

PROVED UPON OUR PULSES: ROMANTICISM AND THE LIFE OF THINGS
TODAY

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Anne Nicole—Annie—Shapiro (1982-2016).

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Introduction: Romantic Life as Resistance

The actual heart of P.B. Shelley is a haunting emblem for a kind of Romantic resistance to reducing life to the mechanisms of its biology, to the law-based interactions of physicochemical matter, or the predictability of regular form and taxonomy that would be the focus of careful research in comparative anatomy throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. The story of Shelley's heart is well known, especially from the account given by Edward Trelawny in *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*: after he met an early death at the age of twenty-nine by drowning in the Gulf of La Spezia in 1822, Shelley's friends, including Lord Byron and Leigh Hunt, quarantined his body by sprinkling it with lime and burying it on the beach, and then later exhumed it for cremation.¹ Byron had actually asked Trelawny to preserve Shelley's skull for him, but Trelawny recollected that Byron had formerly used another human skull as a drinking cup, and determined that Shelley's "should not be so profaned" (136). So the head would be burned upon the funeral pyre with the rest of the corpse, with wine, oil, and salt making "the yellow flames glisten and quiver" (137). Trelawny's description of the poet's cremation proceeds with gruesome detail, as he reports the process of the body's melting away, the skull cracking and exposing the brains that "literally seethed, bubbled, and boiled as in a cauldron, for a very long time" (137). At this point Byron withdraws, but the others remain to attend to the flames, and are finally surprised to see that the body had gone entirely to ash with the exception of some remaining bone fragments and the heart that would not burn and instead "remained entire" (137). Trelawny burned his hand

¹ See E.J. Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1858.

and risked quarantine, himself, when he “snatch[ed] this relic” from the pyre. The heart was later given to Mary Shelley, who according to other accounts that may be apocryphal, kept it for the next thirty years wrapped in the pages of her husband’s *Adonais*, the elegy he had written for John Keats the year before.

It is perhaps fitting that inquiry into an explanation for why the heart would not burn would come in the allegedly un-romantic 1950s, when Arthur Norman, writing in the *Journal of the History of Medicine*, suggests that Shelley’s heart probably had been progressively calcifying, a hypothesis that also neatly accounts for Shelley’s well-known apparent hypochondriac tendencies, which may have actually had a physical basis after all.² Nevertheless, Norman takes the opportunity of this suggestion to make a pregnant observation that “Shelley’s heart, epitome of Romanticism, may well have been a heart of stone” (114).

This story and its appeal, which after all amounts to a Romantic cliché, is nevertheless instructive for the ways it circles around the relationship of life itself to the body, and approaches the limit point of thinking life as a thing: Shelley’s calcified heart is interesting because its survival on the funeral pyre instantly transformed it into a fossil, a stone bearing an indexical relationship to a life that had been, and as a fossil and new kind of object, a stone that would have a life, and certainly a life-story, of its own. To the extent that canonical Romanticism, for my purposes about 1760-1830, can be said to be organized around a common set of problems—itsself a suggestion that relies on a modern logic of periodization that was just coming into existence in the late eighteenth and early

² Arthur Norman, “Shelley’s Heart.” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 10.1 (1955): 114.

nineteenth centuries—life itself and its attendant theories, technologies, and texts organized the common obsessions of a large array of thinkers. Romantic-era poets, physicians, philosophers and physiologists would relentlessly pursue the relationships between life itself, a principle of life or the “living principle,” and its traces in bodily forms and expressions: the result is an unresolved and unresolvable crisis in not knowing how to think life in relation to things, be they “living,” “dead,” or otherwise. Romantic life considered as vital power has an uneasy relationship with organized biological forms, and the Romantic thinkers I read in this dissertation repeatedly find themselves at the edge of the abyss between power and form or organization, life and the body, and persons and things. This chasm remains necessarily unbridgeable, which Romantically guarantees the potential of the power *of* life to exceed the power *over* life that comes into being in a novel form in this period.

In what follows, I bring this assortment of Romantic-era investigations of the problem of life, investigations that may be considered both scientific and aesthetic, into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and attempt to use them as a light by which to read more recent figures of biotechnological and biopolitical anxiety. If it is possible to translate Shelley’s heart’s “survival” and “afterlife” into twentieth-century terms, it might be that of a transplant patient’s new organ. The heart that continues to beat in a brain-dead corpse, and then goes on to live an afterlife in another body, often produces Romantic fantasies for both organ recipients and donor families alike. Along these lines, Ian Hacking describes the case of a sixty-year-old man who receives the heart of a

seventeen-year-old motorcycle accident victim.³ The heart recipient “feels that he bears some of the soul” of his young donor, including “not just his energy” but also some of his “quirks and fascinations” and the donor’s mother, twenty years his junior, “calls him son,” as both agree they have participated in a rebirth (94). Another analogue for Shelley’s heart for our own time may be the “immortal” cell lines of Henrietta Lacks, who also died young, at thirty-one, of cervical cancer in 1951. Cells cultured from her tumor had the remarkable ability to survive *in vitro* longer than other human cells, an element of the monstrous vitality of her cancer, and were used by her physician-researchers to produce the HeLa cell line for microbiological research. Cells bearing her DNA continue to reproduce in their monstrous growth in laboratories across the world, enabling a wide array of biotechnological research, as well as intense interest in Lacks, herself.⁴ Like Shelley’s heart, both of these contemporary examples resist the reduction of living pieces of bodies to the terms in which technocratic biomedicine would have us understand them: the transplanted heart is really just a pump, and the “immortal” cell line just a convenient medium for experiment.

In this way I consider Romantic vitality as an excessive power that seeks to escape empirical explanations about the inner workings of bodies, and continues to figure life in the twenty-first century, in our “biological” age, an age of high biotech. The stakes of this encounter are not merely historical. The potential of studying some of the Romantic shadows cast over our own figures of life is to help us make sense of our own

³ See Ian Hacking, “Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts.” *Critical Inquiry* 34.1 (2007): 78-105.

⁴ For example, see Rebecca Skloot’s recent book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown, 2010.

discourses of life and neo-vitalism, including the deleterious effects of pro-life ideology so tenaciously interwoven with life in twenty-first century America. By this I mean more than the moral opposition to the termination of a pregnancy, and include under this rubric other forms of psychotic celebration of life's indexes or images in ways that eclipse or overshadow the actual social lives that people live.

So this project can be characterized as an extended inquiry about the forms and figures of life itself between the Romantic period and today. In other words, it is oriented around reading life today through the lens of the Romantic ideology. It may not make intuitive sense to return to the Romantic period as a strategy for understanding what is at stake in our own neo-vitalist moment because the new face of the crisis of the body has been brought on by extremely novel technologies developed in the wake of the Second World War, which at first blush seem anti-Romantic: stem cell research, organ transplant, sexual reassignment surgery, genetic engineering, and the specter, at least, of human cloning, for example. Nevertheless, I shall argue that the anxiety surrounding these more novel technologies is itself not entirely novel, and in fact repeats a much more familiar pattern of clamoring over a principle of life itself pioneered in the Romantic period.

And together with the challenge to our conceptions of biological life that recent biotechnology has provoked, we have also witnessed in the same timespan the development of nuclear weapons that could make literal the apocalyptic visions so prominent in Romantic period poetics: for me these twentieth-century fantasies of infinite life, total biological destruction, and rebirth are tightly intertwined. And I suggest below that this Cold War context of the American postwar period ought to be taken seriously in

thinking through the shape of twentieth-century Romanticism in the discipline of academic literary criticism. I should be very clear in explaining that I do not invoke the Romantic ideology in order to celebrate it, even as I argue for its continued relevance as a figure of resistance to the neoliberal, globalized norms of technocratic biomedicine. Romantic life as a figure of power is itself an effect of the workings of power to which it opposes itself; it is not a way out.

It is crucial to underscore the breadth and influence of the paradigm of Romantic life in the history of literature and the history of science: from Jena to Britain, and in relation to animal, plant, and written forms, a fundamental and universal life force or power might be taken to enmesh all that is alive, either literally or figuratively, in a universal, pulsating and breathing organicism. In Britain, the rise of more professionalized sciences and compartmentalized disciplines of all sorts in the Victorian era, a development that led to a “two cultures” model and division between the arts and humanities, on the one hand, and the hard sciences on the other, resulted as well in a marginalization of Romantic science in dominant historical narratives of scientific research and discovery. C.P. Snow’s “Two Cultures” construction, first formulated as a lecture in 1959—just six years following the publication of M.H. Abrams’s magisterial *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which did so much to highlight the shared priorities of Romantic artists and proto-biologists, and two years following the launch of *Sputnik 1*, the popular response to which transformed the priorities of Anglo-American education in the direction of “technoscience,” a term itself coined first in 1953—is a symptom of a discursive pattern that demands the exclusion of the aesthetic form from research

considered properly empirical and, indeed, “scientific.” It is hardly controversial, and even banal, to assert that much critical work in science studies today moves toward dismantling the tired division between “the arts” and “the sciences.” To look toward various aspects of Romantic practice may well provide a powerful model for thinking ourselves out of this opposition.

Nevertheless, it remains something of a ritual in historicist approaches to Romantic thought to acknowledge the power of an inadequate but deep-seated conceptual shorthand that places Romantic thought on the far side of a dividing line between Enlightenment rationalism and post-Enlightenment irrationalism. Decades of ideology critique performed on Romantic texts, in the face of their supposed resistance to historical-materialist analysis throughout much of the twentieth century, are supposed to attest to the ultimate rejection of the old Idealist approach to the Romantic era and its transcendent imaginings about organicist forms floating high above material bodies. And while it’s undoubtedly true that the old Idealist approach to the Romantic era is not as dominant as it once was, and materialist analyses of bodies, labor, the circulation of capital, the history of sexuality and the practice of medicine abound in current historicist scholarship of the period, it seems frightfully difficult to finally break with transcendent Idealism as a means of understanding Romantic thought of all kinds, from poetry and poetics to the sciences. This materialist turn in the study of British Romanticism serves as a kind of counterpoint, or corrective to a received wisdom about literary and artistic production in the period, and yet interestingly, this corrective to a received wisdom about literary and artistic production in the period seems always couched as a corrective,

assumed to work as an intervention in relation to a dominant critical paradigm that will not abate.

In short, the period constitutes such a fertile historical field because its exponents pioneered strategies for thinking through relationships between life and power in ways that crossed generic barriers between aesthetics and the life sciences, making biological form and aesthetic form two sides of the same coin. Although the novelty of the biotechnologies today appears to force a radically new series of crises of embodiment for experts and ethicists to dispense with—coma, brain death, the proper handling of an organ, infection, quarantine, mutation, mutability, engineered GMO crops and the paranoid fantasies about the food supply that they inspire—the Romantic model shows how an assortment of poets and other writers, doctors, physiologists and life scientists alike can participate in an undisciplined project of pushing relationships among life and bodies and texts. Even more immediately applicable to the shape of our own fantasies of life is not the history of the Romantic period properly speaking, but its reimagination in the postwar period as a tightly constructed paradigm. This dissertation therefore tries to engage some of the texts and practices of the historical period, and also the ways these texts and practices are read, taken up, and woven into a stable paradigm for literary study in the twentieth century. Along these lines, I seek to understand some of the reasons why the Romantic canon became such an object of dispute and location of interest, a dumping ground for various bodily anxieties, for literary critics, historians, and theorists in the wake of the Second World War. This is the primary focus of the first two chapters.

This element of the project is genealogical. I try to find some Romantic roots for understanding the pro-life vitalism of the soul, which is so pervasive in contemporary American culture, and which is usually taken to be a retrograde form of Christian fundamentalism. Instead of thinking this primarily as a theological problem, however, I focus on some of the ways the Romantic ideology is repurposed in the early twentieth century in the service of the Southern Agrarians' white supremacist program and manifesto for the displacement of the northern industrialist by the yeoman farmer. In this part of the project, I consider some of the ways the Southern Agrarian program prefigures contemporary resistance to biotechnology through appeals to vitality and life itself.

In addition to tracing some of the genealogies of “life itself” and “vitality” from the Romantic period into the twentieth century, this project performs an experiment in staging a series of encounters within an array of intellectual traditions and their respective disciplinary formations that I've long enjoyed and tried to participate in: literary criticism and theory, medical anthropology, and bioethics. Given the logic of the academic discipline, each of these modes of thought about life and the body tend to function as totalities, and as such, cross-pollination between these fields, with their radically different methodological norms—for example, close reading as opposed to ethnography as opposed to analytic philosophy or applied ethics—still remains relatively rare. From this point of view, this dissertation is a monstrous product of the mutations that result from a kind of experimental disciplinary cross-pollination, or genetic modification. So while I begin by considering the ways thought about “life itself” has mushroomed in the literary critical and theoretical field in the past three decades, including new conceptions of

vitalism, new readings of biopolitics and biopower, and new ways of thinking the human in relation to other kinds of lifeforms and vibrancy, the dissertation as a whole tries to bring these developments into an encounter with the language and methods of medical anthropology and bioethics.

My working method in this project is to shuttle between a wide variety of sites that resist the logic of disciplinary totalization, and my readings around these sites are necessarily partial. So for example, I consider the American system for cadaveric whole organ procurement and transplant in chapter four, along with the twentieth-century invention of brain death as a necessary precondition that makes organ harvest legally and ethically acceptable. I take the invention of brain death, and the widespread resistance to its absoluteness on the part of potential donor families and health care professionals alike, as a kind of restaging of Romantic-era physiological debates about the body's relationship to the person, which are exemplified and born out in that tradition's search for a physiological "living principle." Undertaking such a comparative reading of life between two very different sites—transplant medicine and Romantic physiology—is one strategy I use for putting pressure on the rhetoric of life that is routinely deployed casually or uncritically in transplant medicine: "donate life" being a familiar and effective slogan among procurement professionals. In that chapter, then, I try to tease out the most salient features of the afterlife of Romantic vitality as excessive power in a particular medical context, and trace some of the ways the language of life is routinely used as a strategy simultaneously to guarantee and to defy the authority of technocratic biomedicine. This is important because as the published ethnographic research indicates,

organ procurement specialists often assume families who refuse to donate organs are simply religious, superstitious, or otherwise irrational. My interest here is to develop alternative possible genealogies for this kind of resistance.

Within American bioethics, the status of the body and its parts, and definitions of life itself, have become subject to almost constant revision and elaboration. Sustained fervor over the ontological status of certain bits of flesh, and the property rights that may attach to them, has become commonplace for legions of professional bioethicists, clinicians, public health professionals and hospital managers, who deliberate loudly and publicly about the dignity that ought to be accorded a solid organ taken from the body of a brain-dead patient, or a cell line derived from a tissue sample. It is tempting to suggest that something of a category mistake is at play here: unable to adequately account for the human by drawing distinctions between the body, its parts, and the person, much contemporary bioethics takes the Kantian categorical imperative's injunction not to use a person as a means to an end absolutely literally; proper and legal informed consent becomes a universal standard in the most mundane and the most egregious cases. My hope is that bringing these bioethical problems into a more direct encounter with the Romantic vitalism that informs them will help recalibrate the manner in which these matters can be thought.

Thinking "life itself" in an age when the body seems less stable than ever before, but also more resilient, increasingly repairable, and endlessly modifiable, is a necessarily fraught affair. Scholars from a wide range of fields have responded to this imperative by taking up the question of life anew. My small contribution to this rather large and

unwieldy discourse is to force a comparison of our current obsession with life and its forms with historical concepts of organicist and vitalist biological thinking, themselves ancient traditions that reemerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with particular force. If there is a red thread that runs through this project, it is a sustained attempt to think about the ways Romantic conceptions of life as power, and the relationship of this power to growth and forms that may or may not contain it, command considerable rhetorical purchase in figuring life today.

Another example of a site I explore that resists disciplinary totalization is my experimental reading of a canonical Romantic poem, John Keats's *Lamia*, in light of the emergence of transsexual and transgender discourse in the twentieth century, along with the development of sexual reassignment surgery. I read the poem allegorically for the image of life it produces, hence placing it within an ostensibly stable, period-specific set of textual objects that go in search of a "principle of life." Through this reading I arrive at a Keatsian disconnect between the predictability of form and the power of vital life to generate new, transgressive forms of life. Following the implications of this reading, I explode the historicist framework initially authorizing it, and explore some ways this poem participates in thinking the relationships between life and sexed bodies that would not become prominent for over a century following its composition. In this way I explore the ways conceptions of Romantic vitality might be brought to bear on the emergence of new forms of life in the postwar period, as a generative kind of power that reaches beyond biological givens in order to grasp at the truth.

The dissertation as a whole attempts a sustained meditation on an observation that has become axiomatic in much contemporary critical theory and science studies regarding “life” today: namely, that it has ended. This is not merely a reproduction of Michel Foucault’s pronouncement at the close of *The Order of Things* that man “would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (387), but is instead a somewhat less lofty and strangely more troubling pronouncement on the object of the life science: the living body, living matter itself, insofar as it can be easily distinguished from the nonliving or dead, has begun to disappear. Advances in genetic engineering, cloning, reproduction, and transplantation have allegedly destabilized a familiar sentimental comfort in the “mystery” or “miracle” of life, and have replaced it with physicochemical matter denuded of its vitalist or organicist allure. Or as Ian Hacking puts it, our dominant notion of the body is coming back to Descartes, and he identifies the rise of a Neo-Cartesianism insofar as our vital parts can be taken out, replaced, or transferred to other bodies in the way one might approach the project of repairing an Oldsmobile. Among the scientists and scholars whose disciplines most closely align with these developments—medical anthropologists working with biotech, philosophers of biology, and others—a consensus has been built that “life” as we thought we knew it is no more.⁵ Or, as Albert Jacquard, the French geneticist, puts it nakedly: “Like everything around us, we human beings are ‘stardust’” (qtd in Jones 3). He manages a saving grace insofar as “stardust” is more appealing than mere dust or ashes, but the emptying out of the body of its vitalist

⁵ For a good example of this tendency, see Stefan Helmreich, *Sounding the Limits of Life: Essays in the Anthropology of Biology and Beyond*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, and especially the first chapter, “What Was Life?: Answers from Three Limit Biologies.”

force is unmistakable. Of the many crises of the early twenty-first century, one certainly involves coming to terms with this new development in the study and conception of biological life. Romantic vitalism and its descendants in the twenty-first century resist this kind of reductionism.

For the title of this dissertation I have borrowed a famous phrase from Keats: “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses,” which appears in his 3 May 1818 letter to John Reynolds (1.279).⁶ This line among others in his corpus attests to the power of the body and the materiality of life as the very standard of truth, a Romantic viewpoint sometimes occluded by recourse to the heady space of self-consciousness. But for Keats, the buck stops with the body. In the face of a possible “neo-Cartesian” turn, and the mechanical reduction of life to stardust, this vital resistance of the body is well worth remembering. It is also in this letter that Keats, busy caring for his brother who was dying of tuberculosis, makes his most self-conscious statements about the intersections of his medical training and literary life, and comments upon the tangled, frustrating and labyrinthine pathways of his intellectual development, striking a commiserative tone about it with his friend. Keats can participate in “every department of knowledge” because he romantically assumes them to be “calculated towards a great whole” (1.277). I think at this late date it is time to jettison any remaining Romantic faith in the ultimate harmony of these various departments and traditions: what we inhabit instead is a thicket of bodies of thought wildly, and even vitally resistant to the imposition of this kind of order. But this does not detract from his prescription, fitting for

⁶ See John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*. 2 Volumes. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958.

a poet-physician so sensitive to the body to make, that it is only by working through the labyrinth that might “take away the heat and fever” of the human condition (1.277).

Chapter One

Stirrings of Life: Romanticism, Agrarianism, and the New Criticism

We live in an era in which the question of “life” has moved center stage in the West, displacing or at least shifting the more traditional foci of ontology. This is a recent development, but not entirely unprecedented.⁷ Life is imbricated in the recent development of posthumanism and now the “nonhuman turn,” in Foucauldian biopolitics, and a wide array of neo-vitalisms in cultural theory, including object-oriented ontology, thing theory, and affect theory.⁸ And it continues to operate, as it has since Aristotle, as a category that promises to undergird politics, ethics, and aesthetics.⁹ Within this long

⁷ In 1982, focusing on the German context, Herbert Schnädelbach could claim that “‘life’ is regarded as the domain of the biological sciences and medicine; we can no longer even remember today how this concept was once the dominant theme of philosophy, and yet the period in which this was so—the decades between 1880 and 1930—ended only fifty years ago” (139). See his *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933*. Trans. Eric Matthews. New York: Cambridge UP, 1984.

⁸ See *The Nonhuman Turn*. Ed, Richard Grusin. See Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* See also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Seemingly a world apart from these titles, laboratory scientists and historians working in the life sciences have also responded to the widespread interest in the fundamental question of “life” with a spate of books for popular audiences. For example, see Jane Maienschein’s *Whose View of Life?: Embryos, Cloning, and Stem Cells*, Ed Regis’s *What Is Life? Investigating the Nature of Life in the Age of Synthetic Biology* and Robert Pollack’s *Signs of Life: The Language and Meanings of DNA*.

⁹ The twenty-first century’s reinvigorated interest in the category of life has stimulated a number of new books that attempt to take stock of the ways the concept is so fraught, and to map out the long history of its meanings in philosophical discourse. Eugene Thacker’s *After Life* is a particularly strong book of this sort. Other titles approach these questions less squarely, for example through the lens of biomedicine, resulting in a thoroughgoing analysis of one specific domain. One prominent example is Nikolas Rose’s *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*, which has become something of a contemporary classic dealing with the politics of some of the new biomedical technologies.

tradition, the concept of life is clearly not reducible to the body or to organic matter, but in the face of rapidly developing biotechnology since the end of the Second World War, and the range of dystopian fears associated with it, conceptual clarity has remained elusive in popular discourse, and heated appeals to “life itself” often bear on contemporary politics of the body. So in addition to theoretical developments, folk conceptions of life and vitality, which may be ostensibly “religious” or “scientific” or some combination, bear on policy debates and decisions of all sorts: from labeling GMO foods or not labeling them, to developing ethical protocols for harvesting tissue for either transplant or research, to regulating stem cell research and genetic engineering and assigning property rights to biological material and genetic information.¹⁰

This tangle of popular conceptions of life, public policy and ethics may stand distinct from the relatively recent intensity in theoretical elaborations of life as a separate genre of discourse, but these approaches are not isolated from one another entirely, and indeed they share an interest in the question and nature of “life itself.” And especially since the discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953, the first successful kidney transplant in 1954, and the consequent development of genetic engineering, the new biomedical technologies, including transplant medicine, have provided fodder for myriad science fiction plots dealing with the malleability of the body, often tapping into older, racist narratives of contagion and impurity.

¹⁰ Harriet Washington’s *Deadly Monopolies* is a compelling piece of journalism that reviews some of the conflicts that emerge when parts of the body are designated as property or intellectual property. Anne Phillips has recently analyzed some of the pitfalls of establishing markets for the exchange of body parts. See her *Our Bodies, Whose Property?* (2013).

But it is not the case that a conception of life as manipulable, physicochemical matter was radically new by the time of Watson and Crick's model and then the development of recombinant DNA during the Cold War. In many ways, this was old news by the mid 1950s. Iatromechanistic theories of the body had achieved prominence in the late eighteenth century—Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *L'Homme machine* (1748) being the most famous—and had been subjected to Romantic critique: Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein *qua* Modern Prometheus is of course frequently cited as the go-to literary figure encapsulating collective anxieties surrounding the engineering of life forms.¹¹ As Donna Jones (2010) points out, the Darwinian revolution, with its materialist conception of life, removed certain theoretical “vitalist barriers” to “radical transformations” of bodies by human designers, allowing for the intentional design of life forms in opposition to the much longer process of natural selection; this being “the logical outcome of post-Darwinian materialist biology, if not the next step in evolution itself” (45). At the same time, as Jones explains, a seeming ideology of life is knitted into the Darwinian scheme, and natural selection in particular, in that non-directed, non-teleological, unintentional action in a natural system over an extremely long duration produces the plenitude of a full, complex, and indeed beautiful biosphere of a complexity beyond the power of conscious human design. Life itself thus becomes associated with an

¹¹ For a firm and straightforward account of the way Frankenstein scuttles biomedical technology, and specifically organ donation programs, see Leslie Fielder “Why Organ Transplant Programs Do Not Succeed.” *Organ Transplantation: Meanings and Realities*. Ed. Stuart Younger, et al. Madison, Wisc: Wisconsin UP, 1996.

unconscious drive or force, moving it creakingly back to territory that appears at least quasi-vitalist or organicist.

It is because of this major contradiction in biology after Darwin—the theoretical possibility of intentionally engineering living matter, but an engineering that can only asymptotically approach the results of natural evolutionary mechanisms—that Jones takes H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, with the title character’s engineering of a series of living monsters, as a “much more important precursor of biotechnological anxiety than the crude Dr. Frankenstein” (47). I think Jones is right to displace Victor Frankenstein as the precursor *par excellence* of biotechnological anxiety, but this is not to say that Romantic works or conceptions of vitality do not continue to cast a shadow over these more modern figures composed within a squarely materialist, Darwinian framework, and describing the shape of these Romantic shadows is a primary concern of the rest of this dissertation. Vitalism and organicism are notoriously unstable concepts that have alternated between positions of intense explanatory power and wide denigration over the course of the last three hundred years in the West, in the life sciences and in other cultural forms, with the Romantic period serving as a convenient framework that helps stitch together a tangle of debates and tensions that had become particularly acute.

But nevertheless, while it is relatively easy to demonstrate that fundamental questions about the nature of life are still central to prominent theoretical approaches to language, politics, and culture, on the one hand, and practical ethical debates about medical policies, research, and procedures, on the other, it is perhaps not obvious how returning to Romantic discourses of life may be relevant to thinking through any of these

more contemporary concerns. I suspect it is even less obvious that turning to Romantically inflected American literary theory and criticism of the mid-twentieth century—the particular object of this chapter—is at all helpful when considering the urgent ethical and political questions opened up in the last several decades by developments in biomedical technology such as recombinant DNA, genetically modified organisms and food products, stem cell research, organ transfer, xenografting, and sex reassignment surgery. However, I would like to suggest that there is space for this comparison, and indeed, that in the shadow of the Cold War and the atomic bomb, just as the British Romantics were coming back into favor among American literary scholars after decades of denigration by Neo-Humanists and several prominent New Critics, academic literary critics as well as activists and researchers involved in the emergence of biotechnology responded to a sense that life itself was changing in the twentieth century. These responses, sometimes reactionary, were informed by a long history of vitalist thinking in both the sciences and the arts.¹² And these responses have no doubt left traces on our contemporary popular discourses of life, with material effects on the ways we conceive of ethics in medical care, death and dying, the harvest of body parts, genetic engineering, and embodiment more broadly, rather than remaining sequestered in the domain of poetics and literary theory.

¹² This division, itself, is generally anachronistic prior to the early nineteenth century; the word “scientist” was not even coined in English until 1833. William Whewell was responsible for its coinage, and intended “scientist” to mirror the term “artist.” See Ruston (2013), 7-8. Ruston in turn bases this remark on the research of Richard Yeo (1993) *Defining Science: William Whewell, Natural Knowledge and Public Debate in Early Victorian Britain*. New York: Cambridge UP. This is a symptom of the growth of a “two cultures” paradigm in the first part of the nineteenth century that is remarkably stubborn and deeply ingrained even today.

This legacy of a romanticized concept of life has been pernicious in many ways, in that it has helped produce a normative bioethics in the United States—grounded, relatively late, in the findings of the Belmont Report of 1978—that is oftentimes frankly perverse: bodily tissue, for instance, including surgical waste, can attain an almost sacred status in the proper circumstances (witness the controversy surrounding the collection of fetal tissue at Planned Parenthood in the summer of 2015), such that it is deemed worthy of the most exacting legal protections, or the removal of a feeding tube from a brain-dead patient can spur the United States Congress to action, as in the controversy surrounding Terri Schiavo in 2005, while living people without means can be legally (and apparently “ethically”) exploited regularly in research protocols or denied healthcare altogether.¹³

I pursue the relationship between Romantic vitalism and the widespread contemporary tendency to fetishize parts of the body in this new biotechnological context more concertedly in chapter four. The present chapter works toward constructing a matrix of discourses, including Romantic writing on life, early twentieth-century vitalism, reactionary agrarianism in the American South, and organicist literary theory in the mid-twentieth-century United States in order to better comprehend why and how a feeling of life became such a rallying cry and point of focus from the first decade of the twentieth

¹³ For some of the gruesome details, see Carl Elliott’s “The Best-Selling, Billion-Dollar Pills Tested on Homeless People: How the destitute and the mentally ill are being used as human lab rats” (2014) at the web publication *Matter*.

<https://medium.com/matter/did-big-pharma-test-your-meds-on-homeless-people-a6d8d3fc7dfe>

The analytic framework of mainstream American bioethics trains clinicians and researchers to run ethically challenging cases through the machinery of a test of four principles: autonomy, justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence. The process of running problems through this mill of principles often misses the social, resulting in a superficial, inadequate ethical analysis.

century through the time of the Cold War. The debates surrounding Romanticism among American literary critics, especially following the Second World War (in the shadow of the New Criticism) and culminating with ferocious battles over new directions in literary theory in the 1980s (deconstruction in particular) can be understood partially as a proxy war that recapitulates the ideological warfare surrounding vitalism and positivism at the turn of the twentieth century, which in turn echoes the battles waged on behalf of organicism by the Romantic generation, itself, at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The relevant literary discourses become one index of this larger battle in American culture, which becomes all the more clear as Romantic and neo-vitalist arguments and images are deployed in the rise of biotechnology and in organized resistance to it. So even though most of the Romantic “parent” discourses that I examine are European, this project focuses on the effects on the American “daughters”; rather than being an examination of European Romanticism proper, this is a comparative study of the ways these Romantic ideologies take root in twentieth-century American soil. Chapter two considers this assemblage of literary discourses in the American postwar context, amidst the rapid development of biotech and the trauma of the Cold War, so that certain features come into focus that otherwise might remain nebulous.

¹⁴ See Schwarz (1992) and especially the first section, pp. 277-279. See also Channell (1991), especially the first four chapters, for some valuable if sweeping background in the history of physical science to the ideological struggle between organicism and mechanism that came to a head in the life sciences of the Romantic era. Mitchell (2013) identifies three waves of “experimental vitalism” in the history of the West, including the Romantic era, about 1780-1830 as he dates it, the vitalist moment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the present time, our contemporary biological age. My interest in returning to the literary discourses of the mid-twentieth century is to build some additional connective tissue among these three “waves.”

