things.

As many theorists of childhood have noted, adults all too often project their own desires and fantasies of futurity onto their infants, yet Jewsbury reverses this tendency, projecting the infant onto all things, including the speaker. As such, the juvenile speaker represents less an impossible future like Derrida's *avenir* than a moment or pause that suspends cognition, ideological reification, and the narratives of desire that pictures often evince. The infant might allegorize an androgyny and universality that occurs before interpellation into society, which might be particularly appealing to a woman dreaming of a different place in the world. Without a hint of the future, though, the infant more likely represents the inquisitive but dangerous moment before understanding, an image that is temporarily dislocated from its ideological systems and open for inscription.¹⁶⁹

Jewsbury's childishness functions as a progressive, skeptical epistemology. Toward the end of the poem, the fantasy of brotherhood and friendship is made possible through this childish avoidance of over-determined colonial ideologies. Infancy, however, cannot last forever. Unlike Hemans' Spaniard who continually roams an open

Child: The Ghost, The Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal," *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*.

¹⁶⁹ To take Natalie Melas' approach, rather than interpellating the colonial subject into the English imaginary, Jewsbury's speaker chooses to become dissimilated or dislocated from English interpellating structures. For Melas' re-imagining of Althusser's interpellation, see her *All the Difference in the World*, especially pages 93-4.

cognitive space with an infant for a companion, Jewsbury's speaker cannot remain adrift forever on the open symbolic of the sea and must eventually land in India. The final lines of the last poem take leave of the ship's universe and the world she has imagined during her journey: "But then, I did not dream to find/ Such friendship as a I leave behind" (XII.39-40). The ending might signal that the friendship and virtual reciprocity modeled at sea will no longer hold once the speaker is confronted with the acute exigencies of life in India. Perhaps on the subcontinent, the shock of the real, and the history it imports, will dampen any imaginative or merely literary attempts to change it. Moreover, in becoming a memsahib in India with a power all her own, Jewsbury's speaker may not be able to remain a child excluded from the political structures or racial ideologies of adults. Certainly, Hemans, Robinson, and Smith all to some extent acknowledge the impossibility of the kind of social change they envision. Although Jewsbury's speaker must put aside her new-found friendship with Ceylon, if she carries with her this new mechanism for ethical visualization, she might welcome each strange encounter that she faces in India.

Of all the women writers in this study, Jewsbury's vacancy delves most literally into how to change perception and our ways of understanding new images. In the wake of the reforms of 1832 provoked in large part by identity politics and the Chartist movement, she also documents how the evocation and evacuation of personas or characters might help to suspend or create new roles for women. Both Hemans and Jewsbury describe pioneering characters who literally and figuratively find different landscapes with different mental topologies that might preserve their individuality and their intellectual prowess. Smith and Robinson's hermit and idiot figures become more

figurative and elusive in contrast. All of these women writers pit the altered states of their subversive figures—hermits, idiots, meditating immigrants, or infants—against the overdetermined, embodied representations of landscapes that served to portray women as embodied, unthinking features of a natural pastoral. Except maybe for Smith, who pictures vacancy as a figure of linguistic suspension, all the other poets eventually arrive at a kind of rhetorical or tropological process where vacancy inheres and must be uttered repeatedly. As the promises of the French Revolution and wider reforms to gender and society slowly faded into the past, it is no wonder that women felt the need to repeatedly attack that language and those representations that threatened to see them as merely women.

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