And while this dissertation as a whole is interested broadly in the insights that may emerge in comparing Romantic vitality and Romantic-era life science with our contemporary moment of neo-vitalism, this chapter in particular is an attempt to account genealogically for the “travel” of Romantic concepts of life and European life-philosophy into the various strands of formalist critical practices and literary and cultural criticism of the mid-twentieth century that rely, in part, on appeals to life itself, and which will figure into fundamentalist opposition to the development of biotechnology.¹⁵ In other words, the work of this chapter is to produce grounds for comparison of two apparently distinct discursive fields—Romantic literary history and American bioethics—by constructing a genealogical relationship between them and by laying conceptual groundwork for comprehending them within the same matrix: one involving Romantic conceptions of vitality and organicism, as they were taken up by early twentieth-century vitalists and then mid-twentieth-century American literary theorists, and bearing on the development

¹⁵ For a sophisticated elaboration of “travel” as both a metaphor and as a proto-concept that may facilitate unexpected connections among discrete disciplinary encounters see Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. Bal suggests that the travel of a concept, at the level of a keyword, out of a particular systematic and disciplinary theory and into a separate context may foster meaningful disagreement and productive confusion that can be too often blocked out by disciplinary blinders. For an example of this kind of interdisciplinary cultural analysis, of the travel of a concept from one framework into another, see Helmut Müller-Sievers, *Self-Generation: Biology, Philosophy, and Literature Around 1800* (1997), especially chapter one, for an account of how the concept of epigenesis traveled from embryology into Kant’s critical project, grounding the deduction of the categories in the first *Critique*, as well as Romantic and modern concepts of love and marriage.

of biotechnology and the discourse of American bioethics in the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first.¹⁶

It is certainly uncontroversial that various concepts of life, the body, vitalism, and organicism cut across and travel through diverse disciplines and practices in the United States during the first decades of the Cold War, including literary criticism and theory, the history of ideas, microbiology, biotechnology and the incipient genetic engineering of the early 1970s. My hope is that bringing academic literary criticism of the Cold War and the acceleration of biotechnology and the so-called “Biological Revolution” coincidental with it into a comparative framework will help make visible the assumptions and convictions about the nature of “life itself” that they both took part in shaping and sharing. To read romantically, which is to say, analogically, between these two sets of diverse practices, literature and biotechnology, may help reveal something about the form

¹⁶ One of the finest studies of literary modernism’s relationships to Bergsonism and *Lebensphilosophie* is Sanford Schwartz’s *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, & Early 20th-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). There he makes clear what his approach might accomplish that more conventional studies, which he calls “atomistic,” (for instance, about the influence of a particular philosopher on a particular author) cannot. By viewing an entire network of relationships among philosophers and poets, privileging shared frameworks rather than empirical evidence of influence, and emphasizing the deeply interdisciplinary context in which these figures are situated, Schwartz does not promise “new readings of familiar poems” but rather hopes to “discover why we came to read the way we did” (4). Crucially, he cautions that this procedure “should not be regarded as an attempt to uncover the *Zeitgeist* or ‘deep structure’ of a particular historical period,” and instead suggests that we think of “a ‘model’ that *overlies* a complex array of historical phenomena that defy exhaustive codification” (9-10). I echo this caution not to be seduced into the search for a *Zeitgeist*, and the conformity of thought such a construct implies, and emphasize instead that the network of discourses I seek to put into relationship with one another does not aim at a stable notion of historical accuracy. The very “model” (to invoke Schwartz’s term) that this dissertation tries to construct is more like a lens that, at its best, can temporarily adjust the depth of field of some otherwise familiar territory.

and function of that third term, life, which is so central to both Romantic poetics and the life sciences of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

And indeed, many scholars of Romantic literature have been engaged in the project of reassessing the practice of the incipient life sciences of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, producing a badly needed corrective to the once-dominant notion that the Romantics could be characterized as unambiguously “anti-science,” but my own goal in this chapter is to focus on Romantic literary critics of the latter half of the twentieth century, to ask how and why Romantic literature and the Romantics became so ideologically central in the Cold War period, when technoscience, the atomic bomb, and the rapid advance of biotechnology cast a shadow over life itself. If historicist work on the Romantic period of the last two decades has corrected the shibboleth that the period was thoroughly reactionary and idealist, the question of why this Cold War shibboleth had achieved such persuasive force in the first place has not yet received as much attention.

So why do Romantic discourses of life generate such sustained interest in an era marked by Cold War paranoia, rapid developments in the life sciences, and the possibility of nuclear annihilation? In short, I think these developments in literary criticism are tightly intertwined with nuclear fear and the development of biotechnology in the post-war period. The early Cold War saw some fundamental shifts in literary studies in the United States: the dominance of the New Criticism began to wane in the 1950s as a resurgence in interest in Romanticism was catalyzed, at least in part, by the publication of M.H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), and with it, a strong and renewed

interest in the history of ideas in literary studies. The rise of French theory, in turn, challenged and partially displaced the kind of intellectual history Abrams was engaged in producing, but the traditional Romantic canon, itself, remained central to literary theory and the practice of American deconstruction through the end of the Cold War. Since then, its fortune has reversed. The lyric poem, that privileged textual object of the Romantics, has steadily lost purchase in American academic literary criticism over the last several decades, being largely displaced by prose forms, and especially the novel.

While it is not news to anyone that major theorists engaged in French structuralist and poststructuralist theory concentrated on deconstructing the organicism supposedly central to the Romantic Big Six (this understanding of organicism being largely a result of Coleridge's theoretical writings), I'd like to return to the question of organic form in order to account for how the appearance of such technologies as the atomic bomb and recombinant DNA thrust the organic metaphor to the foreground in literary theoretical debates in the post-war period.¹⁷ While these debates may seem to be focused on squarely academic concerns—New Criticism or historicism? Organic wholes or fragments?—their emergence in the latter half of the twentieth century, when the question of life reappeared with renewed force and urgency, is not merely coincidental.

The strategy I use here, along with my pattern of object choices, is of course just one of many possible ways to account for the shape of our contemporary neo-vitalism as it is manifested in bioethics, popular opposition to biotechnology, and certain theoretical

¹⁷ For a recent and thorough treatment of Coleridge's theoretical writings on organicism, see Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

work in the humanities and social sciences.¹⁸ To focus on Romantic discourse and twentieth-century discourse about Romanticism against the backdrop of biotechnological development is just one way to analyze the structure of neo-vitalist concerns with the status of “life itself” in the twenty-first century; I do not seek more than a partial solution. Surely other historically prior discursive formations resonate with, and give shape to, these same concerns: I do not suggest, therefore, that the ghost of European Romanticism, in particular, lurks inescapably and determines the development of our discourse and our sense of life, even if making this assertion has become something of a convention in Romantic scholarship since the end of the Second World War.¹⁹ But when

¹⁸ I concentrate on the vitalisms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth, as well as early twentieth, centuries in this project. The concept of vitalism in Western thought is of course ancient, but the sheer bulk of writing on vitalism through the centuries would make a comprehensive account of the concept impossible. For a good overview of some major trends and developments in vitalist thought prior to the Romantic era, especially in the domains of physiology and embryology from the Renaissance through the late Enlightenment, see George Rousseau, “The perpetual crises of modernism and the traditions of Enlightenment vitalism: with a note on Mikhail Bakhtin” in *The Crisis in Modernism* (Eds. Burwick and Douglass), New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 15-75. See also the first chapter of Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2009. Pp 1-48, especially 1-23) for crucial background on the debates over preformation and epigenesis, with embryology being the major vitalist ideological battleground in the one hundred fifty years prior to the emergence of European Romanticism proper. Following some cursory Aristotelian background, Gigante’s account begins in earnest in 1651, with the publication of William Harvey’s preformationist *On Animal Generation*, which she identifies as the first modern study of generation, to a culmination of sorts around 1780 with Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s writings on the *Bildungstrieb*—formative drive or formative impulse—complete with analogies drawn to gravity, electricity, and magnetism. From this pivotal moment, Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus would publish *Biologie, oder Philosophie der lebenden Natur für Naturforscher und Aertzte* in 1802, the first use of the term “Biologie.” “Biology” would follow in English in 1819.

¹⁹ The curious pattern of scholars of Romanticism defending the period against modernists and New Critics in the early twentieth century (and by the 1980s, against certain deconstructionists and Marxists) by arguing for the continued timeliness of

it is possible to detect an echo of a Romantic idea in twenty-first-century resistance to embryonic stem cell research, for instance, it behooves us to isolate and amplify it, and to

Romantic forms is widespread. This tendency to argue for the inescapability of Romantic forms is sometimes made precisely, especially in the face of the New Critical denigration of the Romantic canon, as in Richard H. Fogle's demonstration of Romantic notions of irony and organicism at the root of modernist poetics. See "Romantic Bards and Metaphysical Reviewers" *ELH* 12.3 (1945): 221-250 and "A Recent Attack upon Romanticism" *College English* 9.7 (1948): 356-361. Likewise, M.H. Abrams opens *The Mirror and the Lamp* by asserting in the first paragraph that English and German Romantic writers' innovations characterize the literary criticism of our own time, "including some criticism which professes to be anti-romantic" (v). Sometimes these assertions are made more fleetingly or vaguely. For instance, Paul de Man states in "The Negative Road," his introduction to an edition of Keats's poetry (1966), that time and again, the "new conceptions" (among which he includes Neo-humanism, New Criticism, neo-realism and neo-Marxism) that "assert themselves" with an "anti-romantic (or anti-idealist) bias" lead us merely to "becom[e] aware of certain aspects of romanticism that had remained hidden from our perception" (29-30). Much more recently, W.J.T. Mitchell invoked Bruno Latour to conclude a keynote address to the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism with the satisfying remark that "Bruno Latour has assured us that, in reality, 'we have never been modern,' and I would only add that this must mean we have always been romantic" (184). See "Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, Images" *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001): 167-184. I know of no other period in modern literary history where scholarly convention among period specialists invites this kind of repeated declaration of currency and relevance. In a well-known response to this pattern, Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology*, which did much to usher New-Historicism into the field, seeks to challenge the "widespread idea that Romanticism comprises all significant literature produced between Blake and the present—some would say between Gray, or even Milton, and the present" (20) by returning to the Lovejoy/Wellek debates about Romanticism and appealing to the functions of ideology in contemporary literary criticism, and insisting that when critics "perpetuate and maintain older ideas and attitudes in continuities and processive traditions they typically serve only the most reactionary purposes of their societies, though they may not be aware of this" (2). A wave of responses to McGann's book then echoed the well-established rhetorical form established at the beginning of the twentieth century by reasserting the timeliness of Romanticism in the face of denigration. See, for instance, titles such as Richard Eldrige, *The Persistence of Romanticism: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), and its declaration in the first line: "It is no news that Romanticism has had a bad press throughout much of the twentieth century, rising to a chorus of vilification in the past fifteen or so years" (1). Eldrige then appeals to Kantian moral philosophy and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's work on the "literary absolute" to argue for the persistence of Romantic desire.

interrogate it and the reasons it may be stubbornly lodged in our discourse. And if the recent surge in interest in the intersection of the life sciences and poetics in Romantic literary criticism over the past fifteen years can be taken as a signal that these late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century elaborations have left traces on Western habits of thinking about life today, to return to this tradition of Romantic vitalism may help bring into relief both common assumptions and urgent controversies in biotechnology. In short, to concentrate some attention on Romantic life today is not purely, or even primarily, an historical exercise. Doing so helps us see more clearly the fissures and inconsistencies in a supposedly modernized discourse of life science *qua* bioengineering. If the Cold War period in the United States, especially, saw the rise of a new, and particularly vexed, way of thinking about the status of life and the body—partially an effect of the discovery of DNA, the rise of biotechnology, the rapid increase in technologized medical care, in terms of both pharmaceutical development and surgeries such as organ transplant and sex reassignment—it may well be fruitful to examine the ways literary discourses contemporaneous with these developments negotiated life in a period of acute uncertainty and flux.

One place to begin is at the far end of the trajectory, that is, at a moment when a major exponent of American literary theory addresses the concept of organicism squarely, as a metaphor, twenty-five years deep into the Cold War and three years after the world's first successful human heart transplant. William K. Wimsatt, one of the giants of the American New Criticism, had occasion at the 1970 annual convention of the Modern Language Association to deliver a paper on organic form at a "Literature and

Science” panel alongside G.N. Orsini, an idealist aesthetician discussing ancient sources of thought on organic form, and Philip Ritterbush, an historian of science studying the intersection of organic forms and Romantic art.²⁰ Each of the contributions, but especially Wimsatt’s paper, is symptomatic of a kind of anxiety surrounding the rapidly changing critical priorities of American literary theory around 1970, as a wave of French structuralism was revolutionizing the field with a new kind of formalist analysis; both Wimsatt and G.S. Rousseau, in his introduction to the volume, repeatedly claim that they find themselves at a “juncture in critical history” (5, and *passim*). The panel as an event and the volume as a document actually constitute an interesting juncture themselves, a convergence of several notions and traditions key to gauging the animating principles of Cold War Romanticism: a reconsideration of the metaphor of organic form as applied between organic and textual bodies, its use and misuse throughout the period of New Criticism’s dominance in the American academy, the changing status of the body and bodily integrity in the latter part of the twentieth century, the proper object of the literary critic, and the application of a concept of life itself to literary objects. Although each contributor emphasizes the long tradition of thinking about the organicism of the literary object, two key classical texts being Plato’s *Phaedrus* and Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and Coleridge’s writings on the subject being touchstones for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what is most telling here is that this retrospective gesture is coupled with a

²⁰ All three essays were later expanded and published as a book, edited and introduced by the panel’s moderator. See *Organic Form: The Life of an Idea*. G.S. Rousseau, Ed. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972.

hazy awareness of the profound transformation in the field (and the world) that seems imminent: life is about to change, in the academy and beyond.

Wimsatt's contribution seems especially marked by a subtle tone of melancholy as he embeds his own criticism in an ancient tradition, seeks in good New Critical form to appeal to a sense of timelessness of Aristotelian notions of textuality without entirely dismissing structuralist advances, and tries to soften or "loosen" (as he puts it) the terms through which we might productively retain the organic metaphor.²¹ On the one hand, the editor of the collection refers to Wimsatt's perspective on the matters at hand as the "*ne plus ultra* vantage" owing to his status "as America's leading literary theorist" (4), a

²¹ Frances Ferguson has recently commented on Wimsatt's essay in a chapter entitled, "Organic Form and its Consequences" in *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste*. Eds. Peter de Bolla, Nigel Leask and David Simpson. New York: Palgrave, 2004. 223-240. The chapter is focused on the continued power of organicism over most professional literary critics' fundamental understanding of the literary object as well as the disciplinary structures (departments, fields, journals, book series, etc.) that organize and perpetuate this paradigm, the deconstructive critique of organicism notwithstanding. It is quite interesting, as Ferguson says in a footnote, that one of the editors of the collection asked that she specifically address the "apparently obsolete nature of [her] topic" (238) as she argues for its continued relevance. Regarding Wimsatt, Ferguson points out "his high degree of ambivalence about the notion of organic form" paired with his unambiguous assertion that, in his words, "if we had never heard of organic form, we should today be under the necessity of inventing it" (226). Wimsatt seems to subscribe to a "modified idealism" or a "utilitarian comparativism" according to Ferguson's reading; the organic metaphor is imperfect, and can be abused, but it is the best model we have for comprehending literary objects, and absolutely preferable to the "embarrassments" that may otherwise flow either from Paris or from Chicago Aristotelianism (227). Ferguson argues that this brand of utilitarianism informs the New Critics' project of canon formation, which is tightly interwoven with academic professionalization in literary studies, and which has left substantial traces on literary critical practice. Many other recent studies of Romantic organicism suggest that organicist models tend to sneak back into discourse after their supposed exorcism. See, for example, Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife*. New York: Palgrave, 2003. See also Mary Poovey, "The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism" *Critical Inquiry* 27.3 (2001), 408-438, with which Ferguson writes in conversation.

categorical statement indeed, and on the other, Wimsatt makes some gestures, ingenuous or not, to deflect some of the authority assigned to him as he opens the talk by reminding the audience of the ancientness of the organic metaphor, that “most of the questions have been asked before, many times,” and that “pretending to say anything worth while upon such a classic theme requires a courage” that can only come from the example and support of the two other panelists (62). These trappings of the academic ritual serve to accord him iconic status as a representative of the old days of the New Criticism, which had seemed of course to be the vanguard just thirty years earlier in comparison with the Chicago Aristotelians, impressionistic critics, historicists and philologists, and he seeks to recalibrate and partially defend the New Criticism, while at the same time emphasizing the dangers of excess in taking the organic metaphor “too far” as a standard of judgment of poetic objects (72).

Part of what is so strange about Wimsatt’s talk is his manner of embedding the authority of his position in the history of criticism, which relies upon the ancient roots of the tradition of thinking about poetic objects as organisms—it is somehow a comfort to realize that “the metaphor is ancient” even if that means the historical weight and authority are so imposing that we can only “pretend” to contribute to the discourse (62)—while at the same time insisting that “very good ideas, classically simple, essential, and true ideas, are likely to crop up spontaneously in any age – even in the midst of crowding rival fantasies and fads” (78), thereby essentializing the “Aristotelian common sense” (78) that he takes to be on his side. This deft appeal to the authority of tradition points directly to the New Critical project of canon formation, which is so tightly interwoven

with the new professionalization of literary critics in the second half of the twentieth century; judging whether particular literary objects were successful or not was a major element of the New Critical program, and this basic insistence on the vision of the critic's role needs to be highlighted, in distinction from the project of the Chicago Aristotelians, for example. Nevertheless, Wimsatt's apparently confident declaration is hardly unambiguous, and at times seems somewhat anxiously put on as a kind of half-hearted reassurance. He is fully aware of the challenge to his own authority as "America's leading literary theorist," so he must, on the one hand, breezily dismiss the assailants by appealing to common sense and the emptiness of academic fads, while at the same time anxiously acknowledging the instability of understanding "life" and organic form at this moment in history.

It is a surprise, then, when Wimsatt turns to an unlikely site—a discussion of advances in microbiology—in order to make his case for retaining a "loose" version of the organic metaphor in literary studies. With reference to both Kant and G.N. Orsini, Wimsatt declares the new ways in which the physical organism, and our "ragged" bodies (70), are in fact less perfectly synthetic unities than textual objects are: the metaphor goes in the opposite direction than what is usually supposed, namely from text to body, rather than the other way around. In keeping with this direction of the metaphor, we would seem to require poems, or discourse more broadly, to help us conceive of organic bodies as unities that are otherwise dispersed. And if most deconstructive critiques of organicism center on the inherent problems that arise in suggesting that verbal art grows like a plant, or that ideologies and mythologies present the cultural as natural, Wimsatt's reversal

seems an ironic obviation of the objection: textual bodies are more unified, more “organic,” in fact, than anything ostensibly “natural.”

His description of the scientific work is a bit imprecise, and indeed, a little dicey, as he explains that “[n]owadays a batch of amoebas is chopped up and the parts are reassembled, more or less higgledy-piggledy, as I understand it, and a new set of amoebas emerges – ‘synthetic’” (70). It is telling that this kind of novel work with organisms (“nowadays,” almost self-consciously highlighting his old-mannishness) may bear at all for Wimsatt on the ways we are to understand the organic form of a literary text: even more organic than the physical organisms we can chop apart and reassemble.

His bemused interest in microbiology notwithstanding, there is a certain sense of nostalgia for organic form coupled with delight in the organic fragment that pervades the essay.²² This was also a period of high science fiction. Although Wimsatt doesn’t mention it, the front-page *New York Times* article from which he takes this example explains that the synthesis of new amoebas is part of an ultimate plan to cultivate new forms of life that may thrive on Mars, microscopic terraformers paving the way for interplanetary colonization.²³ Does this contribute to the anxiety over the “juncture in critical history” this old New Critic seems to express throughout the piece? Either way,

²² This includes a passage in which he describes himself collecting “glossy black crow feathers” and putting them “in [his] hat or lapel or preserv[ing] for a while at home in a vase” (71-72). There is perhaps something a bit disconcerting about the image of William Wimsatt, of the “*ne plus ultra* vantage,” adorning himself with black crow feathers, but this takes a darker turn especially as his discussion of the fragmented body part (and its relationship to the whole) moves toward ancient haruspication and then to *Lolita*, and Humbert’s longing, “to kiss her insides, heart, liver, lungs, kidneys” (71-72).

²³ See Walter Sullivan, “Buffalo Scientists Report Synthesis of Living Cell.” *New York Times*. Nov 13, 1970. A1.

this invocation of synthetic life forms seems to bring us into the territory of natural law, even if not directly, but by the frequent references to Aristotle and Aristotelian common sense throughout. And the continuing significance of natural law should not be underestimated: appeals to natural law continue to comprise one major basis of pro-life (or anti-choice) arguments, as this tradition assumes the containment of an ideal form (and a soul) in all parts of an organism (even an embryo, or a pluripotent stem cell), mirroring extreme organicist thinking about the relation of the individual parts of a poem and the whole.²⁴ Whether or not Wimsatt's utilitarian invocation of organicism points to an extremist adherence to natural law, it becomes possible to see how the debate in literary theory over the status of organicism bears directly on relevant classical and Catholic traditions for thinking the organism, and the development of a modern politics of life and the body. The synthesis of these amoebas, among other novel projects in engineering life forms in the postwar period, violates this natural-law presumption, stimulating a great deal of biotechnological anxiety that can take many forms: paranoid rage, protest, and sabotage, of course, but also mockery and subtle joking.

For even as Wimsatt seems to want to elicit a chuckle from the audience as he describes this “higgledy-piggledy” process, and his surprise at the use of the term “synthetic” life (doubling a Kantian synthetic idea), his tone rapidly shifts and becomes much graver as he moves to another example of the changing status of the body in the mid-twentieth century, the transplantation and rejection of vital organs in humans, specifically hearts and kidneys. He writes that “even this obtuse archaic organism (our

²⁴ See Denis Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, for a beautiful eighteenth-century working through of this trope via the comparison of the human form to that of a hydra.

body), struggling to carry out the Coleridgean rules, can be coerced for a certain time, even an extended time, into entertaining and being sustained by alien organs” (70). To read about it, he admits, makes him “queasy,” and indeed, in 1970, produces a disconcerting anxiety (70). It is telling, then, that in the shadow of the changing status of the body—be it amoeba or human—and the direction of humankind—whether we’re headed for Mars or not—the “organic” text, at least, remains stable. Our bodies, archaic as they may be, can fail us, but another ancient notion, and Aristotelian common sense, can comfort us like a warm bath, reassuring us. Hence, for Wimsatt, in the face of this anxiety-inducing change in life, the organic textual object begins to function as a fetish.

So even though Wimsatt would likely object to the characterization—he jokes in the essay about the absurdity of supposing, for instance, that one part of a tragedy should correspond to the stomach—I take his remarks on the changing status of the physical body to be the navel of his essay. Speaking toward the end of his career (and he would be dead within five years of this talk, following a heart attack) he seems to take an almost mournfully retrospective view of his career and the displacement of the critical fashion of which he is an icon. His essay concerns itself with the life and death of his critical priorities, by embedding himself in a long and ancient history, and also delights in knowing that he has a lengthy enough memory to appreciate the “embarrassments for criticism” that have resulted from “the more extreme versions of legislation according to the classical literary kinds, or of evaluation according to economic, sociological, or other historical categories, or according to economic, sociological, or other historical categories, or according to any theological, anthropological, or psychological archetypes”

(71). In this, he again indulges in a self-assuring kind of discursive strategy that constructs ramparts against those “critics of the ‘structural’ inclination—and notably by those of the orientation toward Paris” (76), and asserts the timelessness of those of his ilk, namely, “the American critics who were chronologically ‘new’ a third of a century ago but who were, or are indeed, both as old and as new as mankind’s literate ambition to make as much sense as possible of the perennially experienced, muddled shape of things” (78).

With that sentimental gesture, Wimsatt ironically redoubles the New Criticism’s reputation for ahistoricity, as a formalist method, by dehistoricizing the reasons why the movement, itself, came to have such purchase in the United States at the time that it did. The ostensibly timeless appeal of this kind of criticism obviates the necessity to account for its emergence in a particular place and time, even though he specifically acknowledges this development: speaking in 1970—a full thirteen years after what Frank Lentricchia points to as the final nail in its coffin²⁵—the New Criticism was actually “chronologically ‘new’” in the 1940s.²⁶ We ought to be more attentive to this question of

²⁵ That nail being the publication of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957. See Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 2-26.

²⁶ René Wellek makes a somewhat matching gesture with respect to the method’s “timelessness” in the final paragraph of his essay in defense of the New Criticism eight years later, which is entitled, “The New Criticism: Pro and Contra” *Critical Inquiry* 4.4 (1978): 611-624. The piece is actually much more “pro” than “contra” and seeks to push back against four pithy dismissals of the New Criticism that he claims are frequently made and that largely miss the mark (that it is an esoteric aestheticism, or a scientism, or a mere pedagogical device, and that it is unhistorical). In Wellek’s final paragraph, he notes his refusal “to conceal [his] own conviction that the New Criticism has *stated or reaffirmed many basic truths to which future ages will have to return* ... A decision between good and bad art remains the *unavoidable duty* of criticism. The humanities

why and how the New Criticism achieved its persuasive force in the United States around the time that it did, rather than simply nestling it in a general trend away from philology and “old” historicism in the first half of the twentieth century; in what follows, I shall partially address this with particular emphasis on the Southern Critics, placing this development in literary criticism within the much broader context of popular American opposition to various applied sciences, especially industrial farming techniques, and the marked amplification of discourses of life that began to take root earlier in the twentieth century along with growing interest in the work of Henri Bergson.

I would also like to take seriously the unusual constellation that appears in Wimsatt’s essay: the body of American academic criticism, that is, the kind of literary studies in the academy in the United States that produces reasonableness and “sense,” risks being chopped up and reassembled like a batch of amoebas or a transplant patient. His reassurance in these anxious and unsure times takes shape in the “utilitarian” or “reasonable” metaphor of organic form, no matter what may radiate monstrously from Paris. And although every metaphor has its limitations, and it would be wise to heed his own warning not to take the body and text metaphor “too far,” Wimsatt’s discourse does betray a degree of anxiety over twentieth-century interruptions to a motion and a spirit (to invoke Wordsworth) that is not untranslatable between these different contexts, literary critical and biotechnological. I would go so far as to suggest that there is a family

would abdicate their function in society if they surrendered to a neutral scientism and indifferent relativism or if they succumbed to the imposition of alien norms required by political indoctrination. Particularly on these two fronts *the New Critics have waged a valiant fight, which, I am afraid, must be fought over again in the future*” (624). Emphasis added. Wellek also dates the “newness” of the New Criticism as early as 1927, with some of the critical work of Allen Tate.

resemblance between certain kinds of secular humanist resistance to theory and certain kinds of fundamentalist opposition to biotechnology, and that similar commitments to “life” and the “organic” undergird both; to explain these resistances simply by identifying a reactionary political orientation, while in some cases not incorrect, is nevertheless insufficient.

Wimsatt’s declared conception of organicism does in fact tend more toward the classical than the Romantic (although these categories are messier than this formulation would imply), which leads him not to emphasize the battery of living forces that especially informs concepts of organic form in the Romantic period.²⁷ But even if Wimsatt’s appeal to a “reasonable” conception of organic form does not make direct reference to vitality or vitalism or life itself, these categories seep into his discourse, as they do among the rest of the New Critics and other formalists. To appreciate the reasons why, it is necessary to turn briefly to the influential argument that “literature,” as we tend to understand it in the academy today, only emerged in the Romantic period as a self-sufficient domain distinct from science and philosophy. It remains shielded from the epistemological assumptions of science and philosophy because, as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy put it in *The Literary Absolute*, “the literary thing produces the truth of production in itself, and thus ... the truth of production of *itself*, of

²⁷ Frederick Burwick insists that while “organic unity” may be an ancient idea, “organicism” emerges only in the eighteenth century, “when the arguments on growth and process, the reciprocity of part and whole, content and form, were systematized in polemical opposition to mechanism and vitalism” (ix). See his “Introduction” to *Approaches to Organic Form: Permutations in Science and Culture*. Ed. Frederick Burwick. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987.

autopoiesis. ... Romanticism is the inauguration of the *literary absolute*.”²⁸ This concept of literature, as an activity that produces truth through its own internal workings in radical distinction from science and philosophy, depends upon the invocation of autopoiesis, self-organization, and thus the birth of Romantic organicism; through the metaphor of a living organism, literature sustains itself and produces a representation of absolute truth through its own activity.²⁹ As is already well known, in this way the metaphors of life and organicism support a wide range of professionalized literary formalisms in English criticism and theory, most notably in the work of F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot, and I.A. Richards.³⁰ The Romantic trope of the literary absolute is not thinkable apart from organicism, and particularly an organicism that favors activity, movement, and

²⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*. Trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester. Albany: SUNY Press, 1988. 12.

²⁹ Part of the legacy of the appeal to the literary absolute’s autopoiesis in recent years has been the development of a discourse of posthumanism. See Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, and especially his discussion of the work of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, where autopoiesis is a key concept. For a recent reappraisal of the literary absolute and the “invention of literature” that hews carefully and closely to the philosophical discourse of the early German Romantics, see Jan Plug, “Romanticism and the Invention of Literature” *Idealism without Absolutes: Philosophy and Romantic Culture*. Ed. Tilottama Rajan and Arkady Plotnitsky. Albany: SUNY Press, 2004. 15-37.

³⁰ For some good examples, see F.R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975; T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932. 3-11; and I.A. Richards, “How Does a Poem Know When It’s Finished?” in *Parts and Wholes*, Ed. Daniel Lerner. New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963. 163-174. A brief excerpt of Richards’s language will demonstrate how the organic “metaphor” might be taken “too far”: “[Poems] are living, feeling, knowing *beings* in their own right; the so-called metaphor that treats a poem as organic is not a metaphor, but a literal description. A poem is an activity, seeking to become itself. All behavior (or activity, as I prefer to say [...]) of organisms is organic. But of course, it must be *activity*” (165).

dynamism in opposition to the more classical (Aristotelian) version that concentrates on logic, form, and matter.

And as Paul Youngquist argues, this concept of literature not only enables the institutionalization of literary studies in the academy by providing an object and an epistemology, and claims to methodology, knowledge production, and the truth, but this Romantic invention continues to regulate the activities of both formalists (in particular, the New Critics and their descendants), as well as their new historicist detractors.³¹ More directly to my point, in order to distinguish ancient organic form from the organicism or organicity that emerges in the Romantic period, it is extremely useful to focus on the concept of the literary absolute. And part of the reason it is so important to refer back to the Romantics in particular is because that period's concept of organicism developed strong concerns with "life," "activity," "production," and "autopoiesis" that mark today's neo-vitalisms or neo-organicisms in related ways.

So it is by no means novel to observe that the question of the nature of "life" has been long associated with intellectuals in the Romantic period, and that Romantic thinkers, artists, and experimenters shared a common and fundamental concern with "life

³¹ See Paul Youngquist, "Romanticism, Criticism, Organicity" *Genre* 27.3 (1994): 183-208. Youngquist argues that even though new historicists working in Romanticism tend to call for moving beyond the "Romantic ideology"—Jerome McGann's work serving here as an emblem—even that approach is "authorized" by the literary absolute, the Romantic ideology *par excellence*. Youngquist makes this argument by comparing Coleridge's work on organicism (which allies with formalist uses of the absolute, given his emphasis on a hermeneutics of the product) with P.B. Shelley's (which allies with historicist uses of the absolute, given his emphasis on a hermeneutics of production). It's prudent to maintain some credulity when literary theorists insist on moving beyond Romanticism, because "however dead it may appear, the organic metaphor lives on in contemporary criticism. Romanticism as a historical era may be behind us, but organicity as a representational strategy is not" (206).

itself.” It has long been critical dogma that Romantic practices in Britain and on the Continent—these including poetry, philosophy, research in natural history and an incipient biology—have been marked by a preoccupation with the question of “life” and an organizing principle that is thoroughly organicist. As the story goes, Romantic practitioners were mostly beholden to a logic of analogy between aesthetic forms and organic ones: the same unitary force underlies the organization of living bodies—leading them to grow, to develop on a plan, to reproduce and perpetuate themselves, to pulsate in their diversity according to a universal rhythm—as aesthetic forms which, as Coleridge famously put it, express or achieve beauty through “multēity in Unity.”

And because literary organicism is a topic that has received ample critical attention in recent decades, it might be most productively approached sideways rather than directly, and in conjunction with other critical traditions and concepts.³² A generation ago, in histories of science and literature, it was possible confidently to oppose not only organicism and mechanism, but also organicism and vitalism.³³ But these rigid oppositions, generally on the basis of the purported materiality of one category, and the purported ideality of the other, have become more difficult to sustain in recent years; critics such as Robert Mitchell, for instance, have found successful strategies to demonstrate the continued relevance of vitalism/neo-vitalism in contemporary science studies without dismissing the vitalist tradition *in toto* as transcendent and illusory, or as

³² For a recent monograph that works through the German and British contexts head-on to examine Romantic organicism and to reassess its “afterlives” in contemporary theory, see Charles I. Armstrong, *Romantic Organicism: From Idealist Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

³³ See, for example, Frederick Burwick’s introduction to *Approaches to Organic Form: Permutations in Science and Culture*. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1987. ix-xvii.

a kind of animism.³⁴ Without reproducing the long history of tired divisions between the organic and the mechanistic here—even as the structural relationship between the two retains substantial purchase in contemporary discourse in different guises, for example in the form of an analog and digital divide, or the relationship between sensory flux and conceptual form so key to modernist poetics—the relationship between the organicist and the vitalist has also grown thornier in recent years.³⁵ While it is possible, and even crucial, to draw some key distinctions between the complex of ideologies and assumptions comprising organicism in the West—usually beginning with Plato and Aristotle, continued by Plotinus and Longinus, and rehabilitated mightily in reaction to the mechanistic sciences of the Enlightenment—and those comprising vitalism—supposedly rooted in Aristotle’s concept of *entelechy*, revived especially in the Renaissance and ultimately blossoming into the biologicistic cultural vitalism and *Lebensphilosophie* of figures like Bergson, Driesch, Nietzsche, and Simmel—the Romantic intersection of organicism and vitalism joins form with force in a way that makes “life itself” cut across multiple fields in a spirit of radical anti-disciplinarity.³⁶

³⁴ See Robert Mitchell’s concept of “experimental vitalism” in *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science & Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

³⁵ For a useful examination of the various kinds of “mechanism” vitalist thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reacted against, See Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, especially chapter one, “On the Mechanical, Machinic, and Mechanistic,” pp. 27-56.

³⁶ Denise Gigante finds the roots of a Romantic “self-propagating vital power” in 1780, with Johann Freidrich Blumenbach’s discussion of the *Bildungstrieb* (“formative force” or *nisus formativus*). This concept travels to aesthetics, in turn, via Kant’s Third *Critique* (becoming a “self-propagating formative power,” exceeding representation). See Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*.

And to view Romantic uses of life through the lens of modernism helps account for the ways a dominant paradigm of the Romantic period was shaped and understood in the Cold War, which leads to questions about how “Romanticism” functioned ideologically in American literary culture, and how these ideological uses crossed with developments in the life sciences around the same time. M.H. Abrams’s account of the period, in his two tomes, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), stands for me as an emblem of the Romantic paradigm that became hegemonic, or at least authoritative, in the United States at that time; this is the version of “Romanticism” that was, in turn, deconstructed and revealed as ideological by critics and theorists of many stripes in the last thirty years of the twentieth century.

But before turning directly to Abrams (as I shall in chapter two), and the ways in which he invoked ideologies of life and organicism through his intellectual-historical account of the Romantic period, it is important to place his project in deeper context. His revivification of the Romantic period during the American Cold War, and along with it, a revivification of Romantic life, was set against a hostile New Critical background that had been in ascendency in the United States since about 1930. As is well known, many of the New Critics, following T.S. Eliot’s lead, dismissed the canonical Romantic poets (and especially P.B. Shelley) as sentimental and overwrought.³⁷ And yet the New Critics’ own use of an organic metaphor—according to René Wellek, this tendency is clearest,

³⁷ See Richard Fogle, “Romantic Bards and Metaphysical Reviewers” *ELH* 12.3 (1945): 221-250.

strongest, and most consistent in Cleanth Brooks—depends on the body of Romantic thought on the topic.³⁸

In an essay on the topic of organicism, Brooks utilizes the dichotomous opposition of the organic and mechanical to indicate a “most vigorous flourishing” of the former type of poetry in English in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.³⁹ Brooks then valorizes and uses the “organic” type of poetry in order to make a rather Keatsian argument about criticism and the special uses of poetic discourse, not altogether removed from the statements Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy make about the literary absolute and its birth in the Romantic era: namely, that poems, themselves, do not make arguments, that they cannot be translated directly into concepts, and that they comprise a separate kind language that is neither philosophical nor scientific. Brooks’s quibble with Romantic critics arises when he claims that this metaphor is taken too far, such that the “analytic critic” is assailed “with the morbid sincerity of an antivivisectionist denouncing experiments on living animals. He attacks with the vehemence of an antivivisectionist because he thinks that what he is attacking is vivisection. This is the organic concept with

³⁸ Wellek (1978) points out that the umbrella category of “New Critics” can be very misleading because it downplays the diversity of positions and points of view of each of the movement’s theorists. He insists the term “New Criticism” represents neither a “coterie” nor even a “school” (613). For instance, as Wellek points out, Cleanth Brooks was always committed to an “organic point of view” but John Crowe Ransom (Brooks’s onetime teacher) remarked in 1945 that a poem is “much more like a Christmas tree than an organism” (qtd in Wellek 1978, 618). In what follows, I focus on the work of the American Southern Critics, rather than others often lumped in the “New Critical” category; it is worth bearing in mind Wellek’s caution that none of these thinkers moved in lockstep with one another.

³⁹ See Cleanth Brooks, Jr., “The Poem as Organism: Modern Critical Procedure” in *English Institute Annual 1940*. Ed. Rudolf Kirk. New York: Columbia University Press, 1941. 20-41.

a vengeance!” (27). This appears to be a sidelong allusion to Wordsworth’s famous line, “we murder to dissect” from “The Tables Turned.”⁴⁰ And in this way, Brooks primarily reacts to an anti-intellectual, impressionistic brand of literary criticism widely practiced in the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century (and still the dominant mode of criticism in many popular outlets in our time), and he seems to project this aestheticist tendency among certain Romantic critics onto the Romantic poets, themselves.⁴¹

Nevertheless, he concludes his essay with an almost sentimental display of attention to each poetic animal he might like to read: “each poem becomes a special case, to be read in the light of its own nature” (40). The abuses of the organic metaphor Brooks has detailed notwithstanding, there is a kind of aliveness in each nugget of poetic language for him, and he argues vehemently against any approach to the reading of literature that would detract attention from the specific language of specific poems.⁴² This line of argumentation is part and parcel of the reason the New Criticism earned a reputation for an ahistorical orientation, even as Brooks gestures toward extending his

⁴⁰ The entire stanza reads: “Sweet is the lore which Nature brings/
Our meddling intellect/
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—/
We murder to dissect.”

⁴¹ For an amusing account of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren working together at Louisiana State University, where they developed their well-known textbook, *An Approach to Literature* (New York: F.S. Crofts and Company, 1939), see the following feature article in the National Endowment for the Humanities’ magazine: Garrick Davis, “The Well-Wrought Textbook” *Humanities* 32.4 (2011). At the time Brooks and Warren were young adjuncts who helped usher in a paradigm shift in academic literary criticism. Some of their older colleagues, ostensibly operating under an aestheticist or impressionistic paradigm, began referring to the text as “The Reproach to Literature.”

⁴² This includes a cautionary note against any kind of psychological approach that would seek to develop a formula for the way aesthetic objects might operate on human beings – one thinks here of the various attempts to import evolutionary psychology or cognitive science into literary studies in recent years.

singular approach to textual objects to the contexts in which they are embedded.

Otherwise, he makes some reasonable, if perhaps mildly contemptuous, remarks on the kind of biographical and historical empiricism dominant in the academy in the first part of the twentieth century: “Almost every English professor is diligently devoting himself to discovering ‘what porridge had John Keats’” (35; that last line is Robert Browning’s).

But rather than addressing in detail what have become the familiar features of New Critical procedure, I would like to concentrate on the larger cultural forces that led Brooks and some of his Southern Critic brethren to this moderate organicist critical position in the 1930s and beyond. If we bear in mind the importance of concrete and immediate experience to the Southern Critics in general, and understand this category to be taken in opposition to (and in tension with) conceptual abstraction (per standard modernist form), the conceptual importance of vital life, flux, and corporeal sensation begins to bubble up to the surface. As Sanford Schwartz (1985) argues, the Southern Critics generally framed the “abstraction/experience dichotomy in terms of a distinction between scientific discourse, which is abstract and reductive, and poetic discourse, which is concrete and inclusive” (210). This is a major root of the “Two Cultures” paradigm that has Romantic foundations (considering, for example, John Keats’s deploring account of Newton’s destruction of the rainbow, even if his relationship to the sciences is much more complicated than this caricature allows) and which reappears in a new formulation with C.P. Snow in 1959.⁴³ There is more than an echo in this of the cliché Romantic orientation away from the sciences, which so much recent scholarship has sought to

⁴³ See C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959.

upend. To return to the Southern Agrarians helps us to reexamine the bases of anti-science rhetoric of our contemporary situation. And indeed, the Southern Critics' stance becomes all the more useful in the Cold War as new technological developments threatened to incinerate all life (the bomb) or transform it monstrously (biotechnology), leaving a special place for the poem and poetic discourse more broadly as a refuge and as a standard of the natural. The Southern Agrarian worship of the seed, valuation of non-industrialized agricultural techniques, elevation of small, organic communities in opposition to urban "mechanical" societies, and thinly shrouded white supremacist ethos is tightly interconnected with two distinct but related configurations of vitalism: that of the Romantic period and that of the early twentieth century. The movement is valuable as a nexus of vitalist traditions, and in this way I further contend that the Southern Agrarian formulation is the clearest forebear of the battery of prolife and fundamentalist discourses operating in American bioethics today.⁴⁴

To recognize the continuum between modernist poetics and the New Criticism of the American Southern Critics helps place the concept of "life" both within debates that are generally recognized as literary—Schwartz's agenda, for example, is to show that the New Critics inherit more from Continental philosophers like Bergson and Nietzsche than is generally recognized, bringing them intellectually closer to the poststructuralists who displaced them from the vanguard of American literary theory (1985, 209-215)—as well

⁴⁴ This is of course not to suggest that the Agrarians' reactionary politics have gone unnoticed. René Wellek has even suggested that the taint of agrarianism hastened the demise of the New Critics in the American academy. See Wellek (1978, 622). It was perhaps never generally fashionable to ally with the agrarians. They habitually capitalized, however, on their renegade and outsider status.

as debates that are not squarely “literary,” such as those surrounding life-politics, biotechnology, bioethics, and the like. One major development that accounts for the appearance of a kind of life-philosophy in the Agrarian program, and thus a basis for understanding the resemblances between American critical thought and modernist poetics taken to originate in Europe, involves the appearance in the United States of Bergsonism, and with it, the fashionable European neo-vitalisms and other philosophies of life.⁴⁵

Donna V. Jones (2010) has recently examined the effects of vitalism in the early twentieth century by focusing on the writings of Henri Bergson, vitalism’s “contemporary prophet,” as she puts it (20), and the ways in which Bergsonian philosophy traveled to African and Caribbean colonial contexts in the development of *Négritude*. My priority here is in some ways parallel, but instead of concentrating on the colonial context to elaborate the interrelationship of vitalism with racialism in Europe and the colonies, the relevant conceptual travel that interests me is from continental Europe to the American South, where the politics of race play out very differently.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, I

⁴⁵ One major and very useful study of Bergson in America is Tom Quirk, *Bergson and American Culture: The Worlds of Willa Cather and Wallace Stevens*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. See also Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁴⁶ The conclusions drawn about black bodies within a vitalist/mechanist framework are often unpredictable. For instance, Jones points out (by reference to Bernard Doray’s *From Taylorism to Fordism: A Rational Madness*) that “the Southern Negro” was deemed for Taylor to be “especially suited for mechanical work, given his unthinking nature” (35). Hence, as Jones describes, this association with animality, the mechanistic, and interchangeability becomes a device to continue to justify class contempt by denying “the Southern Negro” a sense of “life.” On the other hand, many other examples from the visual culture of the twentieth century—think of Marcel Camus’s *Black Orpheus* (1959) or Leni Riefenstahl’s filmmaking work on the Nuba people of Sudan—attribute a vitalist excess to the black body, which comes with a different set of racial implications.

think Jones is correct to argue that vitalism (at least in its early twentieth-century incarnation) cannot be properly understood in isolation from the politics of race so tightly bound together with it.

It is a reductive convenience to map the vitalist tendencies of the early twentieth century to the written work of a couple specific people, but this is a reduction that has some disciplinary recognition. The relative popularity of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch is often used to historically place and gauge the intensity of interest in early twentieth-century neo-vitalism in Europe; Bergson was appointed to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1897 and then to the Collège de France in 1900, where he became “known as the ‘liberator’ – the man who had redeemed Western thought from the nineteenth-century ‘religion of science.’”⁴⁷ Apart from the traditional *Lebensphilosophen* (e.g., Nietzsche, Dilthey), Hans Driesch was the most important neo-vitalist thinker in the German context, whose work was closer to scientific and biological discourses, and whose book on the *Philosophie des Organischen* (Philosophy of the Organic) appeared in 1909. A wave of interest and influence in Bergson did not come to North America until 1907, later than on the Continent. The Southern Agrarians developed their program in the 1920s, in the wake of the new waves of interest in life and the vital that was ushered in with the translation of Bergson and, to a lesser degree, Driesch.

To consider the Southern Agrarian movement, or the closely related band of poets likewise based at Vanderbilt through the 1920s, the Fugitives, from the vantage point of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century often involves both a perfunctory and

⁴⁷ Schwartz (1992) 288.

disapproving acknowledgement of the members' white supremacist ideology conjoined with a sense that these writers, despite their segregationist politics, served almost as prophets, as Cassandras yelling in the night, whose warnings about industrial capitalism, the exploitation of factory laborers, the plundering of the environment, and the deleterious and deadening effects of such a society on life itself would come to seem all the more trenchant in the face of another world war, the Cold War, the global climate crisis, dystopian fantasies surrounding biotechnology, and the series of crises of capitalism of the last seventy years.⁴⁸ Portions of the Agrarians' scathing critique of mass culture, along with their bleak account of life in an industrial capitalist society, even occasionally seems to mirror that of the Frankfurt School, which provides a canon that has proven much more familiar to practitioners of leftist cultural studies in recent decades.⁴⁹ I turn to this homegrown American movement not primarily to draw insight

⁴⁸ For two examples of the way prophecy is invoked in retrospective accounts of the Agrarians, see Harvard and Sullivan, *Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982) and Melvin Maddocks, "In Tennessee: The Last Garden" *Time* 12/8/1980, Vol. 116 Issue 23, pp. 10-12. For a recent and comprehensive book-length study of the movement in a more measured tone, see Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ As Douglas Mao points out, both John Guillory and Geoffrey Hartman have commented on the strange resemblances between the critique of mass culture of the Frankfurt School and the writings of the Southern Agrarians. See Mao's "The New Critics and the Text-Object" *ELH* 63(1): 227-254 (1996); Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), 13; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), 156. Herbert Schnädelbach comments on the ways "neo-Marxism after Lukács and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School have taken over the more popular aspects of life-philosophy, its criticism of culture, although they also constantly attempt to make a clear distinction between themselves and the 'irrationalism' of life-philosophy" (140). To flesh out this lineage, Schnädelbach compares the life-philosophy with a neo-Hegelian use of a Marxist critique of commodity-fetishism to comment on one tendency toward "metaphysical partisanship for

from their reactionary critique of the bourgeois concept of progress, but rather to disentangle a knot located in the discourse of the Agrarians, whose deployment of Romantic reaction, “life itself” (the single greatest concern of the European Romantics proper), and a blind faith in organic and fully integrated social forms creates a particularly American form of reactionary politics focused on life. The legacy is very much alive.

And while the Agrarians claimed to advocate for concrete political objectives—for the abandonment of industrial capitalism in the South and the West, and for the reversion to subsistence farming as a dominant economic model in the United States—much of their work is marked by a muted melancholy, as if they are writing in the service of a lost cause (that a group of poets at Vanderbilt could hope to turn the tide of American industrialism) reflecting the prefigured “Lost Cause” of Civil War mythology. The movement, and the 1930 publication of its manifesto of sorts, *I’ll Take My Stand*, can serve as an anchoring point in the first part of the twentieth century for some of the features of fundamentalist opposition to various applications of biotechnology in the United States that erupt more spectacularly several decades later and persist into the twenty-first century.⁵⁰ While there are absolutely many excellent reasons to remain skeptical of a wide range of biotechnological developments, the fundamentalist terms of this Old Right movement can occlude them by its reactionary and nostalgic appeal to southern traditionalism. The Southern Agrarians’ program amounts to an American

the dynamic” in celebration of the neo-Hegelian dialectic, even if “in Hegel himself, dynamics was merely a moment of the dynamic and enjoyed no metaphysical priority” (140).

⁵⁰ See *Twelve Southerners, I’ll Take My Stand*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930.

application of vitalist life-philosophy; the movement's watchword is life itself, and it is imbricated in the network of proto-fascist vitalist discourses associated with continental politics of the far right, including various national romanticisms, following the First World War. The archconservative and deeply racist and misogynist collection of essays oriented against American industrialization, urbanization, and socialism is easy to dismiss as such, but because its method of argumentation also strangely prefigures popular opposition to biotechnological advances in recombinant DNA technologies that reaches a flashpoint in the late 1960s and results in the Asilomar Conference of February 1975, and continues to affect policy by scripting, for example, the terms under which President George W. Bush would limit embryonic stem cell research in 2001, it is worth considering its persuasive force.

It would be too simple to suggest that the Southern Agrarians simply planted the seed, so to speak, which would germinate into fundamentalist opposition to birth control and abortion, and later to end-of-life planning and embryonic stem-cell research, which is typically associated with the American Right. Instead, I'd like to suggest that their influence applies across the American political spectrum, casting its shadow over the ways we discuss GMOs in the food supply, the questions surrounding human cloning and genetic engineering, and organ transplant, among other phenomena. The movement proceeds by distilling and then focusing attention on an understanding of "life itself" that provides some of the groundwork for the development of these discourses later in the twentieth century.

And even if the Southern Agrarians can't be said to have achieved hegemonic status on the American literary scene, there is a family resemblance between *I'll Take My Stand* and the New Criticism, which certainly did become hegemonic in English departments in the United States for many years.⁵¹ John Crowe Ransom named the "New Criticism" and was one of its leading lights, and also wrote the first essay in *I'll Take My Stand*. Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren contributed to *I'll Take My Stand* and were major figures in the New Criticism. Cleanth Brooks did not contribute an essay to the collection, but was a fellow traveler with the Agrarians and was one of the most influential New Critics. To concentrate on the nexus of the Southern Agrarians, the New Critics, the European Romantics, modern Romantics, and the post-war Romantic critical paradigm, and the ways these various schools and movements understand "life itself," is my larger strategy for arguing for the relevance of literary discourses and critical history in understanding American bioethics in the twenty-first century—in short, the ways critical problems and formulations about life itself migrated across disciplines to program the ways we think about embodiment and life itself in an age of high biotech.

The Southern Agrarians serve here as a convenient flashpoint in which a kind of life politics emerges in the United States of the interwar period, and the program demonstrates a profound sense of alienation in the midst of industrialization and mechanized life (typified by the northern factory worker) that relies on nostalgic and romanticized myths of an agrarian organicism, a kind of cult of the seed and the soil.

⁵¹ For an account of the relationship between Southern Agrarianism and the form of New Criticism that became dominant in the American academy, with special attention to the cultural politics of both movements, see Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

What is most striking about the introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* is that many parts of it might be mistaken for anti-industrial, anti-consumerist, and environmentalist rhetoric of the left, particularly the American left after the late 1960s, were it not for its persistent and categorical denunciation of socialism (as well as its unapologetic racism and essentialism). They even attack free-market fundamentalists, whom they call "Optimists," and whom they call, together with socialists, "apologists of industrialism" who simply "expect the evils to disappear when we have bigger and better machines, and more of them" (xiii). But as far as the Agrarians are concerned, the only way to reverse the life-eviscerating tendencies of an industrial-capitalist economic system is to revert to the life-enhancing traditionalism of southern agrarianism, rigid hierarchies, an organic cultural tradition, and subsistence farming. This proposed "reversion" clearly operates at the level of historical fantasy: even during the days of the Old South and chattel slavery, the plantations were imbricated in a network of international capitalist markets. The nostalgia the Agrarians express is for a kind of European feudalism (even if they cannot go so far as to advocate expressly for the return of serfdom or slavery) that never accurately characterized the economic system of the American South.

According to the "Statement of Principles" that serves as an introduction to *I'll Take My Stand*, which John Crowe Ransom wrote but did not sign, and to which "every one of the contributors in the book has subscribed" (x), socialists differ from free-market fundamentalists primarily in their reliance on "the militancy of labor to bring about a fairer distribution of the spoils" whereas the latter "see the system righting itself spontaneously and without direction" (xiii)—this was enough to make Cleanth Brooks

remark in a letter to Donald Davidson, one of the contributors to the volume, that “we need to show a little more intelligent knowledge of socialism, and to give the appearance, at least, of having given it more serious attention before rejecting it.”⁵² As far as Brooks is concerned, this is largely a matter of political calculation: he claims he’s learned much from defending the Southern, agrarian program “against the onslaughts of my Socialist friends—some of them very intelligent Socialists with a sound knowledge of economics and a sincere and fine love of the good life” (62); and although he disclaims any fear of offending “our own [i.e., American] group of professional liberals and pink-tea radicals” (62), one must write with a broader audience in mind, especially as socialism grows in England, even if, as he claims, “the matter is immaterial with ‘the brethren’ at home, who are already in a psychopathic state of fear of socialism and Bolshevism” (62). Brooks’s appeal to psychopathy to explain American knee-jerk responses to leftist politics betrays more than simple political calculation, as he situates himself among the coolly reasoned leaders of a principled movement, reigning over the psychopathically fearful American population at large. This actually signals the strong hierarchical thinking that is part and parcel of the Southern Agrarian program.

So as the Agrarians champion the small farmer in opposition to industrialized agriculture, in the name of organic communities rather than “some fabulous creature called society” (xviii), they predate the movement of American conservatism of the post-war period in which a radically conservative cultural analysis merges with an acceptance

⁵² The letter is transcribed in a biography of Cleanth Brooks. See Mark Royden Winchell, *Cleanth Brooks and the Rise of Modern Criticism*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996. 62-63.

of an industrial capitalist economic system.⁵³ As the Southern Agrarians emphasize “overproduction, unemployment, and a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth” (xiii) as a result of increasing industrialization, they appeal to an argument about an economic base and superstructure.⁵⁴ The conservatives of the 1950s and beyond, well into the culture wars, drop this element of the program. Nevertheless, at the level of practical positions—technophobia, a celebration of the small farm, intense skepticism of industrialization and the “Cult of Science,” as they call it (xii), a recognition of the alienating effects of industrial capitalism, a celebration of some concept of vitalist “life”—the Agrarians match many elements of what would become opposition to GMOs and other biotechnological developments of the later twentieth century, which are so central to contemporary bioethical debates.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Paul V. Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

⁵⁴ One relevant remark: “We cannot recover our native humanism by adopting some standard of taste that is critical enough to question the contemporary arts but not critical enough to question the social and economic life which is their ground” (xvi). To extend this line of argumentation into the New Criticism—and it is essential to remember this genealogy—complicates the shibboleth that New Critics embrace an *art pour l’art* attitude in their formalism.

⁵⁵ While, on the one hand, the romanticized image of the small family farm has bipartisan appeal in twenty-first century American politics (one indication of this being the ways industrialized agricultural interests and fast-food companies consistently and disingenuously deploy it), it may seem peculiar to grassroots anti-GMO activists and environmentalists—today largely creatures of the left—to find their prophetic forbearers in the Old Right and the Democratic party before the Civil Rights Movement. See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011) for an attempt to describe the essence of conservatism in an Anglo-American context, where he argues that even the most apparently stable policy positions (e.g., free-market fundamentalism) are secondary attributes of a contemporary conservatism that is fundamentally animated by one group’s resentment at perceiving a loss of social power to another group. Vitalism, likewise, is essentially neither progressive nor reactionary, but can be used for an array of political ends.

The Old Right's concept of vital life blossoms in diverse discursive fields across the American political spectrum during the Cold War, and to trace its travel and its mutations as it takes root can help shed light on a series of questions. In short, why does life itself appear as a matter of such urgency in the interwar period? How does this match the English Romantic period's obsession with life itself, and then again in the New Criticism and Romantic literary criticism of the Cold War period? This exercise helps demonstrate how Romantic thinking about life itself (which is, as I argue, the basis of the Southern Agrarian paradigm's concept of life) managed to inform bioethical debates about biotechnology and the various so-called pro-life politics of the twentieth century.⁵⁶

So even though most commentators highlight the Southern Agrarians' hostility toward the sciences, and most especially the applied sciences, their celebration of a traditional religiosity, and their embrace of a communitarian but rigidly hierarchized social structure, their politics and logic actually rest partially on vitalist biological discourses that emerged in the early nineteenth century, in conjunction with the Romantic literary and aesthetic discourses that intersected with them. In any case, that the object of concern for the Agrarians is "life," and that it is supposedly stifled under the forces of industrial capitalism, becomes clear throughout their increasingly rabid catalogue of the ills American "progress" has visited upon the nation in the "Statement of Principles" in *I'll Take My Stand*. In addition to the destruction of religious life, the twelve southerners

⁵⁶ The misogyny of pro-life discourse is obviously also at play here, but I'll set this aside to focus on the vitalist ideology, even as I acknowledge the impossibility of disentangling sexist forms of power from a proper analysis of these debates. For one queer theorist's refusal of reproduction of social forms, and the propagation of the species, see Lee Edelman, *No Future*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

make a list of additional claims: “Nor do the arts have a proper life under industrialism” (xv), this being the case for them both in terms of art in the capitalist West as well as in Socialist Realism; “the amenities of life also suffer” (xv); “the trouble with the life-pattern is to be located at its economic base, and we cannot rebuild it by pouring in soft materials from the top” (xv-xvi); contra Irving Babbitt, whose brand of humanism they deemed “too abstract,” humanism for the Agrarians is “a kind of imaginatively balanced life lived out in a definite social tradition,” and which is grounded in “the social and economic life” of traditional Southern Agrarianism (xvi), and which cannot be preserved through industrialism; likewise the “tempo of the industrial life is fast, but that is not the worst of it; it is accelerating” (xvi); the emptiness of advertising demonstrates “a false economy of life” (xviii); the Agrarians set themselves in opposition to their local Chambers of Commerce, “which [are] always trying to import some foreign industry that cannot be assimilated to the life-pattern of the community” (xix); in exasperation, they ask, “Just what must the Southern leaders do to defend the traditional Southern life?” (xix). This amounts to an appeal to the ineffable and the organic (as figured through religious feeling and aesthetic experience), and a politics that genuinely and apparently unironically advocated a return to feudalism as a way to reverse the mechanistic alienation they took to be inherent to industrial society.

This same emphasis on life and its meaning appears in Cleanth Brooks’s 1931 letter to Donald Davidson, touched upon briefly above. Once again, with respect to his discussion of socialism and his assessment of the agrarian movement’s rhetorical positioning of itself vis-à-vis socialism, Brooks insists that “[socialism] also needs to

have the question put squarely: What is life for, anyway? And if it gives you the answer (which many socialists will give) which defines man's role as primarily a cog in the social machine, it needs to be rejected as having an essentially inadequate conception of life and humanity" (62). Note Brooks's invocation of mechanism and the organic and mechanistic divide as a strategy to appeal to a fuller, deep, more "organic" sense of life; and as indicated above, an analogous conception of organicism becomes central to his New Critical practice. This is one indication of the ways a vital, perhaps primal, feeling of life, and the agrarian politics of life, worm their way into New Critical procedure. Nevertheless, Brooks's letter indicates the Agrarians' more general resistance to historical-materialist analysis, even as they might have recognized some common ground with early twentieth-century leftist critiques of industrial society. Regardless, the conception of life to which the Agrarians appealed was much less traditional—and in fact, much more modern—than they had suspected. This becomes clearer through a reading of Davidson's contribution to the volume, "A Mirror for Artists," which deals squarely with the matrix of Romanticism and modernism and the "vitality" of the arts in the first part of the twentieth century.

Davidson's essay engages in a critique of mass culture and industrialism that rivals Walter Benjamin's essay on mechanical reproduction, at least in terms of a supposed authenticity or aura that is associated with "organic" art. As with the introduction and the other contributions to the volume, his argument focuses on the premise that the changing "conditions of life"—social, symbolic, material, and economic—cannot foster and give rise to works of art in a traditional form (29), even as

industrialists may strive to create a patina (in the form of art galleries and libraries) that gives the false impression of civilization. In harmony with the rest of the volume, Davidson's position on the American South is that it "furnishes a living example of an agrarian society, the preservation of which is worth the most heroic effort that men can give in a time of crisis" (30). The coupling of a critique of the commodity form and the art market with such deeply held reactionary tendencies may seem estranged from American conservative discourse as it developed in the later twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. But Davidson criticizes industrial capitalism for "[s]eeing the world altogether in terms of commodities," such that "it simply proposes to add one more commodity [the art object] to the list, as a concession to humanity's perfectly unaccountable craving, or as just one more market" (30-31). This is the language of an aesthetic ideology, no doubt, that strangely resonates with leftist deployments of the concept of reification.

To think about this vilification of capitalism together with the volume's attack on communism may seem confounding (however no more so than a similar tension playing out in the Tea Party, or at Donald Trump's political rallies, in twenty-first century American politics), but one way in which it becomes legible is through the politics of race. Even as the anti-Semitism of the Southern Agrarians remains more or less subliminal, unlike their approach to segregation of white and black peoples, which is much less shrouded, this tendency to dismiss both industrial capitalism and Communism as two sides of the same coin resonates with the Nazi platitude that Jews invented both

social forms.⁵⁷ In the postwar period, of course, the American New Right would drop the anti-capitalist rhetoric and intensify its vilification of both communists and socialists while concentrating the political power of evangelical communities.

Donald Davidson's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* focuses most concertededly on the status of art in what he considers a sick and mechanized society; along these lines, he comes close to the fascist logic of condemning degenerate art (*entartete Kunst*) that does not reflect classical or neoclassical ideals in the form of a bizarre dialogue that he stages between an industrialist and an artist early in the essay, through which the artist "magnifies his dissociation into a special privilege and becomes a noble exile" (32). In this way Davidson can pine for "healthy" art while at the same time elevating the figure of the modern artist as expressing a kind of truth of the damaged and unhealthy form of industrialized society. Although he seems to invoke Nietzschean ideals of health, which are actually part and parcel of the Agrarians' larger program, he does not name Nietzsche. This critique is joined throughout the essay with strong criticism of the changes in temporality industrial capitalism has fostered, leading to the destruction of "true leisure" so that instead "we live by the clock" (34). Industrial society for him produces only "skepticism" and "malaise" (58).

⁵⁷ For an examination of the intersection of vitalism and anti-Semitism that informs this discussion, see two books by Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007 and *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Donna Jones (2010) describes the significance of the comparison of twentieth-century vitalism and racialism in her book as well, and declares that her main objective is to show "that one cannot understand twentieth-century vitalism separately from its implication in racial and anti-Semitic discourses and that we cannot understand some of the dominant models of emancipation within black thought except through recourse to the vitalist tradition" (5-6).

It is important to remember that even though most of the Southern Critics developed into New Critics, Donald Davidson did not follow.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, his essay is fully integrated into what R.S. Crane attributed to the New Criticism, namely, “the morbid obsession ... with the problem of justifying and preserving poetry in an age of science. This has resulted in an extraordinary florescence of modern apologies of poesy.”⁵⁹ And indeed, as far as erecting barriers between the two cultures of the arts and the sciences is concerned, Davidson is an absolutist. He contends that “[w]hether or not science and art are actually hostile to each other, as I have argued, it is certainly true that they have no common ground; they are as far apart as science and religion” (47). I mention this element of the Agrarian program, and specifically Davidson’s manner of making this point, because it is integral to the constellation I am attempting to advance here: a Romantic ideology, neo-vitalist accounts of “life itself” in the early twentieth century, and strong anti-science rhetoric are knitted together in an attempt to serve a

⁵⁸ For an overview of Davidson’s relationship to the New Criticism, and some of the reasons he remained estranged from the movement, see Jancovich (1993), 26-28. In addition to the reasons Jancovich outlines, and judging from his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand*, Davidson probably would have been less interested in transforming the teaching of English in American universities (the New Critics’ program) in any case. He had concluded in 1930 that the American university was already a lost cause: “Education can do comparatively little to aid the cause of the arts as long as it must turn out graduates into an industrialized society which demands specialists in vocational, technical, and scientific subjects. The humanities, which could reasonably be expected to foster the arts, have fought a losing battle since the issue between vocational and liberal education was raised in the nineteenth century” (37). He also heaps significant scorn on university administrators and pithily concludes, “[t]he product of a humanistic education in an industrial age is most likely to be an exotic, unrelated creature—a disillusionist or a dilettante” (38). Much twenty-first century critique of the university reiterates many of these points.

⁵⁹ See R.S. Crane, “The Critical Monism of Cleanth Brooks” in R.S. Crane, et al. *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952. 83-107. (105).

radically reactionary politics. It is crucial to bear this history in mind as some scholars in the humanities in the twenty-first century denounce interdisciplinary work with the sciences in the name of a method associated more squarely with the traditional humanities. This denunciation can take many forms, but the hasty accusation that colleagues engage in scientism is one of the most easily recognizable. We ought to be attentive to what this reluctance to break down disciplinary borders might actually betray, and indeed, what kind of politics it might preserve. For decades, the Romantic period has been taken as an emblematic period of resistance to the sciences in the name of vital truth and beauty; to complicate this reputation is one of the most important reasons current critical attention to the sciences and Romanticism is so crucial.

So as Davidson's essay makes clear, it is in this Agrarian manifesto that one of the best examples of a notion of the Romantic period as a courageous resistance to industrialization (given the emergence of European Romanticism at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution) in the service of a more organic life appears in critical literature. There is a structural relationship between the Romantics' resistance to the mechanized reality of factory life and the Southern Agrarians' resistance to an industrialized North; following the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy, these are two more lost causes that Davidson romantically links together and recovers as a species of losers' history. Davidson's commitment to the Romantic period is based in its function as a prefiguration of the strong sense of industrial alienation that he registers in his contribution.⁶⁰ To turn

⁶⁰ The historical context of Davidson's argument is also important to bear in mind: the neo-humanism of Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More loomed large in 1930, and Davidson stood opposed to this trend. The "New Humanism" judged the Romantic poets

directly to his language, he makes one of the first gestures toward associating T.S. Eliot, himself, with Romanticism, Eliot's consistent denigration of the period notwithstanding: "Romantic writers, from William Blake to T.S. Eliot, are not so much an advance guard leading the way to new conquests as a rear guard—a survival of happier days when the artist's profession was not so much a separate and special one as it is now [...] Romantic writers—and modern writers, who are also romantic—behave like persons whose position is threatened and needs fresh justification" (41). Davidson here makes one of the earliest identifications of the "Romantic" with the "modern" that I've described above. But what is most significant here is the identification he makes with the Romantic period in terms of ennui in the face of industrialization. This will become a dominant element of the "Romantic ideology" that gains more complete form later in the twentieth century, and helps make sense of the applicability of an idea of "Romanticism" to the critique of industrialized life.

This manner of critique helps illustrate how the Romantic period would develop its reputation for "reaction" of all kinds later in the twentieth century. Davidson defines Romanticism as originating from "an artificial or maladjusted relation between the artist and society" (42), and thus expresses a nostalgic regret at a lost harmony. The terms of this loss are grand and universal, calling for fundamental social changes and, as he puts it, "the remaking of life itself" (51). That this occurs at the level of fantasy does not detract from the poignancy of his critique. And that Davidson consistently appeals to vitalist and

rather harshly. Davidson claims that they "seemingly fail to realize that if there is to be any art at all under the conditions of modern life, it must probably be Romantic art, and must have the weaknesses of Romantic art, with such excellences as may be allowed to the unvictorious" (41-42).

organicist categories becomes all the more clear as he uses extended metaphors to conceive of the body politic: if “socialism” is a “natural political antitoxin that industrialism produces, Romanticism is the artistic antitoxin and will appear inevitably if the artist retains enough courage and sincerity to function at all” (49-50). The metaphor matters because Davidson’s object of concern is life itself, and the social order is a vital system that produces immune responses (socialism, Romanticism) to the inimical and the artificial—in this case, clearly the threat from the outside is industrial development. But it must be acknowledged that this metaphor dovetails quite well with the second set of concerns that animates the Southern Agrarian discourse: the mutant invader from outside that might disturb the white, male enclave of a nostalgic and harmonious South.

There is no doubt that the Southern Agrarians would stand aghast at the developments in industrialized agriculture made by the likes of Monsanto and Cargill, and their suspicion about the joining together of industry and life would likely generate panic about the ways biotechnology has developed since 1930. This movement signifies more than an historical curiosity, though, whether or not their warnings are considered “prophetic.” Agrarian discourse provides us with a complex tissue of social forces in which “Romanticism,” “life itself,” “vitalism” and “organic wholeness” are repackaged and reassessed. The next chapter will consider the legacy of this wholesale reassessment of “life itself” during the American Cold War.

Chapter Two

Cold War Romanticism and the American “Culture of Life”

While there is certainly no consensus among academic literary critics and theorists that the question of “life” is the single most urgent category or concept to rethink today, it has become uncontroversial to assert that the question of life itself, and the related tasks of interrogating and recasting various concepts of life, have come to the forefront in the humanities and the theoretical social sciences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for good and for ill. This stands in sharp contrast to the preoccupations of continental philosophy of a generation ago, when the concept had receded so much from view European interest in *Lebensphilosophie* seemed to be little more than a historical oddity. The tide began to change, at least in the United States, around 1980. From Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben’s development of the biopolitical, to the “new materialisms” that demand new ways of thinking about “living matter” in the face of novel medical and scientific advances, to the development of object-oriented ontology, new reflections on animality, the in/human and posthumanism, and the recent turns to “vibrant matter,” the “thing,” and speculative realism, “life” has emerged as a common term subtending the most vigorous theoretical debates across an array of fields traditionally abutting or overlapping with continental philosophy.⁶¹

⁶¹ The scope of this literature makes comprehensive citation impossible, but it is worth mentioning a few touchstones that speak to the new relevance of “life” today. In addition to gesturing toward the veritable explosion of work on biopolitics that has appeared in recent decades, Robert Mitchell provides a smattering of bibliographic examples to make clear the new centrality of “life,” grounding many recent developments in Deleuze and

As I hope will become clear below, it is crucial to attend to the ways life and the vital or the vibrant tend toward a position of value in opposition to the dead in many of these discourses. This is particularly interesting in terms of post-war American politics because many of the cultural theorists trafficking in these new positive iterations of life come from the political left, while it is the political right that usually claims a monopoly on celebrating life through self-styled “pro-life” discourses; furthermore, the apparent desirability of inhabiting a position on the side of life is more and more focused in popular political discourses, an example being the new habit in the progressive media to substitute “anti-choice” for “pro-life” when referring to opponents of abortion. What has brought “life” back on the critical scene as a keyword, and refocused it in the popular

Guattari’s development of “non-organic life” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. See his *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science & Literature* (231n3) for an overview. “Life” is deployed variously among approaches focusing more squarely on the human, the animal, agency, materialism, ecology, objects, and things. For an anthology of work exploring the “new materialisms,” along with an introductory essay theorizing them, see Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. For a helpful overview of some current developments among those working under the very loose and contested rubrics of “speculative realism” and “object-oriented ontology,” with particular attention to Whitehead’s process philosophy, see Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. For two prominent examples of the deployment of life and the vital in political theory, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* and William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. For a comprehensive introduction to the concept of the posthuman by the editor of the major new academic book series *Posthumanities*, see Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?* Practitioners of rhetorical reading, such as Barbara Johnson, have likewise engaged the question of the “thing” as it works in tension with the “person.” See her *Persons and Things*. Much of the recent explosion of interest in “thing theory” began with a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* edited by Bill Brown (28.1, 2001), following earlier waves of thought about “the thing” associated most often with Heidegger and Derrida.

imagination, and why has it been resurrected with such zeal?⁶² I begin this chapter by gesturing toward this overarching question and these widespread critical tendencies, which sometimes involve an appetite for theoretical neo-vitalism, in order to situate this web of interconnected thinking about life in relation to the theoretical preoccupations of a generation ago, namely, the spirited and sometimes ferocious debates in the United States between the high theory of de Manian deconstruction and liberal humanism, itself often caricatured as an apocalyptic battle between the forces of death (de Man) and life (the Romantic paradigm of the living word). It may be possible to go so far as to suggest that the confrontation between twentieth-century humanism and Paul de Man's rhetorical interrogation of the "human" be taken as ground zero for the gradual but widespread displacement of language by life in cultural theory over the last thirty-five years or so—this even as the cachet of both de Man's approach and humanist criticism have dwindled considerably over the same time span. In brief, if one of the answers to the question of what comes after poststructuralism is "neo-vitalism," it's worth asking why and how such a framework came to command persuasive force.

And even though framing de Manian deconstruction vis-à-vis liberal humanism in purely oppositional terms would indeed qualify as caricature, it is a useful and instructive one, especially because the binary opposition of "life" and "death" that animates the rhetoric of much contemporary neo-vitalism relies on figures of twoness and a familiar series of oppositions: the mechanical and the organic, the mimetic and the expressive, the

⁶² For a description and critical diagnosis of the widespread assumption in the humanities today that life requires affirmation, what amounts to a new way of being "pro-life," see the recent anthology *Against Life* (Eds., Alastair Hunt and Stephanie Youngblood), Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016.

allegorical and the symbolic, the sign and the referent. To escape this set of binary relations is crucial, and to revisit the battles of American deconstruction and anti-theoretical liberal humanism with an eye cast on the rhetoric of “life” from a sidelong view helps situate the battery of assumptions that operates these days in a wide swath of neo-vitalist writing. In short, what I am interested in tracing is some of the ways “life” became a sticking point and something to romantically cling to in the post-war period, a tendency that reached an apex as the literary-theoretical wing of the profession metabolized and then voided de Manian theory. That theoretical trends have circled back to “life” in the early twenty-first century following the large-scale abandonment of de Manian rhetorical reading, with its favorite catachrestic figure of language as machine, as dead and non-human, suggests the power of the metaphor. As a strategy for interrogating this symptom, it has become necessary to revisit debates around literary formalism because, as I contend, much neo-vitalist writing in the early twenty-first century, including much of the current preoccupation with the “thing,” recapitulates obsessions over life that reemerged most concretely in Cold War-era Romantic literary theory and criticism. These Cold War formulations of life so closely associated with European Romanticism were then, in turn, fundamentally challenged by practitioners of American deconstruction. The perception that American deconstructionists perpetrated an assault on life itself goes a long way in explaining the furor, violence, and public ridicule that met American deconstruction in the popular press throughout the culture wars.

Part of the work of this chapter is therefore to historicize the emergence of a largely reactionary and conservative Romantic concept of life in the American Cold War

era by situating it in the social reality of the mid-twentieth century, which includes the wake of a hugely destructive war, the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation, and explosive advances in biotechnology bearing most literally on thinking about life. These formulations of life as vital power, refracted through the prism of a canonical Romantic literature rather than reflecting those forms directly, are remarkably dogged and consequential for thinking life both theoretically and pragmatically today. Upending this hegemonic understanding of life and language in the 1970s and 1980s was a major part of the agenda of American deconstruction, emerging in the discourse around the same time as Michel Foucault's powerful critique of the power over life called biopower. And even as the history of deconstruction is usually explained in terms of intellectual history rather than cultural history more broadly, it is no mere coincidence that American deconstruction was so closely associated with the counter culture of the 1960s and its broader social context.⁶³

The following is a study of the activation and deployment of the Romantic canon in the immediate post-war period, or echoing M.H. Abrams's title of a late collection of

⁶³ To historicize academic theory by placing it in an economy of broader social forces, rather than explaining its development in terms of a history of ideas, remains a little used approach in academic writing. See the anthology, *Historicizing Theory* (Ed. Peter C. Herman, Albany: SUNY Press, 2004) for a counterexample. Herman's collection focuses on the ways deconstruction emerged from the social flux of the 1960s, and especially the ways Parisian university culture around 1968 shaped Derridean thought in fundamental ways. Herman celebrates the emergence of deconstruction as a product of the 1960s, but notes a deep resistance to that mode of historical work even among major figures, most specifically with respect to the association of French theory with the 1960s: "[G]ranting the connection between deconstruction or New Historicism or any other flavor of theory and the Sixties seems to play directly into the hands of one's enemies ... theory in general and Derrida in particular were consistently denounced as 'relics' of the Sixties. Therefore, it is better strategically to deny the connection altogether or at most, to grant it the most cursory treatment and to quickly move on" (7).

essays: *Doing Things with Texts*. So while it would be possible, and even desirable, to think comparatively and sustainedly about “life” between the early twenty-first and late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—hence bringing what might be called “Romantic” concepts of life to bear on the explosion of neo-vitalist thinking of our own moment—my strategy is instead to perform a version of this comparative reading at a remove: how does the dominant understanding of “Romantic life” in the mid-twentieth century compare with neo-vitalist or even certain non-organic conceptions of life in vogue in our current moment? In taking mid-twentieth-century Romantic literary criticism (and the work of M.H. Abrams above all) as one of the primary objects in this chapter, rather than early nineteenth-century poetics *per se*, I seek to foreground the ways overinvestment in the construction of “the Romantic” as a dumping ground for anxieties about changes in the body and life itself adheres to a structure proper and particular to the American Cold War subject. In brief, I shall explore some of the reasons why post-war critics of Romanticism mobilized late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century texts in particular in order to work through twentieth-century anxieties that we might call, in retrospect, biopolitical.

Romantic literary discourse of the mid-twentieth century sought to infuse its representation of the Romantic period with life and vitality, and did so very successfully; in a fundamental way, this is what Paul de Man’s brand of criticism sought to deconstruct. New Historicist theorists such as Jerome McGann might be said to have made a parallel operation as de Man by working in a historical rather than formalist mode through the critique of the “Romantic Ideology.” M.H. Abrams and his ilk, critics writing

about Romanticism in an intellectual-historical mode, have been, generally speaking, the targets of these waves of avant-garde (or so they were considered in the 1980s) attack.

With this context in mind, this chapter aims partially toward a decades-belated propaedeutic function: why and how did Cold War-era critics infuse Romanticism with such an ideology of life and vitality in the first place? And which aspects of this ideology live on in the neo-vitalist writing of the twenty-first century, the current theoretical avant-garde, that has displaced deconstructionist and new historicist approaches that have allegedly become, in turn, passé? These tasks require attention to the rhetoric of the humanist praise of life, contra de Manian death, and the forms it took in the second half of the twentieth century.

Staging an encounter of the most faddish invocations of life in the twenty-first century and their consequences for agency, the human, and the subject with a largely outmoded humanism focused on a different concept of life allows some of the most urgent theoretical stakes of these recent developments to come into relief. This is true especially if we consider the current wave of neo-vitalism to be, in part, symptomatic of a battery of anxieties surrounding the body in an era of highly technologized medical care, as it intersects in new ways with the forces of globalized, neoliberal capitalism. The body and all of its pieces signify in new ways in the twenty-first century. And while it may no longer be necessary, for example, to recapitulate critiques of organic wholeness so long associated with the Romantic period, the concept of organicism, which is associated with but not reducible to life, continues to cast its shadow over our discourses of life and, indeed, the lives we live. To see these consequences more clearly, it is first necessary to

account for the ways the recent spate of writings about “life” and the “thing” have largely come to displace language as a primary object of critical inquiry, and second, to trace the development of a romanticized concept of life in the second half of the twentieth century that continues to program the rhetoric of life in these more recent developments. Both of these developments can be read in light of the explosive changes brought about by the acceleration of biotechnology beginning in the postwar period in general, and the invention of genetic engineering in particular, with its new possibilities for scrambling and remixing biological matter in ways that both challenge and ironically reproduce romantic conceptions of life, and romantic relations between nature and art.

In so proceeding, my use of the term “neo-vitalism” is not intended in itself as an invective, despite the ways the charge of vitalist thinking has been used throughout most of the twentieth century as a smear to impute an irrationalism veering toward both totalitarian politics and the theological; it is nevertheless crucial to explore some of the political pitfalls of a variety of contemporary neo-vitalisms. In the domain of literary and cultural theory, debates about the many kinds of vitalism that have achieved persuasive power over the last several centuries in the West have involved the contested and contestable reading of British and European Romantic texts, more prominently, perhaps, than the texts of any other literary period. Furthermore, even though the conceptual centrality of “life” at that key moment of the early 1980s was not as clear as it is now, those debates likewise revolved around an understanding of “life” insofar as it was construed through the grid of language, with consequences for thinking through another set of related concepts, for example: the in/human, meaning, intention, agency, and

linguistic materialism. To return to the twentieth-century development of “life” as a touchstone in literary criticism, and especially to the encounter of postwar Romantic criticism (the dominant form being intellectual history inflected by New Critical demands for close reading) with deconstructive theory, can help explain the symptomatic reemergence of “life” in theoretical discourses today. To do this, it will be necessary to explore the ways the category of life became symbolically central in Romantic literary criticism of the postwar era, and the ways in which this development can be understood in connection with a battery of Cold War tensions, which can be gleaned in the intertwined development of cybernetics and genetics, the changing relationships between the humanities and sciences in the American university, and the threat of nuclear apocalypse.

Our contemporary neo-vitalisms are part of the legacy of these earlier developments in literary criticism and theory, and to interrogate some of the relationships between the current set of vitalisms and its precedents in the Romantic period and early twentieth century helps expose some of the hidden currents flowing among them. Even though it has become convenient to refer to the “Romantic Ideology” as if it were a construction proper to the Romantic period that critics should know better than continue to reproduce, we ought to remember that it is as much a reflection of twentieth-century symbolic investments in life, organicism, language, expression, and humanity as it is an “accurate” historical description of the ideology of a particular period in Britain and Western Europe. Throughout the twentieth century, Romanticism and “the Romantics” (most often understood as the “Big Six” canonical authors of the period) became figures

ripe for intense symbolic investment: to be sensitive to these functions and processes is a strategy for indexing these symbolic investments. My reasons for privileging Romantic literature, as it has been curated and canonized and packaged for disciplinary purposes, as a strategy for tracing and interrogating the functions of “life,” are based primarily in its significance in post-war literary theory in the United States; this dynamic will be traced more carefully below. First, though, I would like to remark more thoroughly upon a trend in theoretical writing that I noted briefly above, namely, the gradual displacement of language by life as an object of inquiry *par excellence*, a trend that has become more prominent since de Manian deconstruction reached its apex in the early 1980s and began to fall out of critical fashion.

Academics and Things

As Robert Mitchell puts it, our own “vital turn” in the early twenty-first century appears to be the effect of widespread dissatisfaction “with the exclusive emphasis of poststructuralist thought on representation and signs” leading many theorists to focus on “ontological dimensions of vitality that exceed, or stand as the condition of possibility of, semiotics and representation” (2-3). As the emerging standard genealogy has it, the vibrancy of these assorted neo-vitalisms, although variegated as a lot and certainly not necessarily consistent with one another, generally share together in their displacement of the linguistic and cultural turns of the twentieth century. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, for instance, explain their project of developing “new” materialisms in response to a sense that “the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the

cultural turn is now more or less exhausted” (6) and further, that they seek to “set the new materialisms on course to become a significant orientation for social research after the cultural turn” (39) by “creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter’s immanent vitality” (8) or, otherwise put, the “lively immanence of matter” (9). Hence, out with the old and in with the new, but with a significant repetition: vitality, as a keyword, has returned to the critical scene. I hasten to add that I don’t mean to suggest that their project is a merely craven attempt to keep up with academic fads; they are sincere when they describe their perception of the petering out of the cultural turn, and in fairness, they situate “new materialism” within a hefty lineage of ostensibly “old” materialist thought (e.g., Epicurus, Lucretius, and Spinoza), while declaring that “certain unprecedented things are currently being done with and to matter, nature, life, production, and reproduction” (4) that demand novel approaches to thinking materiality. Rather than cling to a familiar paradigm in the face of changing conditions on the ground—the vagueness of their passive construction that “certain unprecedented things are currently being done” making it all the more ominous—they reach for new forms of thought adequate to thinking them, which to my mind is responsible and intellectually honest. Nevertheless, it is worth remarking upon the rhetorical frame that they use to describe the project—the displacement of a tired paradigm by a turn to some “new” iteration of some older body of work—because this structure has become so dominant to the way we give order to theoretical inquiry in the humanities and social sciences. How new are the new materialisms really? This is a large question that occupies, in some form, much of the rest of this chapter. At a minimum, their insistence on appealing to the “unprecedented”

character of recent developments in a changing world is itself not unprecedented, of course, and matches the sense of political and economic flux of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that gave rise to Romantic poetics, as well as the American Cold War period; this appeal to novelty itself rhymes in a fundamental way with the accounts of Romantic life I shall give below. (Wordsworth makes a similar justification when he explains his decision to turn to the “very language of men” in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: “For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force...” [294].) This insistence also motivates the “new” part of the “new materialisms” moniker, even as practically every initiative or movement coined in the humanities these days is either “new” (a tradition that goes back at least as far as some very musty New Humanism à la Irving Babbitt), a “turn,” or a “return.” Coole and Frost’s consciousness about facing a brave new world importantly informs the shape of their intervention.

Coole and Frost make use of vitalist poetics in order to argue for their new materialist approach to social theory, but they do not reduce their approach to “new vitalism” *per se*; instead, they remark upon the congruence between their program and the rise of a “new vitalism” for the twenty-first century, largely indebted to the work of Gilles Deleuze.⁶⁴ In spite of this spike in interest in “life” across a diverse and unruly array of discourses and lines of inquiry, no strong consensus about its meaning seems to have emerged, such that it may seem the term is emptied of any content, becoming an

⁶⁴ See also the special issue of *Theory, Culture, & Society* 22(1), 2005, that explores the “New Vitalism” for the theoretical social sciences, or the book version, *Inventive Life: Approaches to the New Vitalism* (London: SAGE, 2006).

ideal dumping ground or screen for all manner of projections.⁶⁵ So while there is no academic consensus about what “life” is, its widespread currency has at least resulted in the appearance of a common conversation: it has become possible to refer to a neo-vitalist turn in theoretical debates as they unfold in the humanities and social sciences, and perhaps the illusion more than the reality of a shared intellectual project. It is not obvious why “life” emerged at this moment as a concept of such privilege, and why so many critics and theorists have begun to assert that attentiveness to the “thingness” of things is so crucial a part of any hope, for instance, to save the biosphere in the face of global warming and climate change. Even less clear is how some of these more novel conceptualizations of life, which lead Timothy Morton, erstwhile Romantic literary critic and now theoretician of object-oriented ontology and the “hyperobject,” to assert that “the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine” (17), can develop into an effective politics. If the typical trappings of professional achievement in the “theory” field can be trusted, however, Morton’s approach seems to have gained substantial traction: he gave the Wellek Lectures at the University of California at Irvine in 2014, joining the long line of prominent theorists who have given annual lectures there since 1981. In any event, part of this trend surely involves the extension of life not only to non-human animals and other biological life forms (themselves not traditionally taken as real subjects of philosophy), but also to objects, “things,” and systems both social (or “human”) and “natural.” Whence these novel concepts of life? And how does the more extreme, and

⁶⁵ This is true among theoretical and empirical lines of inquiry, whether the stakes are largely conceptual or have immediate policy implications. For the ways this question is framed by those interested primarily in policy and public science, see Jane Maienschein *Whose View of Life? Embryos, Cloning, and Stem Cells*.

perhaps reckless, speculative realist demand for an anti-correlationist ontology that pushes well beyond Kantian limits of the field of possible knowledge tap into this apparently widespread thirst for a radically un-anthropocentric mode of thought for the twenty-first century?

Here it is important to bear in mind the major differences between “life” and the agency of non-living or non-human actors or, as Bruno Latour would put it, borrowing from the lexicon of semiotics, “actants.”⁶⁶ Latour is happy to attribute agency to the non-living actant, making sensible larger networks and systems without having to appeal to a literal vitality or sense of biological life to do so. And while some writers working in the broad fields of thing theory and new materialism seem content to deploy the rhetoric of life and vitality—one prominent example being Jane Bennett, whose *Vibrant Matter* explicitly explores the consequences of rejecting the binary of life and matter, theorizing “a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such” (xiii) and declaring along with Hans Driesch, “Every thing is entelechial, life-ly, vitalistic” (89)—others are more cautious about associating too closely with the legacy of vitalism. Nevertheless, invocations of “life” are difficult to escape when turning to the relations among objects as a strategy to flesh out anti-anthropocentric ontologies. And while there are major fault lines separating the different camps of speculative realists (some being openly vitalist, others object-oriented or scientific), some concept of “life” figures in these novel attempts to privilege aesthetics in reorienting thought about experience with the world. As another example, it certainly remains questionable whether Steven Shaviro’s recourse to “some sort of

⁶⁶ For an elaboration of Latour’s concept of the “actant” see *Pandora’s Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

panexperientialism or panpsychism” (63) via Whitehead to attribute something like life to all matter is a workable way forward in the project of de-centering the human in continental philosophy today, but what is important for my purposes is the apparent widespread appeal of this manner of thinking about life. Shaviro notes that even he was “quick to deny the panpsychist implications of [Whitehead’s] thought” in a book as recently as 2009, but five years later reconsidered. This is one example of the slippage of non-human agency into the category of life that has been developing over the last couple of decades across a wide array of theoretical strategies for undoing the tradition of anthropocentrism.

To some degree, we’ve been here before. Hence this chapter’s attempt to address these questions by turning to the unlikely scene of Romantic literary criticism in the United States following the Second World War, where the lyric subject reigns supreme. As I shall explore in the second part of this chapter, in that domain, the human mind and especially the heroic poet sits conjoined with a renewed ideology of life for the post-war era. It is certainly fair to ask how a body of work as outmoded as M.H. Abrams’s can be shown structurally to inform the array of “new” work on life today, especially as the current neo-vitalist wave is so intent on expelling anything like a lyric subject while retaining, in a somewhat skewed form, the “life-ly”-ness of the Romantic ideology. My interest in doing so is to refocus on the ways “Romanticism” as a period and paradigm (both imaginary constructs) came to signify differently during the Cold War. This is important because critics such as Abrams elaborated a Romantic concept of life that continues to this day to inform the anthropocentric “culture of life” (as Jane Bennett calls

it), regulating practices and discourses such as stem cell research, the waging of U.S. imperialist wars, and policy surrounding death and dying (e.g., the nefarious rhetoric of “death panels” applied to end-of-life planning in U.S. public policy debates) and reproductive rights. To examine the clash of this ideological formation with the rise of theory, and especially de Manian deconstruction, in the American academy through the 1970s and early 1980s, promises to provide a prefiguration, of sorts, of our contemporary moment of neo-vitalism. To examine these dynamics directly as a prefiguration of our contemporary situation will allow some very real, but hidden, submerged, or forgotten stakes to come back into relief.

It is possible to make the objection that there is very little exceptional in the fact that the twenty-first century is so infatuated with life. Many others have noted the recurrence of vitalist and neo-vitalist concerns and enthusiasms over the last two and a half centuries at least. Bennett, for instance, points to the neo-vitalism of Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch as a presage of the explosion of interest in attributing life to objects and depersonalized systems, and not just carbon-based biological forms conventionally conceived. And prior to this neo-vitalist moment of the early twentieth century, the European Romantic period has long been identified as an era wrapped up in life: not just the birth of the life sciences in this era, but also in aesthetics, ethics, poetics, and politics.⁶⁷ While all of this is no doubt to some degree true, it is imperative to unravel the received wisdom of what “Romanticism” has been by interrogating the writings and positions of those most responsible for its twentieth-century construction. In short, why

⁶⁷ Denise Gigante’s recent book *Life* addresses the nature and function of “life” in the Romantic period most directly and descriptively.

and how did the concepts of life and vitality become so prominent to the image of Romanticism qua idealism in the mid-twentieth century, and how did the state of the life sciences during the Cold War fuel the set of projections that made debate over the Romantic period so particularly fierce for decades?

The same bundle of social forces that pushed mid-twentieth-century critics and theorists of Romanticism to associate the period with expressive life and vitality, making this image of the period a model for aesthetic productivity in tension with modernity, as well as a model for university-level aesthetic education (at least in the United States), also helped consolidate the formation of a “culture of life” bearing on contemporary bioethical debates and the fractured popular discourses surrounding matters such as abortion, stem-cell research, and organ transplant. As I pointed out in chapter one, the Southern Agrarians serve as an American precursor to the more widespread “culture of life” (associated with, but not limited to, the political right) that was refined throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The major puzzle Bennett describes is this: how has dogmatic Christian theology in the United States managed to couple the imperative to ferociously protect “life” (taken here in the most literal sense, including the zygote, stem cell, or even corpse) with an enthusiasm for deadly imperial wars? Her case centers on the presidency of George W. Bush, who famously restricted stem-cell research in the name of protecting life and also invaded Iraq to disastrous results, leading to the death of hundreds of thousands of people and destabilizing an entire region. While Bennett explains the interplay of these forces by reference to Pope John Paul II’s encyclical on the “Value and Inviolability of Human Life” (issued 25 March 1995) and the ways this

piece of Catholic doctrine was taken up, perhaps surprisingly, by evangelical Christians on the far right in the United States, the phenomenon may be translated to secular discourses, where a parallel bundle of tensions undergird a literary-theoretical debate nevertheless interlaced with the meaning of “life” for the religious right. To attend to debates over Romantic life and its afterlives is one way to interrogate the perplexity of the function of life for right-wing religious discourses in the United States today. One need not point a finger at religious or theological discourses specifically to attempt to find an origin for this perverse “culture of life” in the United States, in the manner Bennett seems inclined. And instead of looking at a papal encyclical for an indication of how runaway life toxically programs bioethical discourses and public policy, it is possible to look toward secular institutions, and in the case of this chapter, academic literary criticism and pedagogy and the liberal institution of the research university. To think this through on these terms involves a partial (if only provisional) indulgence of M.H. Abrams’s representation of Romanticism as a pivot from the theological to the secular in *Natural Supernaturalism*. Furthermore, it is by no means insignificant that Abrams, in addition to authoring two extremely influential books, *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*, and a number of widely cited essays, was also the inaugural editor of the dominant anthology of introductory English literature courses in the American academy, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Before closely reading some of Abrams’s criticism in order to trace the increasing investments in life in Romantic discourse of the Cold War, I would like to make this remark about his relationship to the Yale School in general, and Paul de Man and J. Hillis

Miller in particular: the received wisdom about the theory wars in the late 1970s and early 1980s can be described as a battle between secular liberal humanism and a deeply impersonal, anti-humanist attitude toward language. At the risk of artificially inflating the significance of two of the central figures and their bibliographies, M.H. Abrams and Paul de Man, it is a matter of convenience to figure this clash by using Abrams and de Man synecdochically.⁶⁸ To return yet again to the scene of the original trauma, the European Romantic era, and especially British Romanticism, is a strategy for working through the cleavage between idealism and materialism that has animated so much thought about Romantic poetry in the last several decades. And one way to figurize this dynamic is by way of identifying two icons and reading Abrams against de Man. As Sara Guyer and Celeste Langan put it in their *Romantic Circles* volume on *Romantic Materialities*, each of the essays in their collection “is held together by a rethinking and reanimation of Paul de Man’s subtle account of linguistic materiality” (np); to return and to rethink is ironically to revivify a discourse too easily caricatured as deadly—it is no accident that scholars writing about de Man today so often frame their interventions as resurrections of the dead master, a master dead in more ways than one. This chapter’s preoccupation with

⁶⁸ See Marc Redfield, *Theory at Yale: The Strange Case of Deconstruction in America* for a reappraisal of the “Yale Critics” and the ways “theory” (associated in the popular media in the late 1970s and 1980s with de Manian deconstruction, above all) came to be represented through personifications, as well as the ways in which an interrogation of depersonalized linguistic structures can reveal the pitfalls of this habit. Redfield focuses on the extended and famous public debates between Geoffrey Hartman and M.H. Abrams in his second chapter (62-83). For an explanation of the ways de Man became, in the words of Jeffrey Williams, the “synecdochal figure for theory” see pp 47-55 (Williams quoted at 213-214n100).

the encounter of Abrams and de Man, and the traditions they respectively represent, is based in an attempt to reassess the place of “Romanticism” in matters of life in the mid-twentieth century and beyond. This is to explore the extent to which Abrams’s developing account of life in Romanticism is an invention of the twentieth century at least as much as it is a representation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth, and can be taken as a partial reaction-formation to twentieth-century crises over the fluctuations in the meaning of life, even as it is made to be ventriloquized through Romantic texts.

To read Abrams and de Man against each other is not novel, even as the debates between Abrams and J. Hillis Miller, another member of the Yale School, have garnered more critical attention. In fact, in *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson uses an exchange between Abrams and Paul de Man from the question-and-answer period following de Man’s lecture on Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” at Cornell in 1983, and published in *The Resistance to Theory*, to help gather the stakes of her own project of rethinking the relationships between persons and things, which is itself a new face of an older problem.⁶⁹ As Johnson puts it, “the question of things turns out to be a question of things *for people*” (229), and as we find ourselves reimmersed in the early twenty-first century in matters of the thing, object-oriented ontology, and new materialism, Johnson reminds us that de Man’s persistent circling back to the “non-life” or the something that is “inanimate at the heart of what we think is ourselves” (229) turns out to be *the* problem

⁶⁹ The paper is entitled “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’” and was given March 4, 1983 at Cornell as the final lecture in the series of six Messenger Lectures de Man gave in February and March of that year. See Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. 73-105. The book version of the lectures is transcribed from tape recordings available at Cornell University Library.

of (human) life itself. Johnson's approach to the question of the thing as it relates to the person (or the separate category, the non-person) lands in a very different place from Timothy Morton's equation of a paper cup's being with human being: and in this way, the ethical and political questions of Johnson's book swerve away from those of the posthuman. This is perhaps surprising for a scholar trained in a de Manian mode that has been supposed to strip literature, language, life and all of us of the sense of priority or agential control accorded us by secular humanists. To revisit what is at stake in these very different approaches—liberal humanism, de Manian deconstruction as well as post-human thing theory, object-oriented ontology, and speculative realism—is to apply pressure on the concept of life. We need a new genealogy of this concept as it morphed through the Cold War period in order to understand more fully what has been at stake in this new world-historical phase of biopower.

Hence the importance of tracing the categories of "life," the "human," as well as the "inhuman" and "non-human" or "transpersonal" through feverish debates over language and Romantic literature, set in relation to the ways postwar developments in the life sciences challenged conceptions of life taken to be traditional. As Johnson puts it, perhaps with a wink, "Paul de Man was happiest when proving that what we take as human nature is an illusion produced by mechanical means" (4); this much is true, even as the traditional distinction between mechanism and vitalism has become insufficient to explain the depersonalized functioning of linguistic structures. Thus the common charge that de Manian deconstruction, or what Paul Youngquist calls "demonic formalism" (198), is dead, inhuman, and even life effacing. And while practically no one on the

theory scene at this late date seriously attempts to reinvigorate the liberal mode of humanist criticism I have selected Abrams to represent, to go back to the scene of the old battles between idealized and idealizing Romanticism and (especially deconstructive) theory helps expose some of the idealist impulses in the variety of neo-vitalisms that have become so prominent in the twenty-first century, and so deeply nestled in an array of discourses. That is to say, we must be attentive to the ways types of idealisms, in the guise of neo-vitalism, have reentered the scene through the back door. This is even possible as theorists reject idealism on its face and ostensibly practice new modes of “materialism” or “realism” (especially the speculative variety) that forcefully displace the privileged place of the human.

To revisit the encounter of M.H. Abrams and Paul de Man, and through this personifying strategy, the encounter of liberal humanist literary history and American deconstruction, helps show the stakes of thinking “life” with Romanticism today, as well as some of the various excesses that may appear across the humanities and social sciences. As I indicated above, it is key to bear in mind the leitmotif of anti-theoretical discourse of the early 1980s that associated de Man’s mode of rhetorical reading with death. Marc Redfield has recently reminded us that de Manian deconstruction has probably been called “*dead*” more than any other theoretical approach; and this supposed deadness means more than just having fallen out of vogue (54). For, Redfield continues, “to call something dead, one has first to imagine it alive” (54), and this attribution of livingness (*ex post facto*, in this case) to a theoretical approach to language raises a host of questions: why is “life” the privileged category that the detractors of deconstruction,

and “theory” more broadly, would most often invoke in order to deprive the approach of any force? And the flip side: why the mirth with which de Manian deconstruction was announced as “dead” (as opposed, for instance, to “over” or “outmoded”)?⁷⁰ One possibility is that the Romantic and New Critical traditions had pervaded professional literary criticism to such a degree that the “vitality” of any mode of language—think here, poem as organism—might be taken as the standard of its value: this is one symptom of how the Romantic category of life seeped through the field to a massive (and still not fully appreciated) extent. More generally, Redfield is certainly right when he claims that this habit of denouncing the deadness of de Manian deconstruction, thereby bringing it into the arena of life and death, indicates “that [de Manian] theory triggers deep anxieties about language and life, speaking and dying. By allowing language to override the polarity of life and death and acquire uncanny (de)animating power, rhetorical reading attracts to itself—‘aberrantly,’ as de Man would say—the energies of darkly sublime narrative. This in turn helps explain the remarkable reserves of polemical energy that de Man’s name can still unleash, decades later” (55). Ample proof of these “reserves of polemical energy” has been appearing with increasing frequency in the last several years.⁷¹ It is perhaps no mere coincidence that a greater appetite for bashing Paul de Man has dovetailed with a surge in theoretical writing from a neo-vitalist point of view in recent years: language, displaced by life, can no longer “override the polarity of life and

⁷⁰ Redfield calls any of these formulations “anti-theoretical” even if special conceptual significance may be attached to deadness. (See his introductory remarks on Derrida’s “Force and Signification.”)

⁷¹ One recent example of this trend is Evelyn Barish’s *The Double Life of Paul de Man*. New York: Norton, 2014.

death” as Redfield puts it, leaving us with a theoretical scene obsessed with demarcating life in opposition to non-life, and charging the former with value. This dynamic plays out in parallel but more literally in the venue of American bioethics.

For these reasons I have become convinced that even though so many academics today are happy to consider both Abrams and de Man passé, the long debate between cutting-edge theorists and secular humanists during the theory wars of the 1980s has not been fully metabolized, so to speak, and our current “turn” toward life and the vital turns around and around the preoccupations of those theory wars such that we can receive, in inverted form, a contemporary reply to the messages of that body of work.

Paul de Man’s insistence on the “something inanimate at the heart of what we think is ourselves” (229) started Barbara Johnson down the path of thinking through the problem of persons and things. Because theorizing the life/non-life distinction is taken to be so crucial to the new crop of theorists and critics friendly to vital materialism, and because so many literary critics and theorists now central figures in those debates came of age in a moment when de Manian deconstruction was at its apex, it is worth remembering how “life” in opposition to “non-life” was figured in the theoretical debates of the 1980s. One immediate distinction between de Manian theory and the new crop of object-oriented ontology and vibrant materialism is that de Man always insisted on the something “inhuman” (as Johnson reminds us) “behind what is considered most deeply human” (229), while the assorted neo-vitalists (or vital materialists) often make precisely the reverse move: there is something “alive,” or at least something agential, in what has heretofore been considered “dead” matter. This “something” is directed away from

human agency, of course, and so these various neo-vitalisms, post-humanisms, and vital materialisms share in the “non-human” or “inhuman” convictions of a de Manian approach to language—and would seem to be even further afield from Romantic or idealistic impulses to re-center the human.

Does this attribution of aliveness, or vibrancy, to formerly dead (or at least, certainly “inhuman”) matter reproduce the old Romantic or spiritualist habit of attributing “mystery” to the inhuman? Or perhaps: by out-de Maning de Man, does this new theoretical trend wind up in the realm of the ideal? This would be an against-the-grain reading of a theoretical camp that always foregrounds its materialist bona fides. There is at least a common tendency within the discourse of some of those writers currently enamored of the “thing” and vibrant matter to make “thinginess” special, and almost mystical in some cases.⁷² This is what allows Jane Bennett, for example, to linger over an encounter with a set of objects she found “[o]n a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam’s Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore”: “Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” (4) as she begins her study of “Thing-Power” in *Vibrant Matter*, continuing by remarking that the “stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if [she] did not quite understand what it was saying” (4). Note the oddly mystifying power Bennett attributes to the “glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” assemblage; oriented just above this sewer, we appear to be situated in what Kant

⁷² To turn to the “thing” is itself not novel. None other than John Crowe Ransom appealed to the “thingness” of the world in reaction to what he saw as the power of scientific abstraction, which may be taken as roughly analogical to the more recent turns to the thing and away from the abstraction of signs and signifying systems. See his *The World’s Body*, and for discussion, René Wellek’s “The New Criticism: Pro and Contra” (619).

identified as his chosen place, “das fruchtbare Bathos der Erfahrung,” the fertile bathos of experience in the world as opposed to the abstract cloud cuckoo lands of German idealism. But this mysterious “thing power” of Bennett’s draws instead in the direction of mystery and obfuscation. Elsewhere Bennett appeals to a different device, “enchantment” or “enchanted materialism” to get at the agency of non-human entities that would normally be considered non-living.⁷³

This multiplication of tropes, and possibly infinite chain of objects shown to demonstrate “thing-power,” works directly with Bennett’s “dogged resistance to anthropocentrism” (xvi) which she combines, strategically, with a call “to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism—the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature—to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). She figures this rather lyrically, making “the stuff” “sing”: to issue some mysterious call. It is precisely here that Bennett’s project benefits from an encounter with de Manian rhetorical reading, and especially the reading de Man advances of two poems by Baudelaire in “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric.” Whereas Bennett celebrates anthropomorphism as a strategy to dethrone the human in a post-Cartesian order, de Man’s remarkably nuanced analysis lands in a very different place—“true ‘mourning’” (262)—that can at most “allow for non-comprehension and enumerate non-anthropomorphic, non-elegiac, non-celebratory, non-lyrical, non-poetic, that is to say, prosaic, or, better, *historical* modes of language power” (262). This late essay follows de Man’s developing interests in aesthetic ideology and, indeed, suspicion at the Schillerian

⁷³ Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

impulses that seem to guide Bennett's thought. De Man, by contrast, urges caution in the face of the totalizing power of anthropomorphism: not just a trope, but structured like a trope, "anthropomorphism seems to be the illusionary resuscitation of the natural breath of language... a figural affirmation that claims to overcome the deadly negative power invested in the figure" (247). As de Man makes clear throughout the essay, this device is crucial to the development of the lyric voice that dominates the romantic canon; this hints at one of the ways new materialist theory functions as a kind of neo-romanticism for the twenty-first century. Bennett, by contrast, deliberately attempts to put anthropomorphism (as in, the anthropomorphism of things, so as to achieve a kind of "life-ly," "enchanted," "thing-power") in the service of challenging anthropocentrism. This appears to be an instance of allowing idealizing impulses into materialist analysis through the backdoor, which the de Manian critique of personification could help avoid.

Along not dissimilar lines, in the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on things that might be said to have initiated the current spate of thing-obsessed writing, Bill Brown invokes A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale* to present a doctoral student who exhaustedly turns away from French Theory to "relish the world at hand: 'A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*'" (2). Contrary to this fictional doctoral student's desires, Brown ultimately refuses to shield "the thing" from theorization, introducing the issue with his own contribution entitled "Thing Theory." Still, the appearance of "the thing" in opposition to the theoretical (and here, theory means precisely "French theory") gives an indication of the phantasmatic place "the thing" may be said to occupy: concrete and apart from the abstractions of theory and, more

specifically, deconstruction. This promise is what makes Brown further quote the fictional doctoral student: “I must have *things*” he thinks to himself “epiphanically” (qtd in Brown 1).

This declaration—I must have *things*—unintentionally echoes a joke Paul de Man made in response to M.H. Abrams in the 1983 question-and-answer period following de Man’s sixth Messenger Lecture at Cornell, on Benjamin’s “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” (“The Task of the Translator”), already mentioned above, in which Abrams claims in the face of de Manian language work to want to “present the humanistic perspective, as an alternative, an optional alternative, which appeals to [him]. Instinctively, it appeals to [him]” (100). This exchange is so revealing because of the way it foregrounds the category of the human, and furthermore, because Abrams acknowledges that part of the appeal of this humanistic perspective—meaning that language is itself a thing and, as he puts it, “the most human of all the things we find in the world” (99)—is instinctive rather than considered, somewhat automatic rather than thought out. De Man’s response: “[G]o back to Eisenhower and religion: ‘We must have language!’ No, that is somewhere else... They asked Eisenhower what to do about religion, and he said, ‘We must have it!’ The same is true about language as meaning: we must have it. Imagine that we didn’t! Nobody is suggesting that we should do away with it” (100). We must have things, and we must have language as meaning. These two imperatives dovetail across these two snippets of discourse, and are in fact two sides of the same coin: to seek refuge in the thing is to retreat to an instinctively appealing perspective on language, and indeed, life. We may not always know how to understand

the “call” of “thing-power,” in Jane Bennett’s language, “what it [is] saying,” but the mystery surrounding the fact that it is saying anything at all. This type of quasi-mysticism is an aesthetic ideology of the highest order, or at least an attempt at redemption or retranscendentalization. And whatever might be said of Paul de Man, his discourse never moved in the direction of redemption; in this way, he might well be considered the “anti-life” theorist of the twentieth century *par excellence*.

But now, in an apparent state of exhaustion after the cultural turn, both existentially (as figured in the Byatt novel) and pragmatically (as argued by Coole and Frost) we turn to things in order to get away from, or move beyond, language and linguistic structure. In much recent writing on “things,” it seems as if the thing has come to stand in for the firmness of meaning, after the end of the linguistic turn. Or, to put Bennett’s terminology in relation to Robert Mitchell’s, the thing (whose power is mystically at one remove from life) is appealing because it stands as “the condition of possibility” of “semiotics and representation” (Mitchell 2-3).

De Man’s lecture makes a critique of totalizing tropological errors that abound both in “The Task of the Translator” (even as these errors can be considered a “relapse” because on its face, the essay “denounces” them [89]), in that “the text constantly uses images of seed, of ripening, of harmony... which seem to be derived from analogies between nature and language, whereas the claim is constantly being made that there are no such analogies” (89). And yet, according to de Man, Benjamin “manipulates the allusive context” in the essay so that the fundamental “discrepancy between symbol and meaning” can be acted out (89); this follows the thrust of Benjamin’s piece on the

disruption of the sentence by the word, or the word by the materiality of the letter. This analysis moves in the direction of denying access to a pure language, or *reine Sprache*, that a more idealizing mode would affirm: think of Coleridge's privileging of the symbol over allegory as a canonical counterexample. Very generally speaking, here is also a major fault line that separates early German Romanticism with its emphasis on the fragment from the totalizing impulses allegedly found more frequently among the canonical British Romantics. This reading of Benjamin's essay is therefore vintage de Man with its insistence on fragmentation and metonymic displacement over the totalizing and terrifying power of the metaphor.

The de Manian reading of the allusive context between nature and language is instructive in reading the shape of some of the new materialisms. To do so, we might pay closer attention to the stakes of Coole and Frost's collection of essays: I accept their disclaimer that the thinkers they bring together under the rubric of "new materialisms" are fantastically diverse in their particular approaches to what follows the cultural turn, and indeed that "there are currently a number of distinctive initiatives that resist any simple conflation, not least because they reflect on various levels of materialization" (4); internal contradictions within the collection, therefore, do not signal crisis within a burgeoning movement, but rather the potential of thought from many different quarters that concentrates on several fundamental themes.⁷⁴ But in the interest of giving some provisional shape to a widely diverse terrain, Coole and Frost identify three broad

⁷⁴ This kind of disclaimer has actually come to be routine in the various new theoretical turns; it is possible to hear an echo of René Wellek's insistence that the New Criticism does not "represent a coterie or even a school" (613) in this type of remark.

thematics that they see the new materialisms inhabiting: first, a new ontology and readjusted concepts of the (post-)human in light of new conceptions of matter in the physical sciences; second, bioethical and biopolitical concerns focusing on the status of life, both human and non-human; third, the imperative to adjust theoretical models away from what they variously refer to as radical constructivism or poststructuralism that have been dominant in the social sciences over the last few decades.

Because de Manian critique, with its debts to Romantic conceptions of history, has so much to say about analogies between nature and language or nature and the social, not to mention anthropomorphism, I'd like to explore Coole and Frost's first thematic area, the new ontology, more carefully, in the interest of tracing what comes back after the movement to "the new." Only by reading in the interstices between these texts is it possible to piece together one possible account of our situation in and after the linguistic turn.

Coole and Frost turn to the natural sciences for inspiration, and in particular, "new scientific models of matter and, in particular, of living matter" (5), which involves renewed attention to any boundaries we might imagine between life and death. "Living matter" promises to become a keyword insofar as developments in the physical sciences problematize traditional divisions between life and inert material, so that "matter itself" can be conceived of "as lively or as exhibiting agency" (7). And yet the trickle-down model of this supposed development—from basic research in the natural sciences, to "educated publics" who "inform expert witnesses who contribute to relevant policy making" which then will "gradually transform the popular imaginary about our material

world and its possibilities” (5)—strains credulity especially when Coole and Frost perform their own bit of translation work from the sciences by citing a number of introductory physics texts and popular science books to provide a description of atomic and particle physics that would be well suited to a middle-school science class (e.g., “[T]he microscopic atom consists of a positively charged nucleus surrounded by a cloudlike, three-dimensional wave of spinning electrons. And if most of the atom’s mass resides in its nucleus, this is itself but a tiny percentage of the atom’s value” [11]). The fact the Bohr model must be updated from a model in which electrons resemble “planets in solar orbit” (11) to one that acknowledges the huge vacuums between the nucleus and electrons that are “like flashes of change that emerge from and dissipate in the empty space from which they are composed” (11), leads Coole and Frost to a provocative suggestion: “the most ardent realist must concede that the empirical realm we stumble around in does not capture the truth or essence of matter in any ultimate sense and that matter is thus amenable to some new conceptions that differ from those upon which we habitually rely” (11). I cannot quibble with their accurate statement that matter can be productively rethought, and that our experience of the empirical realm does not capture “the truth or essence of matter in any ultimate sense” but have we not known this since Kant, at least? And besides, it does not necessarily follow that any new insights about the properties of matter make for useful or insightful social theory: why should the discovery of the Higgs boson particle necessarily transform the way we think about society and politics? Just as evolutionary biology does not translate directly to productive modes of thought for human social formations (as the twentieth-century histories of eugenics and

sociobiology attest), the structure of particle physics need not provide the ontological grounding on which we think power and social formations in the twenty-first century. Ptolemaic astronomy is still true enough to be used effectively in navigation; the same might be true of classical physics for social theory.

The reason new materialists tend to see promise in the interplay between theoretical particle physics and social thought seems to be the flattened ontology they advance, in which living bodies are to be placed on the same continuum as all other matter, an ontology Coole and Frost call “monolithic but multiply tiered” in which there is “no definitive break between sentient and nonsentient entities or between material and spiritual phenomena” (10). Hence the theoretical significance of physics for social formations, and the extension of figures of life beyond the biological realm and into the matter that had been mistakenly thought of as merely dead and inert in a Cartesian scheme. In self-consciously moving beyond language—situating themselves after the cultural turn—the new materialists risk losing sight of the function of the tropes that make their discourse work, and instead literalize everything. Furthermore, it’s telling that these theorists have emphasized time and again the extension of a concept of life outward—from biological forms to all matter—rather than emphasizing the deadness of all living forms, a reverse move that would likewise seem to move in the direction of flattening the ontology. This is perhaps what comparative thinking of society and particle physics promises, but the uncheeriness of equating human being with dead matter forces the discourse in the other direction.

These caveats notwithstanding, I don't mean to rule out the possibility that newer developments in the natural sciences can provide interesting material for comparative thinking in the domain of theory in the humanities and social sciences—far from it. New research in these areas might well produce novel figures and tropes for thinking through agency, life, systems, and the subject, but what's important to bear in mind is the play of the figuration. Otherwise we risk repeating historical errors of trying to model the network of social forces on larger natural systems (be they biological, physical, chemical, or whatever), in short, aestheticizing work to potentially disastrous effect. What I'm interested in critiquing, therefore, is the inevitability of the “trickle-down” movement from the sciences to the popular imagination that Coole and Frost suggest, and especially their apparent assumption that in the age of the post-human, turning to a concept of vitality is the best way to argue for their laudable goals that we think more carefully about matter so that we can complicate our thinking of causation, and “recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces” and “consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency” (9). Isn't all of this possible without making recourse the voodoo poetics of life: enchantment, mystery, wonder, whatever? One way of interrogating this brand of post-humanism, which is deliberately positioned as the “new” following the cultural turn, is to turn to what seems to be its antithesis: secular, liberal humanist Romantic criticism in the mode of M.H. Abrams. The latter is a discourse that speaks clearly what the post-humanist discourse talks around; what connects them most profoundly is a renewed obsession with the category of life

beginning in the mid-twentieth century, and what allows them to be triangulated is the dead deconstructive discourse of Paul de Man.

By point of contrast, we have seen some of the ways neo-vitalist rhetoric in the twenty-first century reproduces the totalizing analogies between trope and nature. The animating figure in these discourses is not the godhead, by and large, and most practitioners would fiercely object to the suggestion that their rhetorical strategies tend to follow so closely upon those idealizing and messianic works associated with the kind of Romanticism represented in a book like Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism*. Nevertheless, I think it is crucial to consider the function of mystery and wonder in these new articulations of the inhuman in the various new materialist or neo-vitalist paradigms, if only to identify partially the form of retranscendentalization and totalization they perform. This is a separate matter, of course, from the larger and largely admirable agenda of thinking through the ways non-human or non-living entities can "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (Bennett viii), which may well produce new theoretical configurations appropriate, especially, to thinking ecologically or about climate change. The appetite for this recent wave of approaches turning away from language and toward life and the vital appears to be growing, centering on the problem of non-human agency, and this is surprising in some ways given the extent to which de Manian theory had already worked out a path for thinking the inhuman: de Man's work on rhetorical reading treated prosopopeia with especial care, and he and those working in this mode had already developed adequate strategies for addressing these kinds of questions. How to account for the pervasive and

stubborn blindness to some of de Man's insights? Why this re-staging of the rupture of de Manian rhetorical reading and liberal humanism in the guise of hyper novel "hyperobjects" and the like? I cannot address this large and fundamental question adequately, but I would suggest in very general terms that, if one of de Man's greatest virtues was his refusal to aestheticize the deadness of language, and the non-livingness at the core of human being, more recent theorists tend (more happily) to put the "life" back in to the picture. Bennett's analysis of "vibrant matter" is unquestionably rosier than de Man's repeated demonstrations of non-redemption. And to return to the primal scene of liberal humanism's encounter with rhetorical reading may help account for this crucial difference.

It is de Man's response to his friend Neil Hertz in the same question-and-answer period already mentioned above that most clearly brings this possibly troubling relationship of the "inhuman" and the "mysterious" into relief, and in a sideways fashion, points at some of the suggestive mysticism of wide swaths of post-humanist writing. Hertz begins framing his question by asking about the relationship between the long history of connotations and traditions that attach to particular words in particular languages—the example he uses to try to work through this thicket of apprehensions of connotations comes from de Man's talk: taking a cue from Benjamin to discuss the differences between *Brot* and *pain*⁷⁵—and he makes recourse to the mathematical

⁷⁵ "To mean 'bread,' when I need to name bread, I have the word *Brot*, so that the way in which I mean is by using the word *Brot*. The translation will reveal a fundamental discrepancy between the intent to name *Brot* and the word *Brot* itself in its materiality, as a device of meaning. If you hear *Brot* in this context of Hölderlin, who is so often mentioned in this text, I hear *Brot und Wein* necessarily, which is the great Hölderlin text

sublime to try to understand how comprehension becomes impossible in the face of rapidly growing chains of associations and whether this series of apprehensions “add up to what’s beyond your control as an individual user of language” (95). As an example, de Man had explained how, in translating *Brot* to *pain*, he gets to “bastard” from *Brot und Wein: pain et vin* “brings to mind the *pain français, baguette, ficelle, bâtard*, all those things – I now hear in *Brot* “bastard” (87). Is this the “Inhuman” for de Man? Hertz asks the very important question of how de Man gets from “a series of failed apprehensions” to “a major term, like the ‘Inhuman’” (95) and I think this is a question worth revisiting in light of what had unfolded with respect to the human and the inhuman in theory and literary criticism since this lecture was given in 1983.

Hertz elicits laughter from the audience when he asserts, in continuing his question about the relation of the transpersonal and the inhuman in de Man’s discourse, that “the word ‘inhuman’ keeps pulling in the direction of the mysterious” (95). The remaining part of de Man’s response to Hertz goes a long way toward a meditation on the “human” and “inhuman” that is worth revisiting. We are far removed from “the burden of the mystery” with respect to the inhuman as far as de Man is concerned. In all of de Man’s discourse, it is perhaps here that he lays it out most directly: “The ‘inhuman,’ however, is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any

that is very much present in this—which in French becomes *Pain et vin*. “Pain et vin” is what you get for free in a restaurant, in a cheap restaurant where it is still included, so *pain et vin* has very different connotations from *Brot und Wein*” (87).

desire we might have” (96). By contrast, the sweeping language of a vital materialist like Bennett lyricizes the vibrancy of matter—“Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick...issu[ing] a call, even if [she] did not quite understand what it was saying” (4). Compare this with the linguistic materialism of Paul de Man: “What in language does not pertain to the human...is totally indifferent in relation to the human, is not therefore mysterious; it is eminently prosaic” (96). With respect to Benjamin’s language “pathos...historical pathos...the messianic...the pathos of exile...” according to de Man are, in fact, “linguistic events which are by no means human” and hence not mysterious, prosaic (96). Bennett’s decision, or at least impulse, to replace God with sewer trash as a source of that mysterious call is actually not novel: God has always been a thing. This insistence on the prosaicness of the inhuman is one of the most radical aspects of de Man’s discourse, because it refuses the redemption of poetic mystery or wonder that several more recent formulations of the “post-human” or the “vital” have since replaced. “Life” is, itself, a bridge concept in this remystification operation.

Cold War Romanticism

Although it is not quite customary to think of twentieth-century Romantic literary studies primarily as a Cold War problematic, it is no accident or mere coincidence that the Romantic period, in its traditional canonical formation, rose to such prominence in American academic literary criticism and theory in precisely this period, in which the question of “life itself” generated new urgency in the shadow of the atomic bomb, and in which the arms and space races, and public policies supporting them, demanded new

ways of thinking about the sciences, usually in opposition to literature and the arts. If the research university became complicit in the wide-scale mobilization of American resources in the postwar period, with basic science research fueling the war machine and biotechnological development to an unprecedented degree, the academic humanities likewise shared in the flood of material resources (so that the hazy memory of the 1960s can still represent the good old days before the academic job market crashed in the 1970s). One way to understand renewed interest in a Romantic critique of science in this period is as an attempt for literary study to function in relation to the harder disciplines as an imaginary place of refuge, an answer to the bad conscience brought on by the instrumentality of the explicitly technologized disciplines. Post-war investment in American universities touched every discipline, creating a boom time in many quarters even if the public policy strategy was directed at growing more “useful” fields.⁷⁶ In light of the material conditions academic workers faced in this period, and the changing shape of the institutions that employed them (including new demands for increased research productivity), the construction of Romantic anti-science conjoined to an aesthetic ideology in the mid-twentieth century can be taken as one veiled response to the growth of a military-industrial complex in the United States. It is important here to consider the ways academic literary criticism and literary pedagogy was not just reactionary, but also proactive in helping to construct Cold War ideologies of science and life. The legacy of

⁷⁶ Hence the special place of the humanities in the public imagination in the United States, according to Geoffrey Galt Harpham. Harpham pays considerable attention to the ways the humanities are ideologically charged as a result of material conditions of the Cold War era, but by no means limits his analysis of the Americanness of the humanities to this specific historical development. See *The Humanities and the Dream of America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

this dynamic, including a remarkably inadequate but persistent “two cultures” division of the sciences and the arts, is what much recent scholarship in Romantic science studies, as well as new materialist theory more broadly, seeks to reassess.

And if there are indeed currents of neo-vitalism and anthropomorphism within the diverse body of work that goes under the banner of new materialism, and if some of the leading figures in the field situate this new materialist intervention as a response to the waning of the linguistic turn and the theory it generated in the second half of the twentieth century, one way to interrogate what has been superadded to the discourse (life-ness, the poetic mystery of the thing, etc.) is by turning back to the body of work from which that same ghost had ostensibly been exorcised, namely, the image of the Romantic in the postwar period. To consider the Romantic paradigm in light of de Man’s rhetorical readings and critiques of aesthetic ideology, as well as the new-materialist neo-vitalism of the twenty-first century, produces a tissue of thought about life since the end of the Second World War. And as I noted above, many new materialist critics deliberately respond to the “unprecedented things [that] are currently being done with and to matter, nature, life, production, and reproduction” (4) that make their readings applicable to pressing bioethical questions that have been forced by biotechnological developments; by embedding Cold War Romantic criticism in the moment of rapid post-war technologization and the abrupt change in life it wrought—when incipient genetic engineering, for instance, began to make abstract science fiction plots seem actualizable—it is possible to see how that literary critical practice was itself a kind of response to the “unprecedented things” then being done with life and nature, and not

least, the atom. Furthermore, this mode of inquiry helps produce an alternative, secular genealogy (through American academic literary studies) to help explain the coming together of the “culture of life” Jane Bennett describes in our contemporary situation. It has become clear to me that this discursive formation—the culture of life, the pro-life-ness of culture—is deleterious, wide-ranging and very stubbornly lodged in American politics. To understand its coalescence in a variety of discourses, and not least Romantic literary criticism, is only one step toward keeping it at bay in our politics. And to see how it can inform theoretical initiatives even ostensibly opposed to it goes to show the reflexive persuasive power of figures of life that have been drawn and redrawn over the course of the last couple of centuries in the West.

Bennett begins her account of the development of a “culture of life” in the United States by considering the effects of notions of vital force drawn from thinkers like Bergson and Hans Driesch crossed with developments in the biological sciences, namely cellular biology and embryology, helping to create what she calls a “hybrid” debate both “moral and scientific” that brought thinking about “freedom and life” together with “morphology and matter” (82). Even though modern microscopy was advanced enough by 1829 to make that year a starting point for many histories of modern medicine, Bennett focuses on the popular fascination with “the question of developmental growth” that she asserts only really took hold in the West at the turn of the twentieth century, ostensibly as a result of new research in the biological sciences. This new research was inflected by organicist thought that had been renewed and revamped throughout the nineteenth century, such that, “insofar as seeds, embryos, personalities, and cultures were

all *organic* wholes, there was an isomorphism between physical, psychological, and civilizational orders” for Driesch and the other critical vitalists of the early twentieth century, according to Bennett (64). What is most important here is the blind faith in isomorphism and other analogical thinking that seems to enable imaginative leaps between different orders: physical, psychological, civilizational. The received wisdom about the Romantic ideology likewise invokes this style of thought. The same might be said about Bennett’s “dream” of a “fabulously vital materiality” (63) that links together social forces and material bodies on the basis no longer of organic wholeness, but of life itself, carbon-based and otherwise. Hence litter in a sewer can be taken to issue a mysterious call on the same ontological order as human speech. Although it is difficult to imagine M.H. Abrams indulging in the kind of florid language Bennett uses to describe sewer trash, there is certainly some resonance between Bennett’s understanding of the isomorphism linking together discrete organic wholes and the series of analogies this understanding authorizes and Abrams’s representation of Coleridge and Wordsworth’s thinking about life and vitality in connection with the human mind: “the mind is [most frequently] imaged by romantic poets as projecting life, physiognomy, and passion into the universe... What is distinctive in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge is not the attribution of a life and soul to nature, but the repeated formulation of this outer life as a contribution of, or else as in constant reciprocation with, the life and soul of man the observer” (64). Abrams makes clear that the mere infusion of vitality in the universe could not be considered novel by the early nineteenth century. This relationship, however, of “constant reciprocation,” between the object-world and “the life and soul of

man” will authorize a Romantic manner of thinking about the human and its vitality that promises to soothe tension by phantasmatically bridging an unbridgeable abyss.

The work of M.H. Abrams is taken here as an emblem of a larger paradigm for thinking language and life in the immediate post-war period; as I’ve intimated above, we might consider de Man’s critique of Romanticism and Romantic literary history to be aimed precisely at the kind of humanistic work Abrams was producing through the 1950s and into the 1970s. Canonical European Romantic literature, perhaps above any other period, remained central to American deconstruction (ironically enough, for a practice based on radical decentering), especially for students of Paul de Man. And now that enthusiasm for deconstruction has largely given way to “life” as the single most urgent theoretical problem in the twenty-first century, an opportunity arises to knit together a genealogy to answer how and why critical discourses of Romanticism in the post-war period came to focus on the question of “life itself,” while coalescing around the notion that Romanticism began in the late eighteenth century and never ended, thereby foreclosing the modernist disruption to literary practice and characterizing it as just another face of Romantic praxis.

Because *The Mirror and the Lamp* contains so many historical examples and so much careful research, and because it moves along with such a decided air of totalizing authority, it can be difficult to discern its specific theses; as many others have already remarked, the book has effectively become a reference work in the field of Romantic literary criticism, and likely *the* reference work in the field, at least as far as twentieth-century scholarship is concerned. It is no accident that its author was also the founding

editor of the Norton *Anthology of English Literature*, that hegemonic object of fashionable derision throughout the canon wars of the last several decades. The ironic effect of *The Mirror and the Lamp*'s fame and influence, however, has been an occlusion of Abrams's politics and priorities with respect to the Romantic period, which have receded from critical view and blended in with a greyish notion of depoliticized historical description and received wisdom to be deconstructed, reconceptualized, and upended. Indeed, by the late 1970s and 1980s, Abrams had begun to function as an icon for the secular, liberal humanism that had enjoyed a place of privilege in the literary studies of the immediate postwar period.

The edges of *The Mirror and the Lamp* have to be roughed up through close reading because the text has become too smooth. A secondary imperative is to embed Abrams's account of the Romantic period in the larger disciplinary forces of the immediate postwar period, to ask why his central tenet in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, namely, that the Romantic period functioned as a turning point in literary life of the West, establishing the paradigmatic norms for literary discourses well into the so-called modern period, enjoyed such widespread consensus. In fact, as Seamus Perry has recently pointed out, Abrams was by no means alone in this general trend in the 1950s: in the US context, he notes the appearance of Murray Krieger's *The New Apologists for Poetry* (1956) and Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), both of which take the Romantic period as a hinge moment, from mirror to lamp, that defines the parameters of modern literary criticism, in addition to parallel developments in Britain (263). And even though Abrams insists upon the continuation of the Romantic paradigm to make sense of modern

critical norms in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, thus nestling his account of the period in the language of a turning point, as Perry emphasizes in his lengthy reappraisal of the book, it unfolds through a process of accumulation of historical data rather than the single-minded pursuit of a specific thesis—a method that better characterizes the later volume, *Natural Supernaturalism*.

All of this is critical commonplace among Romantic period specialists, and Abrams's career and corpus is too vast to treat fairly and comprehensively here. So my objective is much more limited: by reading between *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism* it is possible to tease out a specific line of thought more implicit in the former and quite explicit in the latter, and that is namely the crystallization of a renewed concept of Romantic life and its relation to poetics. Abrams's work is only one part of a larger tendency toward aestheticizing the concept of life during the American Cold War period, but this is a pattern that feeds the development of a "culture of life" in the United States for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, touching pro-life fanaticism and various new-materialist discourses alike. There is not a single mention of "vitalism" in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which is perhaps surprising because of the way the book reaches toward comprehensively sweeping up the Romantic paradigm as a strategy for understanding the dominance of expressivist poetics. *Natural Supernaturalism*, on the other hand, declares straightforwardly and boldly that "[l]ife is the premise and paradigm for what is most innovative and distinctive in Romantic thinkers. Hence their vitalism: the celebration of that which lives, moves, and evolves by an internal energy, over whatever is lifeless, inert, and unchanging," privileging

becoming over being (431). Abrams echoes the terms of this celebration, for twentieth-century literary culture and pedagogy, throughout the rest of his critical career: it is possible to refigure his own sustained response to deconstructive criticism (especially in the de Manian mode) in just these terms.⁷⁷ In his hands, life for Romanticism is certainly multivalent: it involves both the biographical life of persons and the notion of life as a power or force, closely related to the power of imagination, that enables Romantic isomorphic thinking about universal creative production, poetic creation, vegetable growth, etc.

The Mirror and the Lamp was started in 1937 and published in 1953, and *Natural Supernaturalism* was published in 1971 after evolving, as Abrams puts it in the preface, throughout the 1960s. Because Abrams uses both titles as explicit occasions to argue for the currency of Romantic paradigms in our own cultural moment, it is worth pushing the implications of this currency beyond the traditionally recognized boundaries of disciplinary literary studies. Life and vitality as keywords and key concepts were transformed in Abrams's own corpus over the same span of time that saw the development of the double helix model of DNA in 1953 by Watson and Crick and developing technologies of recombinant DNA, one major early example being Cohen and Boyer's successful transfer of a section of *E. coli* DNA from one bacterium to another in 1973. The famous Asilomar Conference on the ethics of recombinant DNA would be

⁷⁷ The best known essay in which Abrams critiques American deconstruction is "The Deconstructive Angel," published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1977, and part of an open critical debate between Abrams, J. Hillis Miller, and Wayne Booth that had been taking place in that journal since the previous year. He returns to his opposition to that new theoretical idiom repeatedly throughout the rest of his lengthy career.

held a few years later, in 1975, as widespread anxiety over the new sciences of life found increasing expression in popular media.⁷⁸ In Abrams's Romantic paradigm, life itself and above all human life became a watchword and a figure to affirm and celebrate for the twentieth century; as such, this relatively conservative pattern of thought was part of a larger system for refiguring and reconceptualizing life during the American Cold War against the backdrop of the bomb that threatened total annihilation, and just as neo-liberal economic forces were radically changing the lives people lived. This mode of response to political flux and transformation, and its phantasmatic redoubling at a literal, biological level, hangs about Abrams's invocation of English Romanticism to define a literary aesthetic paradigm for the present moment: he declares that "the need to justify the existence of poets and the reading of poetry becomes acute in times of social strain" and then draws a comparison between the English romantic era and the interwar period of the twentieth century, noting "war and the rumors of war" and "the stress of social and political adjustments" that characterized both periods (326). The terms of this comparison can easily be translated from the interwar period to the Cold War, even if this was not quite as clear to Abrams in 1953. This indication of a strong resemblance or even isomorphism between what Abrams takes to be discrete historical periods contributes

⁷⁸ For one prominent example, see Gordon Rattray Taylor's *The Biological Time Bomb*, first published in Britain in 1966 but in the US in 1968 as a "Book-of-the-Month." The book tends to oscillate between ostensibly value-neutral descriptions of biotechnological research developments and hysterical speculation about its dangers. For example, after entertaining the possibility that nuclear transfer would allow for DNA from one human egg to be used in the fertilization of another, he writes: "The logical extension of this proposition is the complete elimination of men and the creation of a race of Amazons," but then tempers this remark by suggesting that "[w]hile things will hardly go so far, on earth, it might be convenient to colonize another planet in this way" (171).

strongly to the kind of historical fantasy work Abrams undertakes throughout his own intellectual-historical project.

So to pause for a moment to extend the historical fantasy work: how do two very large books by an influential American critic participate in a larger network of anxious discourse about life, (neo-)vitalism, and technologized biology running out of control in the 1950s and 1960s? And in the face of “war and rumors of war,” how does Abrams’s ultimately conservative discourse about life, even if it is presented as historical description, reassure us of our own vitality in an uncertain time? Is there some red thread that runs through the prominent fantasies of these historical moments—the early nineteenth century and the emergence of Foucault’s modern episteme, the development of a critical vitalism around the turn of the twentieth century, the Romantic discourse of life of the Cold War period, our own neo-vitalism—that can lead us somewhere helpful in trying to explain why these fixations on, and preoccupations with, life itself keep coming back in the West? One symptom of this dynamic is the remarkable resilience of vitalistic concepts of life that seem to keep returning to the critical and popular scene just as quickly as they are exposed to critique of all sorts (be those critiques psychoanalytic, deconstructive, laboratory-based, historical-materialist, or whatever). This tendency toward celebrating life and using it as a redemptive foundation for thinking might even be considered a central “cruel optimism” of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to borrow a phrase from Lauren Berlant.⁷⁹ For Berlant, the cruelty of optimism inheres in

⁷⁹ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

the ways that that very optimism—in this case, the wonder at, marvel by, or enchantment of a pulsating and teeming vital universe—stands as a primary obstacle to the good life.

One of the cruelest optimisms in the history of the West is certainly the tradition of Christian theodicy (Abrams uses Augustine as a prominent origin), which seeks not only to justify but also to demand human suffering in the name of recreating the paradise lost. As Abrams argues, the theodicy as a form fervently denies “blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things” (95) and requires, in its place, meaning, and promises, as a result of suffering, redemption. As part of his discussion of the transformation of this tradition in the hands of the Romantics, and especially Wordsworth, Abrams traces a secularization of the theodicean form that replaces “theos” with “bios,” and puts forward “biodicy” as a newly coined term (96). This type of argument is in line with the larger argument of the book, about the Romantic period’s tendency to make secular that which had been traditionally been theological. It is life (bios) that displaces the divine and achieves pride of place in Abrams’s account, which is figured through a citation of *The Prelude* and a secularized analogue of the “painful process of Christian conversion and redemption” that moves in the direction of maturity, and as Abrams puts it, “self-coherence, self-awareness, and assured power that is its own reward” (96). Even though the Wordsworthian version of the paradise lost is theoretically immanent and wholly of this world, the approach to this state of purported maturity is as asymptotic as ever. This version of life, biographical and thoroughly human, does not exhaust the concept for Romanticism or for Abrams, but this kind of thinking certainly informs some of the

currents operative in the “soul vitalist” aspect of our contemporary “culture of life” and its psychotic consequences.

And while it is clearly insufficient to suggest a direct or straightforward genealogical or causal relationship between Cold War literary discourse and the new materialism of today, there is, nevertheless, something almost uncanny in reading between some of the new materialist writings on things and the central theoretical tension elaborated in *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Namely, this is the use of life and its relationship to expressive art (the lamp) as a metaphor to understand the infusion of the vital into the dead matter of the world of things as a strategy to comprehend literary production. If theorizing the relationship between matter and life has become newly urgent in the early twenty-first century, as a growing number of political theorists seem to suggest, it is perhaps beneficial to revisit Abrams’s representation of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s conversations and disagreements over the status of life and the world of things in the early nineteenth century. Coleridge is more exemplary in this case than Wordsworth, whose attachment to the things of this world can, according to Abrams, be taken as continuous with the mimetic models of literary production predominant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; this he places in opposition to the expressive models becoming more dominant in the Romantic era. I hasten to clarify that the accuracy or inaccuracy of Abrams’s historical argument for a paradigmatic shift from mimetic to expressive theories of literature in the Romantic period (in conjunction with the other two categories he discusses, pragmatic and objective) is, for me, more or less irrelevant; I am interested, instead, in the ways Abrams’s historical work can be read as

historical fantasy that bears on an understanding of literature and human life that he seems keen to make for the mid-twentieth century.

Abrams argues that Wordsworth made the Romantic transition “to the concept that the mind is creative in perception, and an integral part of an organically inter-related universe” (104) in his poetry but not his criticism; as a thinker and a critic, Wordsworth remains steeped in “certain currents of eighteenth-century thinking” (103), and demonstrates this most consistently by appealing to “the old antithesis between nature and art and, like the aesthetic primitivists of the preceding age, declar[ing] himself for nature” (111). In short, Wordsworth is made to represent a melding together of certain neo-classical aesthetic ideals (aiming at universality; employing very deliberate and careful language use) and his own, more Romantic standard for poetic truth (the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; the notion that “truths should be *instinctively* ejaculated” [qtd at 114, Wordsworth’s emphasis]), while shedding neo-classical techniques he takes to be artificial or merely decorative. Abrams is quite clear throughout the discussion that, in his reading, Wordsworth’s poetics theoretically rely on the stability of a universal and common human nature, which grounds the mutual intelligibility and exchange of sympathies among all human beings; this he takes as a fundamental eighteenth-century appeal to universalism but with a twist, authorizing Wordsworth to focus on “a mad mother, an idiot boy, or a child who cannot know of death” and not just “Achilles or Lear” (107). A stable concept of the human that guarantees the translatability of feelings and sympathies across all time and space would seem to command some

appeal in the immediate postwar period for liberal humanists like Abrams; one might say it is made to function as a poetic analogue to the United Nations.

And as much as Abrams celebrates Wordsworth's "achievement" (as he often puts it), Coleridge is the bigger hero of *The Mirror and the Lamp*: his critique of Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in *Biographia Literaria* is, according to Abrams, "the fruit of some fourteen years of meditation" on Wordsworth's ultimately unsustainable opposition of nature and art (116). Abrams walks through the structure of Coleridge's argument (on the distinction between a "poem" and "poetry" and their comparison to science, history, and prose fiction), and discusses the ways Coleridge's discussion matches the form and terminology of traditional rhetoric, and then lingers on the crux of the matter: by centering the poetic genius as the ground of aesthetic contemplation, the guarantor of the logic of commensurability to which Wordsworth also appeals, Coleridge "introduced into English criticism" the "appeal to inclusiveness as the criterion of poetic excellence," a concept he claims plays "a leading role in the critical writings of our own generation" (118); this is namely Coleridge's organicism. It is here that Abrams departs from historical description in order to make a more forceful argument for literary aesthetics in the Cold War, a species of argumentation that begins to draw out a renewed significance of life and vitality coupled with the poetic genius and the synthesizing power of the imagination, a kind of aesthetic ideology for the culture of life in the new world order based on Coleridge's habit of sensing "echoes" of the "creative principle underlying the universe" in both his epistemology and account of literary and artistic poesis (119). Coleridge's theory of the "dynamic conflict of

opposites, and their reconciliation into a higher third” effectively becomes the foundation for Abrams of a stable theory of the subject for the twentieth century (119). Life itself is aligned with the creative power of the universe, allowing for its analogous expression in human subjects and their poetic creations.

Part of Abrams’s account of the shifting governing metaphors of art from mirror to lamp, or mimetic to expressive, involves a parallel operation in demonstrating (again through Wordsworth and Coleridge) changing metaphors for comprehending the human mind: from an inactive *tabula rasa*, *camera obscura*, or tablet sensitive to impression by external stimuli (favored by Locke, whom Abrams calls the most influential figure on the popular conception of mind in the eighteenth century) and toward a revived Plotinian archetype of “the projector” nicely analogous to the lamp spilling out light actively to illuminate the world and its objects, as well as a profusion of Neoplatonic fountains and streams (57-69). This transition from a more passive to a more active mind is one of the central sites through which Abrams argues for the renewed importance of life as a concept in the period. And although Abrams privileges the writings of imaginative writers over academic philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, his analysis clearly owes much to the elaboration of the concept of the imagination as an active power, especially in Kant, where Kant marks an interest in the interrelationship of imagination and life in the third *Critique*.

Only toward the end of the chapter does Abrams’s rhetoric move in a less restrained direction, focused more explicitly on the attribution of life to the natural world (which, as he notes, was by no means a novelty by the early nineteenth century, given the

ways eighteenth-century nature poetry made ample use of “Isaac Newton’s ubiquitous God” and “the World-Soul of the ancient Stoics and Platonists” [64]). While there may be certain coarse affinities between the representation of a “life of things” so prominent in twenty-first century neo-vitalism and nature poetry in Britain throughout the eighteenth century, Abrams suggests a strong concept of life as an organizing principle for poetics did not truly emerge until the Romantic period. Whether or not the scheme Abrams uses is historically accurate—again, this is an issue that might be endlessly debated, challenged, and revised—it is important for my purposes to highlight the representative gesture implicit in *The Mirror and the Lamp*: the Romantic period marks the point of crystallization of our contemporary paradigm for thinking life and language. The key feature, according to Abrams, of the Romantic transition in understanding the relationship between life and the natural world is the new importance of “constant reciprocation” between the outer world and the imaginative mind that grounds, among other things, “debates on poetic diction and the legitimacy of personification and allied figures of speech” (64). And if the new materialist theorists of the twenty-first century frame their intervention as a turning away from Descartes and the Cartesian legacy in Western thought, Abrams solidifies the twentieth-century account of the Romantic ideology as a “revitaliz[ation] [of] the material and mechanical universe” (65) of Descartes and Hobbes. In his discussion, Abrams himself acknowledges the ways this revitalization could serve a psychological function, as “an attempt to overcome the sense of man’s alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object,

between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity, and motion” (65).

As an early progenitor of the widespread notion that a Romantic paradigm continues to ground modern aesthetics (if not explicitly politics or ethics), Abrams concentrates assorted reflections on life to argue for a revolution in life that promises to comfort and sustain humankind well into the modern period: the power of the poetic imagination is required to transform “the cold inanimate world into a warm world united with the life of man,” especially for Coleridge who, according to Abrams’s reading of his “Dejection” ode, maintains space for an empirical world of common sense (the result of a primary act of perception) prior to the activity of a power of poetic creation, a “secondary imagination” (68).

How do Abrams’s constructions of Romantic life bear on the construction of a culture of life for the early twenty-first century? To further pursue this question, I’d like to turn to Jane Bennett’s critique of the “culture of life” that she works through in *Vibrant Matter*. I find her description of the culture of life that had taken hold in the United States by the early twenty-first century, which she uses to explain (partially) the preemptive wars of the George W. Bush administration and restrictions on stem cell research enacted by the president, to be provocative and important: how has discourse on life and the vital arranged itself in such a way as to make morally imperative both the “protection” of zygotes and embryos and the mass destruction of wars in the Middle East? As a vital materialist herself, she interrogates the uncomfortable association of vitalism with two apparently opposed public policy imperatives: the bizarre elevation of the status of

potential persons (the fertilized eggs and embryos) and the killing of tens or hundreds of thousands of actual people in what was called a “vital war,” all in the name of ensuring the “freedom” of life and of the Iraqi people. For Bennett, both of these imperatives come from the same place: the American “culture of life” is linked to the rise of a “vitalism of soul,” a theologized and anti-scientific vitalism that she claims must ultimately remain distinct from the critical vitalism of figures like Hans Driesch.

While her analysis leaves many questions unanswered—there is no indication of the historical development of the “vitalism of the soul” in the United States prior to the Bush administration, aside from its vague association with Catholic doctrine clarified in a Papal encyclical of 1995, for example, and she seems to take the Bush administration’s rhetoric of “protecting freedom” as a reason and justification for war at face value—Bennett does manage to bring urgent political matters and their relationships to the discourses of life into sharp focus in her short chapter. Her insight that the new face of the vitalist-mechanist controversy for the twenty-first century involves the strange conjunction of deadly war with a declared, almost manic drive to preserve bare life (consider the hysteria surrounding the Terri Schiavo case) is worth bearing in mind as we continue to deal with the effects of a “culture of life” throughout the rest of the twenty-first century.

What I think is important here is to flesh out some of the historical explanation for the development of this “culture of life” in the United States, and to consider some of the ways secular humanist literary criticism and pedagogy of the Cold War era helped produce and give shape to this renewed enthusiasm for a sacralization of human life later

in the postwar era. Bennett reads Bush's own remarks literally in these connections to tease out specific theological motivations, noting for instance that Bush spoke at a National Catholic Prayer Breakfast in April 2007, where he stated very directly, "[w]e must continue to work for a culture of life where the strong protect the weak, and where we recognize in every human life the image of our Creator" (85). This strategy helps her to cordon off the hierarchical "vitalism of soul" associated with George W. Bush, Tom DeLay and the evangelical Christians that swept them into office from the critical vitalism of Hans Driesch, in whose "wake" she "locate[s] [her] vital materialism" (93). In Bennett's account, the theological language of a personal god and immortal soul conjoined with "the hierarchical logic of God-Man-Nature" (84) explains the monstrous politics of "paternalistic care" (88) that may emerge through the twin moral imperatives to at once protect life and ensure its "freedom."

While this is satisfying to a degree, the scope of Bennett's discussion seems inadequately limited to several bad actors ultimately responsible for the war: an evangelical Christian president, for instance, and a conservative pope. By locating the root of the problem as straightforwardly theological, however, Bennett actually seems to undersell the intractability of the "culture of life" in the United States. Hence the importance of looking toward a parallel discourse of literary criticism to see how it, too, contributes to the neo-vitalism of our current moment. Part of Bennett's apparent objective in describing the American "culture of life" surely is to distinguish her own vitalism from it. She makes clear that while "soul vitalists" like George W. Bush may take the nation on murderous rampages on the psychopathic justification of protecting

weak people, and allowing them to be free, the critical vitalism of Driesch and company leads to a different politics: “Driesch rejected the notion of a soul; he strove to replace faith-based claims with experimental hypotheses, and he associated the idea of vital force with a liberal pacifism [sic]” (84). While both the “soul vitalists” and critical vitalists share some common ground in rejecting mechanistic materialism as a paradigm for understanding biology, with both camps subscribing to a force of some sort that exceeds the physicochemical workings of organic matter (whether that be an immortal soul or an entelechial vitality), Bennett goes to great lengths to argue that Driesch’s critical vitalism, because of its strong basis in materialism and laboratory-based practice, avoids the pitfalls of its soul-vitalist cousin.

Indeed, the question of any necessary or direct relationship between a particular metaphysic and a politics occupies Bennett as she works through her alliance with Driesch. The fact that Nazi German scientists had invoked Driesch’s concept of entelechy, specifically, in order to justify racist purification policies (over Driesch’s strong objections) is an extreme case of vitalist thought seeping into a discursive system and producing deadly effects. Bennett, however, points repeatedly to Driesch’s own pure intentions in order to protect his body of research from the dangerous part of its legacy: Driesch himself was forced by the Nazis to retire his university post because he objected so strongly to their hierarchization of forms of life, and considered militaristic violence, in his own words, “*the most terrible of all sins*” against “the vitalistic principles of life, holistic cooperation and higher development” (qtd in 83-84). It is this refusal to hierarchize vitality among various populations that is absolutely key for Bennett, and

indeed, she extrapolates from the spirit of this refusal—in conjunction with his laboratory practice, his “hands-on, face-to-face, repeated encounters with sea urchins, seawater, sulfuric acid, and various pieces of glass and metal equipment... attentiveness to nonhuman matter and its powers” (89)—that Driesch used his conception of entelechy not only to assert the “equality of all people” but also to defend “the possibility that this vitality is shared by *all* things” (89). In this, Bennett has found a fellow traveler in the undoing the binary of life and matter, and mechanism and vitalism, and identifies this as the moment of Driesch’s “transition from vitalism to vital materialism” (89). It is peculiar that meeting the mere criterion of basing his theorization about entelechy in laboratory practice in opposition to the soul vitalist’s habit of appealing to a personal god of creation does so much to elevate Driesch’s practice for Bennett: by making the argument in this way, she reinscribes a dualism in thinking about science in opposition to non-scientific discourses, which appears at the very least ironic considering her stated purpose of challenging dualistic thinking. And yet her method of argumentation for undoing these binaries depends on a resolutely dualistic scheme: the privileged, materialist habituation to nonhuman matter in a laboratory in opposition to idealizing religious fanaticism. Bennett seems to participate here in a long debate over the truth claims of science in opposition to poetry and religion, which Abrams treats in a somewhat different register in his final chapter of *The Mirror and the Lamp*.

It seems to me that there is something else perverse about this perspective: while it’s very nice, of course, to privilege life-affirmation, and to extend this kind of peaceful orientation to all things—to view all of us and everything as part of a pulsating, living,

becoming—what kind of a politics does this produce for the world as it is? This is not to say this kind of world picture does not have its appeal: if I'm honest, I can echo the exchange between Abrams and de Man at precisely this point, “instinctively it appeals to me...it appeals to me also, greatly; and there is no question of its appeal, and its desirability” (100). Abrams and de Man had been discussing romanticized humanism, of course, and its consequences for thinking the stability of meaning and intention in language, for humans, and for life; this seems at first a far cry from Driesch and Bennett's attempt to redistribute vitality qua entelechy equally among all things, and yet this latter attempt somehow lands in the terrain of instinctive appeal and desirability, of life-affirmation, “holistic cooperation and higher development,” and a kind of liberal pacifism that M.H. Abrams championed through his post-war image of romantic literature, which is largely structured as a reaction formation against mechanistic materialism. He quotes two of Coleridge's letters to make clear the boldness of this substitution of life in the place of cold, dead matter: “life and intelligence...for the philosophy of mechanism, which, in everything that is most worthy of the human intellect, strikes *Death*” (65) as well as the monist bringing together of nature and human thought that can almost be said to prefigure the neo-vitalism of our own moment, “everything has a life of its own, and...we are all *One Life*” (65).

It is peculiar, then, to read Jane Bennett's work, the very image of novelty in political theory today, and its insistent undoing of the life/matter binary, in light of this kind of remark from M.H. Abrams in 1953 that seems to anticipate it: “This experience of the one life within us and abroad cancels the division between animate and inanimate,

between subject and object—ultimately even between object and object, in that climactic ALL IS ONE of the mystical trance-state” (66). There are undoubtedly elements of this mystical trance-state in twenty-first century political theory. My suggestion, here, is that the liberal, humanist Romantic criticism of the Cold War constructs an image of life that informs both “soul vitalism” and “critical vitalism” and that any attempt to extricate the one from the other on the sole basis of laboratory work in opposition to religious doctrine cannot be successful, because both formations appear to come from the same place. And while it may not ultimately be possible to exorcise the vitalist ghost from our discourses of life, it is crucial to attend to its effects.

Chapter Three

Sweet Bodies Fit for Life: A Brief Romantic Prehistory of Transsexuality and Trans*

Discourse

John Keats's eponymous heroine in *Lamia* (1820) speaks for the first time in the poem as a disembodied voice rising up from a thicket on Crete. Hermes has just sneaked away from Olympus in pursuit of a nymph renowned for her beauty, and after frenetically searching the island for her without success, sits pensive and aloof on the ground. It is then that we hear Lamia's first mournful lines: "'When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake! / When move in a sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips! Ah, miserable me!'" (1.38-41).⁸⁰ This voice emerges in the poem prior to the corporeal form, which is for now that of a snake; this demon, though, wishes to become a woman.

Before attending to the dramatic tension in this romance between a living, sleep-like death and the promise of vitality that comes with the material body that makes movement possible, and an interrogation of the ways the poem situates the sexed body in relation to a Romantic problem of life, it is worth remarking that the "wreathed tomb" of Lamia's living death recalls yet another famous phrase in Keats's corpus, the "wreath'd trellis of a working brain" appearing in "Ode to Psyche" (also in the 1820 volume). The trellis, obverse of the tomb, is an apt figure for the Keatsian "negative capability" that makes poetic production possible, an aesthetic principle based on dissolved boundaries

⁸⁰ All references to the poem cited by line number are from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Cambridge: Harvard, 1978.

around the ego, such that “the camelion poet” in creative expression sheds every identity, ostensibly including those of gender and sexuality, but which also leads to another kind of living entombment, as *Lamia* seems to suggest with its deep irony and even satire.⁸¹ It is this suggestive aspect of “negative capability” that inspired a wave of feminist reappraisals of Keats in the latter half of the twentieth century, both on the essentialist basis that softer ego boundaries might be associated in general with femininity as opposed to masculinity (a rather “second-wave” conclusion), and, more relevant to the purposes of this chapter, an apparent capacity for movement between the two poles that are often taken to regulate the gender system in the West.⁸²

⁸¹ I follow Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1988, in taking Keats's phrase, “wreath'd trellis of a working brain” as a figure for his “negative power” and, as she puts it, the “effect of the impossible project set him by his interests and circumstances: to become by (mis)acquiring; to become by his writing at once authorized (properly derivative) and authorial (original); to turn his suffered objectivity into a sign of his self-estranged psyche, and to wield that sign as a shield and an ornament” (6). The phrase “camelion poet” comes from Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse of October 27, 1818.

⁸² In the first edition of *Adrienne Rich's Poetry*, eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, New York: Norton, 1975 (but excised from the second edition in 1993), Rich comments in an interview that women generally have “tremendous powers of intuitive identification and sympathy with other people” and that this might lead to a woman's losing “all sense of her own ego,” and in referring to Keats, hero of the negative, claims that “the male ego, which is described as the strong ego, could really be the weak ego, because it encapsulates itself” (115). Among those who have taken Rich's commentary (clearly informed by Nancy Chodorow's work) up as a starting point for discussing Keats and gender are Margaret Homans, Anne Mellor, and Susan Wolfson. In fairness, the context of Rich's remark is important to note: she appears to have made these comments somewhat offhand in an interview with two friends, one of whom was the first to invoke Keats's name, not Rich. But because these remarks have been so frequently cited in feminist scholarship on Keats and Romanticism, I must acknowledge that I think the relationship between Keats and femininity is much more vexed and ambivalent than Rich seems to suggest; nor am I convinced that isolating a concept of a “male ego” in direct opposition to a female one is either productive or convincing. Nevertheless, I point to this comment to illustrate how well-established Keats's

It is in fact very difficult to think about Keatsian “negative capability” apart from the social category of gender identity, which is of course such a fundamental, if not entirely secure, marker we use to orient ourselves in social space, and the growing body of scholarly writing on transsexuality and transgenderism may help illuminate or transform our understanding of Keats’s retreat to the “negative” in ways unavailable to feminist theory of the late twentieth century. The figures of transsexual and transgender subjectivity, which seem to have appeared most prominently in a moment of post-industrial capitalism, can be brought to bear on a moment in literary history situated just at the rise of Western industrialization; what follows is an interrogation of what is at stake in these forms of life, how they come to terms with alienation, and how they inform each other. Rereading Keats with the understanding that his retreat to the negative is at least partially a strategy to foreclose a profound sense of alienation, an apparent if ambivalent attempt to turn away from an unjust world and imperfect social life in favor of a more rarified poetic realm, helps shed light on some of what may be at stake in some strains of trans* discourse, and trans* life, of our own era. This chapter explores the two-way transaction between trans* discourse and Romantic poetics with particular attention

reputation is as the most effeminate of the Romantic “Big Six” of Blake, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, P.B. Shelley, and W. Wordsworth. This is not simply a twentieth-century phenomenon; the *locus classicus* is William Hazlitt’s essay “On Effeminacy of Character” in *Table Talk; or, Original Essays*. Vol. 2., London: Henry Colburn, 1822, 199-216. For a very good comprehensive history of Keats’s feminization in the nineteenth century, see Susan J. Wolfson, “Feminizing Keats” in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione de Almeida, Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990, 317-356. For a reading of “Ode to Psyche” that draws out the ambiguity of Keats’s playfulness with matters of gender in this poem, see Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender*, New York: Routledge, 1993, (181-182). For Margaret Homans’s deliberations about whether or not to claim Keats as a feminist Romantic poet, see “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats.” *Studies in Romanticism* 29.3 (1990): 341-370.

focused on *Lamia*, which satirizes Keats's own attempts to "pass" as a poet, coding its series of misfires in terms of inadequate gender performance. At stake in Keats's corpus in general, and so poignantly in this eight-hundred-line romance in particular, is the triangulated relationship of gender (attempts and failures at masculinity or femininity), the making of a social life and livelihood (the terrain of accomplishment and the strong ego that may accrue with social power), and poetic production (and the solace that comes with claiming to achieve something greater than life by dissolving into the negative).

Hence *Lamia* provides an object of focus to think and work through a knot of interconnected concerns: Keats's own literary insecurities as figured through his perceived effeminacy; his fundamental desire for mastery, for non-alienated wholeness; the relationships among the specter of literary fraudulence, its genuine denial, and satirical acceptance; the imperative to "pass" by adequately performing a gender identity, which in this case goes hand-in-hand with "passing" at having a gentleman's education and belonging to the class of men authorized to produce high art; and in poetic creation, the Keatsian fantasy of dissolving the ego to express a kind of vital power that escapes all attempts to (formally) contain it. As far as I am concerned, Marjorie Levinson has made the most convincing case to date for reading Keats's literary career as a "life of allegory," taking his style as a symptom of his frenzied attempts to climb socially and to enter a lettered class not aligned with his education or family background, culminating with a reading of *Lamia* that exposes a satirical gesture about these futile attempts, failures, and

romantic recuperations of those failures.⁸³ One starting point for this chapter is to consider Levinson's critique in tandem with the long tradition of Keats's own gender trouble: his deep insecurity about social power and standing is thoroughly condensed in metaphor about his own purported deficiency of sexual power, masculine prowess, and his shortness of stature, always a particularly sore spot. His occasional and apparent identification with the feminine "negative" is tempered, though, with reactive bouts of misogynistic rage in poetry and letters, including railing against literary "bluestockings"—a term that refers to literary women of the late eighteenth century, and to the socks Benjamin Stillingfleet wore when he met with them—and his feminine readership, which has been framed as smoking-gun evidence that his gender politics are not enlightened and that feminist appropriations of this poet may be too hasty.⁸⁴

In order to avoid reproducing the customary binary relationship of masculinity and femininity while making a reading of *Lamia* that deals squarely with the crisis of gender and sexual difference, and the crisis of class and social power that it allegorizes, the relatively young body of writing on transsexuality and transgenderism helps refocus the stakes of gender on a body of conceptual concerns not available heretofore. Ultimately, for me, the questions toward which much feminist writing on Keats has gravitated, of whether or not the historical figure of John Keats was or was not a proto-feminist or misogynist, or whether he would consciously or unconsciously champion a women's movement, are much less interesting than the question of how canonical poetry

⁸³ See Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1988. (especially Chapter 6, 255-299)

⁸⁴ See Margaret Homans, "Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats." *Studies in Romanticism* 29.3 (1990): 341-370.

of the Romantic period uniquely frames gender as a fundamental problem of life, and imagines the “negative” escape from the crisis of gender as a poetic/expressive access to a higher, more vital, category of life itself. The potential danger of this move, however, inheres in a potential depoliticization of “life itself”; and indeed, Keats himself has often been criticized for being dreamy, airy, unpolitical, unconcerned with matters of this world and satisfied with a fetishistic reassurance of his ore-laden poetic style (“load every rift of your subject with ore,” as he put it in a letter to P.B. Shelley).⁸⁵

This element of Keats’s reputation is not unrelated to the well-known attacks Lord Byron made on him, referring to him as a poet of onanism, wont to “frigging his *Imagination*,” to “Johnny Keats’s *piss a bed* poetry,” to “the drivelling idiotism of the Mankin” among other remarks in other places. And while these comments are often marshaled to explain the tradition of viewing Keats as the effeminate social climber of the Big Six, not really suited to be admitted to the company of serious gentlemen poets, it may well be possible to think about onanism and “self-pollution” a bit more literally, in an attempt to gauge the motivation of Byron’s exasperated anger: in short, how has Keats managed to infuriate him that much? If we follow Byron and consider Keats’s sensual style, most apparent in the odes, to function as a kind of masturbation, it promises an alignment of subject and object and unalienated, autotelic wholeness beyond division or lack, a paradise of sorts, or very near a living death.⁸⁶ Perhaps it is this thought of excess

⁸⁵ This traditional reading of Keats as depoliticized has been rethought and challenged, in recent years especially. See, for instance, the 2011 “Reading Keats, Thinking Politics” special issue of *Studies in Romanticism* 50(2).

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the Enlightenment discourse surrounding masturbation and gender confusion, see Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*.

jouissance Byron cannot countenance. In any case, thinking along these lines puts into relief Lamia's cry to Hermes for a body fit for the "ruddy strife" of other bodies' "hearts and lips," an appearance into the world, and a world apart from self-contained and self-possessed imagination, for intercourse in place of masturbation, in this case both literally and figuratively.

Locating an understanding of Romantic "life itself" among the so-called Big Six of the period, in this case in the work of John Keats, may seem like an endeavor that is almost too obvious. I've selected Keats not with the intention to further invest in his name and body of work, thus capitulating to the power of the canon, but with the intention ultimately to comment on what the author's name, itself, now signifies (the boy-poet whose doomed betrothal to Fanny Brawne, along with his early death, became objects of both Victorian embarrassment and impassioned scholarly interest), and how the nature of that signification, and fascination with Keats's biography, actually inform a concept of life very much still with us. Thus, what is at stake here is not just Keats's work, but also the effects of Keats as an emblem of life after death—including sentimental incantations about Keats's love living on through his poetry and beyond his body—in effect, a peculiar kind of haunting.

Keats often plays with the idea of his own disappearance in poetic creation. For instance, in turning away from what he calls "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" [sic] and declaring that the poet "is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures,"

These notions continue to obtain in the Romantic period. Masturbation was strongly identified with cross-gender identifications (masturbating boys becoming effeminate and masturbated girls mannish), given the strong influence of Samuel-Auguste Tissot's *Essay on Onanism* (1758) throughout Britain and the Continent.

he sounds both overly confident and suspiciously self-effacing for a young poet whose short career was marked by desperate attempts to escape the working class (and, indeed, work itself, as he abandoned his medical training) and pretend to a life of letters.⁸⁷ This kind of self-effacement, or disappearance of the poet into the poetry, marks the evaporation of social life and points in the same direction of *Lamia*'s living death in a "wreathed tomb." Furthermore, as I will explain below, I find this psychic motivation of this account not dissimilar from Lacan's concept of "horsexe" ("beyondsex"), a theoretical position beyond sexual difference, which Catherine Millot mobilizes to explain a certain type of transsexual desire, and which casts the gender play of *Lamia* in a different light. By making gender performance and poetic expression so proximate as to be interchangeable, Keats's short romance helps prefigure certain elements of the discourse of transsexuality specifically (rather than trans* more broadly) that develops in the twentieth century, a paradigm based on both gender identity and its expression, naming a new form of life.

Lamia has garnered a vast number of allegorical readings since its appearance, so many in fact that it gives me pause before proffering another.⁸⁸ The "problem" of this poem has long been considered its constantly shifting allegiances among the characters

⁸⁷ See Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818.

⁸⁸ Garrett Stewart, in his article, "*Lamia* and the Language of Metamorphosis" *Studies in Romanticism* 15.1 (1976): 3-41, cautions against the allegorical readings that the poem "seems to invite" because such a manner of reading "violates the true life of the poem, which is not linear so much as interlinear, with meanings sparked by the slightest frictions of sound, definition, and linkage" and goes on to lament that mere "thinly veiled plot summaries" proliferate in the scholarship. Stewart's appeal to the "true life" of the poem, based on its closed system of sounds and significations, reflects an ideological commitment to a concept of expressive poetics that is genealogically related to other forms of living (gendered) expression, as I shall argue in this chapter.

and the ideas they seem to represent, and the impossibility of stabilizing it in any definitive way through a totalizing critical reading.⁸⁹ Denise Gigante's more recent reading of the poem as a problem of life itself, as too much life, a kind of "excessive vitality" that serves as a Keatsian principle of monstrosity, seems to me to emblemize this aspect of the reception history: this poem about "monstrous beauty" (which Gigante argues is an aesthetic expression of early nineteenth-century biological theories of "self-

⁸⁹ According to certain influential critics of the mid-twentieth century, *Lamia* had been conventionally read as an allegory for an opposition of the sciences and the imaginative arts, a kind of way of staging poetic revenge on the philosophy that "will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line" (2.234-235). For a brief review of critical examinations of the poem throughout the early twentieth century, see Earl Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1953. Wasserman claims the reader must identify with Lycius as a mortal who cannot access divine love, and asserts that the poem, which he deems a "failure" as a "thematic narrative" (159), means "to sharpen the outlines of Lycius' tragedy" by contrasting it with an episode of immortal love, namely Hermes' rape of the nymph (162). According to Wasserman, this reading represents a departure from critical consensus until the early 1950s, which would typically invite the reader to side with either Lamia (and sensuous beauty, the arts) or Apollonius (cold philosophy, the sciences), the problem being the impossibility of coming down firmly on one side or the other. "The repeated failure to find any solution to this problem results," Wasserman asserts, "from the fact that there is no problem" (163). Twenty years later, Stuart Sperry argues in *Keats the Poet*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, that the poem is an allegory for poetic creation, riddled with ambivalence about the contemporary sciences (307) and marked throughout by "sarcasm" and "a disconcerting quality of self-mockery" (292). Sperry also attests to the traditional tendency for critics to disregard the episode of Hermes and the nymph as a "curtain raiser" and notes that Wasserman's was the best critical reading to take it seriously (294). One other example is Edward T. Norris, "Hermes and the Nymph in *Lamia*," *English Literary History*, 2 (1935), 322-26. Marjorie Levinson (1988) likewise emphasizes the poem's (the poet's) self-mockery, but explicitly shifts the analysis to terms of social class; she also devotes intense attention to the Hermes episode, and especially the first six lines of the poem (255-299).

propagating vital power”) has itself escaped the closure of critical consensus and has instead inspired a series of monstrous readings, to which I add one more in this chapter.⁹⁰

While critics have often used the sexual element of the poem to amplify and reinforce their own allegorical decodings of it, *Lamia* is not usually taken to deal squarely with the problem of sexual difference. I find that focusing on this issue allows its negotiation of a concept of life to come to the fore in new ways: as a discursive knot it provides a site for thinking through Romantic life forms in ways that have become newly legible with the development of feminist thought and gender theory in recent decades, just as the development of psychoanalysis stimulated a movement in literary criticism that opened up Greek mythology, for instance, to readings that had not been articulable without the common language the paradigm provided.⁹¹ This is not a matter of simply applying thought about transsexuality to an aesthetic object to generate unexpected meanings in a canonical poem; instead, the reading must move both ways, the poem illuminating trans* discourse as much as trans* discourse illuminates the poem. Hence it should be clear that I do not mean to suggest that the historical author necessarily

⁹⁰ See Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 208-246. (210-11). In her chapter on *Lamia*, Gigante argues for the productive comparison of the aesthetic category of monstrosity with research in the developing life sciences.

⁹¹ Freud’s reading of the Medusa myth, in his short piece on “Medusa’s Head,” is a relevant example of this kind of intersection of psychoanalysis with text. See the collection *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, New York: Touchstone, 1997. One exception to my remark that *Lamia* is not usually read as an allegory for the problem of sexual difference is in D.J. Moores, *The Dark Enlightenment: Jung, Romanticism, and the Repressed Other*, Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010, 122-138. Moores’s approach to the poem is quite different from mine: his Jungian reading takes *Lamia* as a working through of the concept of the contrasexual other, and an allegory for the failed *syzygy* of balancing male and female elements. This approach seems to me to re-establish the binary gender system that my own approach seeks to disrupt.

intended Lamia to be read as a transsexual (the allegorical reading I pursue below), but this does not mean that the development of a language around transsexuality and transgender forms of life cannot illuminate the stakes of Keats's poem, casting it into a new light, and making possible the articulation of a reading that had previously been accessible only intuitively or pre-consciously, in the realm of primary-process thinking.⁹² So while the poem more obviously raises the problem of living in the world as opposed to a self-contained realm of illusion, and seems unable to decide whether to engage in social traffic (figured in the poem as "Corinth talk" and public marriage) or to retreat to the negative (as I've been putting it) of masturbatory evanescence, I think this more conventional thematic can be transformed by reading the poem in light of recent gender theory. And at the same time, I think it's possible to show how dominant twentieth-century models for understanding Romantic poetics in general, and this Romantic poem in particular, can be taken to prefigure certain elements of trans* discourse that have emerged today: that lamp-like expression yields a higher truth, a more authentic truth, than mere mimesis, in terms of poetic creation and the project of creating the self. At the very least, it may be productive to think about the encounter of Romantic poetics and trans* discourse because both categories deal significantly with tensions between truth, mimesis, style, and a kind of expressionism based on spontaneity or the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. If trans* people are enjoined to play self-consciously with personal gender style within an expressivist paradigm, including decisions about dress,

⁹² Another productive concept for this kind of unarticulated understanding of the text is worked out in Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

movement, pronoun preferences, voice, bodily modification, etc., the project of self-presentation becomes another species of poesis. This comparison serves both to expose the long shadows of Romantic forms of life on contemporary life forms, and to explore pregnant analogies between a kind of gendered alienation in the early nineteenth century and another intersection of gender and alienation in the early twenty-first.

It is worth reviewing the events of the narrative here. Lamia's embodiment is immediately a matter of life and death: in serpent form, this creature's movement in the world is limited to magical dream space (illusion being her specialty, of course, as a lamia). After having visited the young scholar Lycius, of Corinth, as a disembodied spirit, and falling in love with him, whom Sperry claims virtually everyone agrees is a stand-in for Keats (298), she is left pining for the womanly form that she claims she had once had and lost.⁹³ Once Hermes comes to Crete in search of the nymph, Lamia reveals that she keeps the nymph hidden from all on the island but that, in exchange for a "sweet body fit for life" (1.39) she would trade sexual access to the nymph. Once the nymph is revealed and Lamia undergoes a twenty-five-line metamorphosis, she seeks out Lycius and seduces him, providing an illusory palace and furnishings, which they enjoy together in great happiness. When Lycius insists on a large public wedding and feast to display his good fortune to the people of Corinth, his mentor Apollonius arrives uninvited and

⁹³ Although this backstory remains a mystery, one mythological source suggests Hera had transformed her from a divine creature into a serpent as a kind of preemptive strike in the face of Zeus's lust for her. See Bernice Slote, *Keats and the Dramatic Principle*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958 (142-144) and Kathleen Gallagher, "The Art of Snake Handling: *Lamia*, *Elsie Venner*, and "Rappaccini's Daughter"" *Studies in American Fiction* 3.1 (1975) 51-64 (54).

uncovers Lamia's demonic identity. She screams, loses her human form, and vanishes; Lycius dies in his marriage robe, the poem closing on the image of the lifeless corpse.

Keats's primary source for the basic narrative is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a portion of which was printed as an endnote to the poem in the 1820 publication, although there are many deviations from this source throughout the poem, as well as telling additions.⁹⁴ In addition to Lycius's death at the close of Keats's version, another of the most significant includes the opening barter scene, in which Lamia and Hermes participate in an economy of desire by trading access to sex objects. Lamia effectively serves as a pimp for the nymph, and in exchange, indirectly receives sexual access to Lycius when Hermes transforms her into a woman. Mid-twentieth-century critics spinning allegorical readings of the poem have tended, somewhat curiously, to downplay this element of this narrative, but I find that these seventy lines offer a way to grasp the gender politics at play in *Lamia* most concretely.⁹⁵ The heroine occupies a typically masculine subject position from the start as she engages with Hermes in the traffic in women, only to inhabit a convincing feminine form, ultimately revealed not to

⁹⁴ Additional major sources include John Lemprière's *A Classical Dictionary* and Andrew Tooke's *The Pantheon* (Gigante 209).

⁹⁵ Earl Wasserman's claim that the poem is a "narrative failure" is grounded in his observation that the drama between Hermes and the nymph seems to evaporate from the poem as attention turns to the affair of Lamia and Lycius; for him the former is not integrated into the latter (158-159). This reading, however, depends on the reader's identification with Lycius, who cannot attain the perfect and eternal "dreamlike" love that Hermes can attain with the nymph, as Wasserman's reading concentrates on high idealism and the "translation to human terms" of a divine romance (162). Wasserman does declare in his chapter on *Lamia* that he is "forced to confess" not to fully understanding the significance of Lamia's origin, her metamorphosis, or why she holds power over the nymph (165). Not coincidentally, each of these elements may be taken to point to Lamia's gender ambiguity, which Wasserman does not remark.

be “real” on her wedding day. While others have focused on themes of science (“cold philosophy”) in opposition to beautiful (if immaterial) fantasy and delusion, even isolating the narrator’s lament that philosophy can “unweave a rainbow” (2, 237) as the *locus classicus* of an apparently Romantic resistance to science in general, my allegorical reading of this piece focuses on the negotiations of gender and sexuality the poem pursues.⁹⁶

This strategic reading of *Lamia* begins from the premise that it is a poem that more or less self-consciously metabolizes an early-nineteenth-century conception of vitality and the question of its representation and organization, that it is a poem very much involved in the Romantic project of thinking through the identity of life itself. This concept of life itself is intimately related, in turn, to the poem’s subliminal tensions surrounding sexual difference and gender performance (even echoing certain biographical anxieties on Keats’s part, insofar as the poem satirizes poetic creation and professional success, which Keats habitually casts in terms of gender), to such a degree that its expression of particular desires can be taken to prefigure twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorizations of transsexuality and transgender subjectivity grappling with the problem of sexual difference. To make this comparison is to continue the project of bringing Keats and his strategies for figuring alienation to bear on a genre that likewise thinks through the real insufficiency and limitations of material bodies, as well as the

⁹⁶ M.H. Abrams discusses *Lamia* at length in just these terms in the final chapter of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, on “Science and Poetry in Romantic Criticism.” For an example of a general-interest title that makes use of this tradition, see Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

social structures (in this case, the gender system) that can make them so excruciating to live. This reading emphasizes the materiality of the body as a Romantic problem that the tradition of Romantic ideology, in turn, sought to minimize, ignore, or downplay, in favor of framing the period as one absorbed with the problem of consciousness, and with immaterial or spiritual concerns. To fully appreciate the implications of this line of argument, it is crucial to bear in mind the ways in which the Romantic ideology should be taken as an artifact of the Cold War era at least as much as it is taken as a characterization of a particular period in literary and cultural history; it is, hence, not an “accurate” description, or at least not an adequate one, of the poetic objects it seeks to capture and account for.

While I think this manner of reading Keats in comparison with certain elements of trans* discourse may potentially yield some insights about these forms of life and their evolution—to ask, for instance, why transsexuality seems to emerge as a discursive formation only relatively recently, and becomes, together with transgender theory, ever more prominent with the intensification of an information economy, in opposition to the Romantic era that serves as the other bookend of Western industrial capital—it is also essential to examine the ways the traditional Romantic ideology can itself be read together with certain aspects of contemporary trans* discourse that seeks to transcend the sexually differentiated body in the name of the expression of life, a kind of voluntarism linked to the will of the expressive subject. “Expression” is key to both paradigms I discuss here: poetry and gender. It is no simple coincidence, in short, that the rise of a highly ideological species of Romantic scholarship emerged around the same time as this

modern form of life. This is certainly not to argue a direct causal relationship between strategies for reading the Big Six in the post-war period and the actual emergence of transsexual identity, but rather to suggest that the two phenomena are effects of the same network of larger and more fundamental social forces, and that each may be viewed productively through the prism of the other. Furthermore, I would like to suggest that this network of social forces that regulates the relationship between these two other terms is deeply bound to a modern conception of life itself, a conception subject to radical, even violent, transformation between the early nineteenth century and our own time.

As my own reading of Keats should make clear, the image of the heroic poet constructed in the post-war period and to which Keats scholarship had been deeply ideologically, and even sentimentally, devoted for several decades is not adequate. Out of vogue as it may be by now in most academic quarters, however, this tradition of Romantic ideology continues to have effects on the way the broader culture thinks the body, and life itself, in an era of highly technologized medical care and ever-more sophisticated life sciences; one site where this influence is most legible is in the discourse of transsexuality and trans* formations. In this way, post-war Romantic criticism in general, and Keats criticism in particular, can be used as a cipher to read both large-scale shifts in attitudes toward the body and sexual difference (and hence a growing neo-vitalism that has been intensifying in recent decades) as well as access to a “life” that escapes the bounds of normal science. So while I do not wish to reduce *Lamia* to the terms set by the Cold War paradigm that had been so powerful in explaining Romantic literature in a particular way, it is worth examining both sets of relationships: Keats and

Lamia, as a particular object, in comparison and tension with trans* discourse, as well as the relationship of the Romantic ideology of the 1950s with the emergence of the figure of the transsexual on the cultural scene.⁹⁷

It may seem perverse to invoke one of Keats's narrative works to make a more wide-reaching argument about his poetic priorities in relation to a Romantic paradigm that, as conventional wisdom has it, strongly privileges the odal hymn over narrative forms, all the more so in turning to a narrative romance instead of ostensibly grander ways to tell a story, such as epic, history, or tragedy. This poem's heroic couplets might also seem like a throwback to the neoclassicism that Romantic poetics were meant to break from, according to textbook accounts such as that of Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Especially from the perspective of mid-to-late twentieth-century criticism, *Lamia* is considered second-rate to the widely celebrated odes and the perfection of style that they have come to represent, but this relative minority status within the corpus leaves space for more inventive readings than would be possible with the odes.⁹⁸ The poem's problematic status, including the traditional gendering of its genre in opposition to more masculine epics, tragedies, and comedies, and the fact that the reputation for perversity

⁹⁷ For example, Christine Jorgensen's famous sex reassignment surgery made the front page of the *New York Daily News* on December 1, 1952. ("Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty")

⁹⁸ For an example of this type of approach, see Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1985. Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory* is the most thorough interrogation to date of the reasons for the late twentieth century's commitment to Keats's particular place in the canon. There she makes the following comments on Vendler's book and formalist method by way of explaining why she doesn't consider the odes in her own project: "Vendler gives us something to read, and more important, something to read against. Indeed, her book is so firm in its persuasions, so pure and exhaustive in its execution of them – so heavenly, in short – that it practically writes its own Bible of Hell" (33).

Keats earned with reviewers in his own time was attributed above all to his romances and not the odes, make this an appropriate object for examination: the fault lines and anxieties surrounding gender ambiguity and the crisis of sexual difference are closer to the surface here.⁹⁹

Indeed, this poem works through a full-fledged crisis of gender allegorically, which is more fundamentally a crisis of alienation in a variety of guises (including anxieties over poetic creation and professional achievement), and if it seems too hasty to label any of the principals “transsexual” in any direct or literal way, at least enough ambiguity inheres in the work to warrant the name of “gender outlaw” for both Lamia and Lycius.¹⁰⁰ Most readers have traditionally not thought of Lamia’s crisis in the poem as a problem of gender performance, for at the level of the narration she is a monster seeking to become a human, but it is important to bear in mind that she is also a monster seeking to become a woman.¹⁰¹ Keats embellishes the account given in Burton (which in

⁹⁹ A similar trend obtains in the discourse of the novel, such that by the close of the nineteenth century a clear hierarchy had emerged between serious philosophical novels and romance novels. See Gaye Tuchman, *Edging Women Out—Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change*. New York: Routledge, 2012 [1989].

¹⁰⁰ See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

¹⁰¹ The theme of sexual in-betweenness or ambiguity does not exclude the critical commonplace Sperry draws attention to by arguing that this poem “strongly reflects Keats’s love for Fanny Brawne” and that “the combination of apprehensiveness and fascination with which he found himself drawn to her is powerfully mirrored in his treatment of the central relationships” (300). And although critics have tended to read the relationship between Lamia and Lycius analogically to the relationship between Fanny Brawne and Keats, these direct identifications miss the complications of shifting allegiances and identifications central to the poem’s drama. I concur, however, with Sperry’s assertion that the poetic and sexual themes cannot be separated in *Lamia*; and as is usually the case with Keats, “the various levels of thematic significance do not run counter to but illuminate and reinforce each other” (300).

turn comes from Philostratus's *de Vita Apollonii*) most floridly in the first part of the poem, in the encounter of Lamia and Hermes; in Burton, there is no hint that Lamia depends upon some other agent in order to appear to Lycius as "a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman." She simply does so. And while a certain degree of gender ambiguity is present in the source material, which would place Lamia in a long line of mythological femmes fatales, in Keats's hands she becomes a creature of another order.

This ambiguity is even marked immediately following the famous description of her serpent form early in the first part of the poem: "She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self" (1.55-56). It is important to take this all "at once" seriously, and to remark the use of the conjunction in these lines: a "lady elf" (and) either a "demon's mistress" (feminine) or the "demon's self" (masculine). This snake contains multitudes, seems lacking nothing, indeed is not subject to sexual difference (both lady and serpent, demon and/or demon's mistress) and hence, not subject to castration, and enjoys unlimited powers of the imagination that I referred to as "masturbatory" above.¹⁰² The initial description of Lamia's serpent form is cast in

¹⁰² The signification of the masturbatory moves in a number of directions here: as discussed above, Keats represents, according to Byron at least, the "onanism of poetry," which lends a certain meaning to this poem that is in many ways about writing poetry. In this "pre-transition" part of the poem, Lamia ironically seems to already occupy an ideal situation beyond lack, which, as a psychoanalytic reading of a kind of transsexual desire suggests, seems to function as an identification with a place *horsese* (as will be interrogated more fully below). In this sense, Lamia as serpent has already achieved the subject-position of unalienated wholeness. And yet in order to obtain her transformation—think of Hermes as surgeon who can grant sexual reassignment surgery, touching her with his caduceus, so close to the Staff of Aesculapius as to be frequently confused with it—she has to offer up a "real" woman (the nymph) and also make a convincing case history for herself: ah, miserable me, I was a woman once, and lack a sweet body fit for life. To keep her story straight, Lamia in this form is not allowed to

richly image-laden language but is almost impossible to visualize: she has spots of vermillion; she is golden, green, and blue; she has crimson bars; she has zebra stripes, leopard spots (freckles), and peacock eyes; she is covered in silver moons that sparkle and grow or shrink and seem to move “as she breathed” (1.51), indicating a sublime vitality that overflows its boundaries of familiar form and into monstrosity. As Denise Gigante has argued, this overflow of imagery indicates Lamia’s excessive vitality that becomes a principle of monstrosity, a Keatsian figure for “too much life.”¹⁰³ It should go without saying that I resist the chain of signifiers linking transsexuality too easily to monstrosity in a derogatory way, but it is nevertheless essential to stop and think about the association of life with plenitude and a place beyond sex, as figured romantically in

acknowledge any enjoyment of her serpent self. As it happens, Sandy Stone comments on a parallel trend in twentieth-century transsexuals: “Into the 1980s there was not a single preoperative male-to-female transsexual for whom data was available who experienced [admitted to experiencing] genital sexual pleasure” (292). To be eligible for surgery, penile pleasure was not allowed; likewise, as Stone goes on to describe, not a single post-op male-to-female transsexual admitted to sexual pleasure through masturbation, either, as anything other than heterosexual penetration might be taken to cast doubt on the authenticity of the new gender identity. In the accounts of males seeking SRS into the 1980s that Stone reviews, dealing with the penis is a difficult matter: “‘Wringing the turkey’s neck,’ the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery, was the most secret of secret traditions. To acknowledge so natural a desire would be to risk ‘crash landing’; that is, ‘role inappropriateness’ leading to disqualification” (292). It may indeed appear implausible, or frivolous, to compare a Romantic monster’s pining to a Greek god for a female form with that of real-life twentieth-century transsexuals’ negotiations with a medical system that can provide or withhold the surgery they so adamantly want. But what is interesting here is the way the former prefigures the latter in terms of narrative and the structuration of desire; as far as this comparison is concerned, it doesn’t matter that transsexuals have a good reason (saying what needs to be said to get approved for surgery) for representing their desires and experiences of gender identity in a “plausible” way. Masturbation seems to have been likewise central to mid-twentieth-century understandings of transsexuality; according to David Cauldwell (1949), “The transsexuals [sic] are, however, transsexuals [sic] by affectation only. Evidently they are all, in their sexual activities, purely autosexual” (279-280).

¹⁰³ Gigante, *Life*. See chapter 5.

the early nineteenth century, because trans* fantasies might also be taken to refer to this kind of plenitude: a place beyond sexual difference.

The poem's preoccupation with gender performance, with passing, at a fundamental level—"passing" being the essential imperative of transsexuality as understood from the post-war period through the early 1990s to erase oneself, to "fade into the 'normal' population as soon as possible," according to Sandy Stone, who distinguishes this from a new form of life in the "posttranssexual" who mounts an "effective and representational counterdiscourse" that is not beholden to the binary oppositions of normative gender (295)—reinforces and redoubles Levinson's reading of this poem as the apex of Keats's social striving, to pass as an educated and properly high bourgeois (or aristocratic) man of letters: if Keats uses this work to allegorize (and satirize) his failures to pass in this way, this entire domain of analysis cannot be disentangled from the crisis of gender that works alongside it and gives it form. In this way, Lamia's imperative to "pass" as a woman seems to suggest an identification between the title character and the poet, along with more customary identifications of Keats with Lycius. Keats's own anxieties about his failures as a man are given voice in *Lamia*. It is possible to read *Lamia* in such a way as to quilt these domains together with the poem affording us a fantasy space and an opportunity to think through the feeling of alienation (figured though gender) that demands "passing" as a man, as a woman, as a successful writer. Hence it is this essential aspect of transsexual subjectivity that seems so well reflected in *Lamia*, making the poem and the phenomenon intelligible each in light of the other.

Taken as a poem about the crisis of sexual difference as it relates to a Romantic vitality, *Lamia* features something like an almost benevolent demon who seeks only a body that matches her idealized form of life—truer, perhaps, than her “real” form, this predicament matches the too-easy twentieth-century framework for understanding transsexuality as a matter of living in the “wrong body” that can thus be corrected through hormonal therapy and plastic surgery—and then matches this search for an idealized form of life with that of Lycius (in this aspect, a stand-in for Keats) whose hopes hang on possessing a “real” woman, but who instead ultimately finds a snake.¹⁰⁴

The twenty-five-year-old scholar Lycius has his own problems of proper gender performance in the world, as the poem indicates: on the one hand, Lamia first sees him in a dream “Charioting foremost in the envious race, / Like a young Jove with calm uneager face, / And fell into a swooning love of him” (1.217-219), which seems to make him the very picture of masculinity, but on the other hand, the proximity in the poem of Jove to Hermes, who has just left the scene, points to one of Keats’s own ambiguous meditations

¹⁰⁴ Sandy Stone’s critique of this conception of transsexuality as a matter of living in the “wrong body,” which she calls “a posttranssexual manifesto,” is widely recognized as a founding gesture of an alternative paradigm that does not ontologize this phenomenon in terms of a simple male/female binary. Stone cites Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, New York: Julian Press, 1966, as the foundational text resulting in the intransigence (so to speak) of the “wrong body” paradigm. That book grew out of an article Benjamin had published, “Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes,” *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 8, 1954, 219-230. An earlier paper Stone also cites is a play on Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s famous title, D.O. Cauldwell, “Psychopathia transexualis,” *Sexology* 16: 274-280, 1949; this paper has proven much less influential than Benjamin’s work, perhaps because its subject is a female-to-male trans person, and most research through at least the 1990s focused on male-to-female trans people. I refer to all of this *scientia sexualis* in the domain of transsexuality to emphasize the post-war chronology in research into the phenomenon and its close coincidence with the rise of the Romantic ideology in American literary criticism of the period. (See Stone 295-299, 302n35.)

on sex and sexuality, in which he ironically associates Jove with a higher, feminine power in contrast to the “buzzing” masculinity of Mercury.¹⁰⁵ This is the second appearance of Jove’s name in the poem, following an opposition sewn into the verse between him and Hermes early on when the latter had “stolen light, / On this side of Jove’s clouds, to escape the sight / Of his great summoner” (1.9-11) in his pursuit of the nymph; it will appear twice more in the poem, and both instances occur in the next ten lines in reference to Lycius, who had just been on Aegina “To sacrifice to Jove, whose temple there / Waits with high marble doors for blood and incense rare. / Jove heard his vows, and better’d his desire” (1.227-229). This betterment of Lycius’s desire on Jove’s part is wonderfully ambiguous, and coming from Jove, who has us “open[ing] our leaves like a flower and be[ing] passive and receptive,” ironic: Lycius may at once seek a stronger (a better) desire as an escape from castration anxiety, a solution for literal or figurative impotence, in this temple with rock-hard “high marble doors” awaiting the flow of blood, or more conventionally perhaps, he may seek a tempered desire, less

¹⁰⁵ One famous letter, often cited in feminist scholarship on Keats, is addressed to J.H. Reynolds and dated 19 February 1818. In it, Keats claims “It has been an old Comparison for our urging on—the Bee hive—however it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee—for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving—no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits—The f[l]ower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee—its leaves blush deeper in the next spring—and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? Now it is more noble to sit like Jove that [sic] to fly like Mercury—let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive—budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from eve[r]y noble insect that favors us with a visit—sap will be given us for Meat and dew for drink...” (1.232). In *Lamia*, the consummation of Hermes and the nymph matches this language very closely (1.134-145), perhaps allowing for an association of Lycius with the nymph. See Homans (342-345), Wolfson (328-329), Mellor (177-178).

adolescent and more adult, connected to the noble marriage he seeks and the trappings of professional accomplishment and virile adulthood that would come with it (the pedagogical theme will be introduced more explicitly with the vexed figure of Apollonius). Insofar as many critics agree that *Lamia* reflects Keats's courting of Fanny Brawne, and his own habits, especially in his letters, of identifying with women, undercutting his own masculine sexuality and prowess, and then responding with some denigrating remarks about women (especially literary women, "Bluestockings"), these lines arrange a series of themes that mutually enforce one another and describe the fundamental state of alienation that inheres in the crisis of sexual difference that this poem addresses, and that some forms of twentieth-century transsexual desire ultimately seek to evade: poiesis, production, traffic in the world, better'd desire, and profound anxiety are all knit together here and cast into relation with Lamia as a conception of unalienated Romantic vitality, a power uncontainable in differentiated bodies.¹⁰⁶ The poem does not draw conclusions, but instead plays with a relationship between "life itself" as a vital power both scientific and fetishistic, lacking nothing, and the much more vexed and quotidian problem of making a living in the world as it is; the crisis of sexual difference, in turn, bridges these two domains together.

Lycius's sacrifice to Jove and Jove's answer to him in the form of better'd desire sets in motion the chain reaction of the rest of the poem and his eventual undoing; this is

¹⁰⁶ Keats's habit of mulling over his own masculine inadequacy and then reacting violently against women and reestablishing his virility, sometimes all in the same breath, has received a great deal of critical attention already. See Homans, "Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats" and Mellor "Part III: Ideological Cross-Dressing: John Keats/ Emily Brontë" (especially 180-186).

named the “freakful chance” (1.230) that pulls Lycius away from his companions so that he walks home from Cenchreas alone, “Perhaps grown wearied of their Corinth talk” (1.232), which gives Lamia the opportunity to seduce him. “Corinth talk,” given Corinth’s reputation for prostitution and commerce, may imply something like a classical or early-nineteenth century variety of rowdy, adolescent locker-room talk or its more adult analogue (talking business). In any case, Lycius retreats from this activity, separating himself from the mercurial buzzing of the rest of the boys, which seems to place him under the sign of a nobly passive Jove, a passivity he will generally maintain until he insists on a public wedding to Lamia. In sum, the poem’s introduction of Lycius points to his ambiguity and ambivalence in the realm of sex and gender, and this becomes all the more powerful when taken in light of Keats’s own habitual strategies for figuring sexual inadequacy and then over-compensating for it, for constantly waffling on the topic of phallic desire: to shift registers to poetic production, an example of this over-compensation is what Marjorie Levinson finds constitutive of his poetic style overall.¹⁰⁷ Less important than Keats’s ultimate position on matters of gender (whether he sides with or identifies with women and a kind of redemptive passivity) is the poem’s manner of productively suspending itself over the matter of sexual differentiation generally and its relationship to vital force.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ This is why the chapter on *Lamia* is a climax, so to speak, of Levinson’s argument in *Keats’s Life of Allegory*.

¹⁰⁸ Reading this poem in the light of writing on transsexuality helps to emphasize this particular element, which had been somewhat occluded in the feminist scholarship. For instance, in conversation with Margaret Homans’s pair of contributions on whether or not to consider Keats a champion of women (the first largely a positive answer, the second largely a negative one), Anne Mellor suggests we consider Keats an “ideological cross-

As many critics have suggested, Lycius may well function as a bitterly satirical version of Keats, himself; thinking along these lines, it is key that a sacrifice to the quasi-feminine Jove results in his seduction by the demon, even as he clearly believes himself to be the one doing the seducing after engaging in fifteen lines of intensive “adoration” (1.256-271) of Lamia, which the “cruel lady” (1.290) follows with an empty threat to bid him a final adieu.¹⁰⁹ Above all, the deadly and perhaps unintentionally cruel aspect of Lamia’s use of illusion and manipulation is to allow Lycius to believe in his own success, his own potency and virility, and in his arrival at adulthood, for this semblance of mastery is precisely what he means to celebrate with a large wedding feast. And while most commentators assume that Lycius dies of grief at the close of the poem, once

dresser” in that he managed to “embrace all or parts of feminine Romanticism” with the caveat that “[t]here are some senses in which a male could not enter a feminine ideology” (171). To distinguish the complicated movements between the masculine Big Six and the “feminine” Romanticism that has only achieved a kind of shadow-canonical status, Mellor goes on to assert that “certain Romantic writers,” including John Keats and Emily Brontë in particular, “might have been ideological transvestites but they were not transsexuals” (171). I agree that John Keats was neither a literal nor figurative transsexual, but nevertheless, the particular form of gender trouble his poetry works through makes for a productive comparison with a twentieth-century conception of transsexuality that helps eclipse the binary character of Mellor’s framework of contrasting “masculine” and “feminine” Romanticisms.

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps a bit prescient on Keats’s part to kill him at the close of the poem, Lycius’s age is given as twenty-five years in Burton, the age at which Keats, himself, dies of tuberculosis. This coincidence has probably intensified tendencies in the criticism to identify Lycius with Keats; criticism of his poetic corpus is very tightly knit together with his biography in general, the circumstances of his early death being a point of strong interest among nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentators. (Burton’s Lycius, however, survives the ordeal.) Two major works by other poets writing about Keats’s demise, P.B. Shelley’s *Adonais* (in which Keats is eulogized as a delicate and fragile, flower-like genius) and Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, Canto XI (which propagates the notion that Keats was a weakling who died of grief at having received such negative critical reception, “snuff’d out by an article”) have contributed significantly to his feminization in conjunction with the early death. For a more thorough discussion of this critical history, see Wolfson (1990), especially 321-325.

Apollonius, his “trusty guide” and “good instructor” (1.375, 376), solves the “knotty problem” (2.160) of Lamia’s provenance causing her to shriek and disappear, it is more accurate to say he is literally mortified, humiliated to death when he is publicly revealed not to have been a skillful seducer, but to have been seduced. The quick reversal of his masculine parade is made even more stinging when his teacher (of all people) steps in to rescue him: not only has he failed in this seduction of a woman, but he has nearly become the prey of a demonic (read: masculine) being, having allowed himself to be manipulated and having utterly failed to successfully pull off a virile gender performance. The tone of Apollonius’s lines really lend themselves to this reading: “‘Fool! Fool!’ repeated he, while his eyes still / Relented not, nor mov’d; ‘from every ill / Of life have I preserv’d thee to this day, / And shall I see thee made a serpent’s prey?’” (2.295-298). And while Lamia’s unmasking by Apollonius is surely more spectacular—the serpent passing as a woman confronts “the sophist’s eye” (2.299) which, “Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly” (2.300), hence ironically receiving on her wedding day the “ruddy strife” she had asked for at the start of the poem—Lycius is likewise “read” here, failing to pass for the successful man he prayed to Jove to become, corrected and exposed by his teacher, rescued.

Rereading *Lamia* allegorically in light of the discourse around transsexuality, especially as it developed in the post-war period in close conjunction with highly sophisticated surgical interventions, helps create a nineteenth-century pre-figuration of this chronologically later form of life. In a rather striking way, the poem mulls over the imperative to “pass” and the anxiety this induces, with lessons to be drawn for both those

anatomically “unreal” (the serpent passing for a woman) and those who, like Lycius and all of the rest of us, constantly try to “pass” in a gender that nevertheless appears to us to be “natural.” Lamia and Lycius are paired in this poem to demonstrate a fundamental contingency in the constitution in the subject: the example of Lamia is more obvious, but nevertheless exposes the parallel phenomenon in Lycius. The poem does not articulate an argument about a distinction of gender and sex, obviously, but it does focus on some of the consequences for subjectivities unmoored from secure sexual identities. And while in an earlier critical idiom it might have sufficed to reduce Lycius’s crisis in the poem to castration anxiety, to turn to transsexual identification and all that comes with that discourse as it was dominantly constituted until the early 1990s (passing, creating a plausible personal history, living with resistance to being read, etc.) opens the poem up to a set of fixations and anxieties that had not been legible in the same way before.¹¹⁰ This manner of reading a poem from the Romantic era qualifies the otherwise valuable and at least partially plausible account of transsexuality’s emergence in conjunction with medical technologies making surgical sex change possible, as Bernice Hausman has argued along Foucauldian lines.¹¹¹ While it is vital to maintain careful historical

¹¹⁰ See Judith Shapiro, “Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, Eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, New York: Routledge, 1991, 248-279, and especially the section on “Passing,” 255-260, for a good description of a political debate surrounding transsexuality and its intersection with the larger gender system as conceived in the early 1990s.

¹¹¹ See Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Hausman argues that the transsexual phenomenon does more than simply reveal the functioning of the gender system: it actually produced the concept of gender in the West. While she considers the “transhistorical” desire of living as the other sex in myth and history, she distinguishes

distinctions in drawing these comparisons—Lamia is not literally a 1950s transsexual, even if thinking through the analogy is productive—the important point I’d like to make is that Romantic poetic discourse has served to color, inform, and give shape to the order of desires and identifications associated with a much later transsexual subjectivity. This is what I mean by “pre-figuration”: Romantic vitalism resonates across the gap of more than a century with the neo-vitalism that begins to proliferate in the post-war era, stamping the second-order phenomena that emerge there in particular ways.

Passing is one feature of transsexuality that transgender theory in the twenty-first century generally seeks to displace, most obviously because to pass successfully in terms of a strict gender binary seems to imply an accession to the terms of that binary structure: hence transsexuals who pull it off seem not to challenge normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity, but rather even to reinforce them.¹¹² Hence the proliferation in recent years of new gender categories that ostensibly challenge the terms of the binary

this desire from the specific form of life that emerges when SRS becomes available in the mid-twentieth century: the medical discourse is so tightly interwoven with the figure of the transsexual toward the end of the twentieth century that it is impossible to consider transsexuality in isolation from the practices surrounding SRS. In the two decades since the publication of Hausman’s book, new directions in trans* theory and activism have sought precisely to move the phenomenon away from the terms set by the medical discourse.

¹¹² See Judith Shapiro for a very useful discussion and review of these assumptions in the social science literature on transsexuality through the 1980s. Two telling quotations seem to capture the tenor of objections to transsexuality as a kind of missed opportunity. Thomas Kando puts it this way: “[T]ranssexuals are reactionary, moving back toward the core-culture rather than away from it. They are the Uncle Toms of the sexual revolution” (qtd in Shapiro 255 [Kando 1973: 145]). And commenting on the disappointing politics of turning to hormones and plastic surgery to solve gender trouble, Dwight Billings and Thomas Urban claimed “the medical profession has indirectly tamed and transformed a potential wildcat strike at the gender factory” (qtd in Shapiro 255 [Billings and Urban 1982: 278]).

structure in a direct and straightforward way, such as “gender queer” and “gender fluid,” and the list goes on. Whether or not this strategy of intervening by directly challenging a conception of the norm at the level of the imaginary proves ultimately effective is an open question. And while there are major distinctions between the discourse of transsexuality of the mid-to-late-twentieth century and the trans* discourse of today, there are important continuities as well. One of these intersects with *Lamia* and Romantic poetics (as conceived in the mid-twentieth century) more broadly, namely, expressionism as distinguished from mimesis, as an appeal to a more authentic truth that may be at odds with physical embodiment or anatomy. The current expressivist paradigm of gender inherits some of its form, structure, and assumptions from the expressivist paradigm of Romantic poetics, bearing out another example of Romantic influence on post-Romantic forms of life.

By working through this poem, this period, its ideology, and its status as a fetish for certain twentieth-century literary historians and other ideologues, it becomes possible to think about Romantic life (a hidden term in this equation) in a way that prefigures our own neo-vitalist moment, and especially the conceptualization of the body, its parts, and their liveliness or vitality. Although sexual reassignment surgery and hormone therapy are only two kinds of body modification that are often associated with trans* identities and lifestyles, and as critical consensus insists ever more loudly, together represent only a relatively minor aspect of gender transitioning and trans* life, an array of medical and ethical questions surround these practices in our era. And as improbable as it may seem, to view the Romantic period and the post-war period as bookends representing the

beginning and the beginning of the end of industrial capital helps set out a temporal nugget to establish, negotiate, refine, and amplify doctrines of life and vitality that remain considerably entrenched today, whether we view the effects in highly technologized medical care, sexual reassignment, gender performativity, or in any other domain.

Before attending to the possible relationships between these larger discursive systems of Romantic poetics and trans*, it is worth continuing with the poem more locally, to focus on the ways it signals Lamia's ambiguousness in terms of gender and sexuality by obsessing over matters of embodiment and vitality. What is finally at stake in Lamia's metamorphosis from a serpent with a woman's mouth to a full woman's form, and how does this playfulness along the lines of gender and sexuality resonate with Keats's interest in matters of "life itself"?¹¹³ Another way to frame this question: How does *Lamia* negotiate a relationship between vitality or life itself, physical bodies, and sexual difference? What dreams of transcendence inhere in Lamia's project of escaping her "wreathed tomb" (1.38) by moving from an effectively masculine subject position to that of a feminine one?

¹¹³ As Paul de Man has observed, Keats's later work (from his composition of *Endymion*, beginning in April 1817, until the end of his life) involves the subject of mythical metamorphosis, and the attendant problem of transitioning between various forms of being, with "striking prominence" (34-35). As he explains, "From *Endymion* on, the movement of mythical metamorphosis, practically absent from the early poems, achieves striking prominence that will maintain itself to the end; the very narrative pattern of *Endymion*, of *Lamia* and, in a more hidden way, of *Hyperion* and the Odes, is based on a series of transformations from one order of being into another" (34). This focus on metamorphosis may be taken to allegorize both poesis and life itself. See also Bruce Clarke, *Allegories of Writing: The Subject of Metamorphosis*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1995. As we shall see, the subject of metamorphosis, when viewed in a particular light, bleeds over into the realm of the monstrously vital, the body in flux that cannot be neatly contained and accounted for, or as Keats puts it, conquered "by rule and line" (2.235).

To begin to answer these questions, it is essential to remember that by revealing the nymph to Hermes in exchange for her new body, Lamia enters the trade in flesh, and thereby participates in an economy of desire, or to borrow a term from Gayle Rubin, the “traffic in women,” which consequentially further feminizes Lycius, who occupies a symbolic position similar to that of the nymph. This element of the narrative is not in Burton; Keats devises it on his own, and recalling Stuart Sperry’s assessment, it had traditionally been taken as little more than a “curtain raiser” (294). But to read it in terms of the way it knits together gender politics and vitality helps inch us toward the poem’s fixations on sexual difference and mastery in the realm of gender. It is unclear how Lamia has come to protect the nymph; she claims that she took pity on her when she was relentlessly pursued by every manner of satyr and faun on the island and “bade her steep / Her hair in weird syrups, that would keep / Her loveliness invisible, yet free / To wander as she loves, in liberty” (1.106-109). This rather idyllic existence comes to an end once it is time for Lamia to cash in her hoard by turning the nymph over: the exchange involves the transfer of heat between Hermes and the nymph who, amidst “fearful sobs” (1.138) tries to shrink away, “But the God fostering her chilled hand, / She felt the warmth, her eyelids open’d bland” (1.140-141). Wasserman significantly downplays the tears and bland eyes and reads this rape as a representation of perfect, divine love, with the sadness of the poem being that it ultimately proves inaccessible to Lycius, as a mortal, largely on the basis of the lines that follow (the nymph blooms like a flower, echoing Keats’s remark in a letter cited above that we ought to “our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive” [1.232], and gives up “her honey to the lees” [1.143] before flying off with

Hermes). And while it is difficult to read mythological trysts represented in the early nineteenth century in the light of contemporary sexual politics, the poem does not seem inattentive to the darker elements of this exchange.

One way that it does so is through the appearance of the nymph's chilled hand and Hermes' warmth. As de Man notes, from the earliest poetry and throughout the corpus, Keats often invokes imagery of the interplay of hot and cold, often in the form of cool breezes that temper excessive heat; this he associates with an understanding in Keats's earlier work of the fundamental social function of poetry as a tempering and redeeming force that neutralizes hot tempers, restores the "natural balance of things," and crucially points prospectively and optimistically to a future happier than the mire of the present, the pain of which is, in turn, often signaled and characterized in the work through sharp conflicts of sensations, such as rapid alternations of extreme hot and cold (31-33). This notion of poetry and the symbolic function of the figure of the poet, who in his narrative capacity brings forth this kind of balance, appears to be aligned with a kind of homeostatic drive that easily slips into an analogy with life itself as a self-tempering, self-perpetuating, and self-adjusting force that reaches not toward transcendent access to something otherworldly, but rather toward harmony in social configurations very much of this world.¹¹⁴ The organicism implicit in this way of thinking so optimistically about

¹¹⁴ The problems inherent to this sentimental notion of poetry, and of life, become clearer as Keats moves away from the naiveté of his optimism in his later work, and translates a preoccupation with pain in his lived present into a poetry that squarely engages anxiety, in some fundamental forms: sexual difference and new or aberrant forms of life. I follow de Man's periodization of Keats's poetry, which identifies a major shift following his completion of the odes, and which begins in June 1819 (when he began composing *Lamia*) and stretches through the end of the calendar year to the worsening of the

economic relationships springs from much the same place as Keats's appeals to cool breezes tempering excessive heat. On the other hand, Lamia's excess of vitality clashes fundamentally with this cooler form of life: especially as she changes forms, her body becomes extremely hot and cold.

Her metamorphosis begins as soon as Hermes and the nymph exit the scene, and is marked with substantial heat in one of the most spectacular and most famous parts of the poem: in contrast to the nymph's "bland" eyelids, Lamia's "eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear, / Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear, / Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear" (1.150-152), which Denise Gigante takes as an indication of Keats's interest in the electricity that was thought to be associated with a vital concept of life itself.¹¹⁵ This is followed by an extended metaphor of flames, liquid fire, lava, and "volcanian yellow" (1.155) and the melting away of her snake form in

tuberculosis that kept him from writing and finally killed him in February 1821. The "late" Keats marks, for my purposes, the most intriguing part of the corpus, because it is in regard to this material that critical consensus becomes radically unstable—in de Man's words, critics have "difficulty agreeing on the significance" (41) of these poems, and *Lamia*, in particular, has "given rise to incompatible readings and to general puzzlement" (42).

¹¹⁵ See Gigante, 220-238. It is probably not coincidental that Keats makes reference to Lamia's eyes in this transformation, and does so in contrast with those of the nymph. As Gigante points out, both Coleridge and Keats were interested in lamiae, and both were familiar with Andrew Tooke's *The Pantheon* (1753), which describes lamiae as a group of monsters who had only one eye which they kept at home and shared among them as necessary; Gigante points out that, as beings "capable of putting on or taking off parts of their physical organization at will, the lamiae provide an inherent critique of life as merely organization" an element of the raging Lawrence and Abernethy debates about life that both Coleridge and Keats took an interest in (208-211). Hence *Lamia* begins to explore a vitalistic concept of life that could not be simply contained in organic forms, just as it explores a concept of sexual difference that cannot be satisfied by the terms of a simple binary. Coleridge also makes reference to the fable of the Lamiae in his *Theory of Life*.

twenty-five lines.¹¹⁶ Recall that Lamia as a serpent had been described as lacking nothing; in the process of becoming a woman, this plenitude is painfully stripped away, line by line, each aspect of her rainbow-like body is cashed in, or exchanged. She is “undressed / Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst, / And rubious-argent: of all these bereft, / Nothing but pain and ugliness were left” (1.161-164). Is this what it is to be thrown into gender, to enter the symbolic order by becoming aware of sexual difference? This is the only time in the poem that she is called ugly, and it raises significant questions as she moves from an undifferentiated heap that has been scraped of every identity; she moves from plenitude to a void in which nothing is comprehensible beyond pain and ugliness. Gigante refers to Slavoj Žižek to begin to make sense of this ugliness, reminding us that for him, ugliness is “an onotological category resulting from an eruption of the real, or the raw stuff of existence, from figurative containment” (230), in order to argue that Lamia as a Romantic monster serves primarily to allegorize a principle of excessive vitality along the lines explored by John Hunter, and taken up in the Lawrence and Abernethy debates.¹¹⁷ This might also be understood in the light of Lacanian theory about sex and gender: sexual difference occurs in the real, but insofar as

¹¹⁶ At the close of the poem, this use of temperature to figure Lamia’s undoing is repeated. After Apollonius first casts his eye on Lamia at the wedding: “Lycius then press’d her hand, with devout touch, / As pale it lay upon the rosy couch: / ‘Twas icy, and the cold ran through his veins; / Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains / Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart” (2.249-253). Note that the heat, rather than the cold, is marked as “unnatural” here.

¹¹⁷ Hermione de Almeida, “Romantic Evolution: Fresh Perfection and Ebbing Process in Keats,” was the first to highlight Keats’s involvement in debate over the Hunterian “principle of life”; the Lawrence/Abernethy debate was at its height while he was at Guy’s Hospital as a dresser. Gigante expands upon this research considerably in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism*.

the real is wholly negative (a hole itself), we can only comprehend gender through the other two orders, imaginary and symbolic. Prior to Lamia's fresh "gendering" as a woman, perhaps the poem leads us to consider through this "pain and ugliness" the incomprehensibility of this "raw stuff of existence." I find the argument that *Lamia* is steeped in early nineteenth century biology and its vexed conceptualizations of life compelling, and I would add that this understanding works together with the reading I've advanced about the heroine's ambiguity in terms of gender, in terms of her proto-transsexuality.

How precisely does the concept of Romantic life figure in this proto-transsexuality? Considering Catherine Millot's Lacanian analysis of the fantasies at play in transsexuality (as well as certain theorists who have taken up her reading more recently), transsexual identification (which may involve, from the twentieth century on, the transformation of the sexed body through hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery) is not always a matter of identification with the opposite sex.¹¹⁸ In many (but not all) cases, Millot suggests, the transsexual identifies with a place outside sex entirely—*horsese*, a Lacanian concept literally meaning "outsidesex"—which is a much more complicated matter than simply "feeling" oneself to have been born into the wrongly sexed body. This fantasy of eluding sexual difference entirely (and hence, retaining mastery, avoiding castration, having it all) can take the form in the imaginary as

¹¹⁸ See Catherine Millot, *Horsese: Essay on Transsexuality*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1990. Other theorists who take this concept up most fruitfully include Charles Shepherdson, "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex" in *Supposing the Subject*, Ed. Joan Copjec, New York: Verso, 1994 and Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, especially chapter two, "Transcending Gender," 61-93.

transsexual desire (especially as medical practices and personal narratives converged in the twentieth century to produce the category and allow for its proliferation) but it need not. In fact, in times and places where the discursive slot of the transsexual does not exist, this fantasy may be expressed in alternative imaginary forms. Here is where *Lamia*, and through it, the larger issue of Keats's place in the canon as well as our ideological investments in that figure, importantly including a long history of ambiguous gendering of both the poet and the poetry, become relevant, and even help give shape to a subjective form that would emerge only later.¹¹⁹

The poem resolves none of these tensions, in that it cannot come down decisively on the matter of Lamia's alienation; this is why *Lamia* remains such a riddle, unsatisfyingly lingering in seeming contradiction both in sympathy for Lamia and reassurance by the narrative resolution of a broken spell, the end of enchantment. It inspires sympathy for and fascination with the heroine, who seeks to transcend something like the "real" of sexual difference. At the same time, it thematizes the "imaginary" as such, calling into serious question both the terms of Lamia's transformation and the terms

¹¹⁹ What has proven to be a special challenge for those seeking to historicize homosexual experience in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, namely, the absence of a concept of sexuality that regulated thought about sexual behavior and instead the use of gender categories to comprehend this behavior and desire (e.g., the assumption that the desire of a man for a man be considered "feminine" – although this is further complicated by the perceived activity and passivity of sexual roles – and that the desire of a woman for a woman be considered "masculine") actually proves an advantage in thinking about the prehistory of the concept of transgenderism. Representations of confusion of the two genders may also screen what we might call homosexuality. It is perhaps ironic that transgenderism is at the vanguard of sex and gender politics today, but that this figure actually might have been more legible to eighteenth and nineteenth century readership than the more radical figure of the gay man or lesbian. It also points to the difficulty of the assertion some trans activists make that categories of gender have nothing to do with categories of sexuality.

by which we attempt to gauge the phenomenal world with scientific proof or cold philosophy. But there is still more at stake in *Lamia* besides a rich example of the drama of “passing” or attempting to pass that may be grafted onto histories of a subjective form. In keeping with the broader concern of this dissertation, the interrelationship of Romantic life and our own discourses of life, this poem provides an occasion to draw the discourses of Romantic life and vitality together to the transsexual fantasy of identification with *horsexe*, the imperative to pass associated with it and, in successfully passing, denying subjective division. And by reading this poem in light of trans* discourses that begin to flourish more than a century after its composition, it is possible to see how a certain understanding of life-affirming, expressivist Romantic poetics gives some shape to the ways we may think about the interrelationship of gender, life, and truth today.

On this basis I shall further explore the relationships between expressive poesis and the form of “passing” that may sit at the foundation of certain fantasies that produce transsexuality by first repeating the caveat that M.H. Abrams’s account of the sea change in Romantic poetics from mimesis to expression represents as much about the mid-twentieth century as it does about the early nineteenth. This is interesting insofar as we might claim a certain fantasy about the Romantic period which takes form as its canonical description in the mid-twentieth century (as is challenged as a “Romantic ideology,” notably, in the mid-1980s) is coincidental with a transformation in the discourse of transsexuality around the same time. Romantic, theoretical vitalism may well bear structural resemblance to the master fantasies bound up with transsexual identification. As such, if this kind of life informs contemporary social forms (the market,

notions of gender expression, the status of the body), it is worth thinking through the terms of wholeness and non-alienation it offers.

Tim Dean's discussion of Lacanian approaches to transsexuality is extremely helpful here, especially as he uses Lacan's concept of the real to demonstrate the limitations of Judith Butler's deconstructive approach to gender, with its emphasis on style and performativity, which, he argues, fundamentally "restricts vital political questions [about sex and gender] to the arena of ego identifications" (71), insofar as a rebellious personal style is thought to pose a political challenge to the problems that arise from sexual difference (hence her interest in drag, a phenomenon that she effectively puts on a continuum with transsexuality). While Butler is keen to demonstrate the ways dissonant gender performances reveal the mimicry, fiction, and denaturalized status of all identities—in the way that Lamia's dissonance, for instance, helps reveal the degree of work it takes Lycius to try and achieve his—Dean, with Millot and Lacan, insists on an absolute distinction between mimesis (provenance of the imaginary) and the unconscious identification with *horsexé* that transsexual identification (as well as, one might expect, other forms of trans* being) may imply.¹²⁰ He cites Butler's use of Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in American* as a symptom of the outsized role of mimesis and style in her theory, explaining that Newton's "functionalist anthropological paradigm" takes drag "as a cultural expression of the contradictions generated by the

¹²⁰ Dean puts it best: "There is something quite appropriate, indeed unremarkable, about a bunch of English professors arguing over transsexual phenomena, insofar as the central concept at stake is imitation—an aesthetic, philosophical, and social problematic that long antedates the more local aesthetic of realism. As an aesthetic problematic, imitation goes under the name *mimesis*, and connects to sociopolitical questions of gender identity via the politics of mimicry" (71).

social stigma of homosexuality” (72), meaning that should the underlying homophobia be eradicated, so theoretically would the symptom of various varieties of acting out (in this case, drag performance).¹²¹ In this way, Newton’s paradigm explains the organic emergence of various “deviant” behaviors in response to larger social forces.

Dean’s use of the Lacanian real to comprehend the ineradicable conflict born of sexual difference is one strategy to complicate the notion that gender politics ought to be framed simply as a problem of freedom of (gender) expression, as is so often the case in the United States with its elevation of the individual that may be considered “free” to “express” her or his gender in whatever style she or he (or ze or thon or per) deems appropriate.¹²² The danger of the paradigm of gender expression, then, which Dean suggests is too closely associated with Judith Butler’s emphasis on style, is that structural political struggles may be conceived at the level of the individual dissident. Furthermore, the language that has erupted around the paradigm of gender expression has served to reify the notion of “core gender identity” as a stable, naturalized and naturalizable phenomenon that preexists the social gender system (hence the medical hubris that “gender dysphoria” may be easily corrected through surgery when “core gender identity” fails to match anatomy, or chosen expression). This is of course not to suggest that trans*

¹²¹ I don’t mean to suggest any psychotic desire on Newton’s part to stomp drag performance out of the world. The key point for Dean is that “The psychoanalytic idea of an *ineradicable* conflict structuring subjectivity has no place in the functionalist framework—a distinction that will be important as we investigate the theory of gender performativity that grows out of Newton’s functionalism” (72).

¹²² A outgrowth of this way of thinking is the rise of new sets of pronouns and ways of referring to gender expression ever-more carefully, such as the relatively recent coinage of “cis-gender person” conceived largely as a strategy to de-stigmatize (or normalize) transgender people.

people should closet themselves or try to live up to the demands of gender roles normative for each anatomical sex, but rather, that psychoanalytic insights be used to comprehend the interrelation of sexual difference, alienation, and anxiety. And in fairness to Judith Butler, the concept of “performativity” is meant to undercut all essentialism, including that of the individual, but when it is confused with “performance,” the individual dissident once again takes center stage relative to the social forces into which we’re always already swept. Butler’s concentration on mimesis, according to Dean, fatally defangs the approach by focusing entirely on matters of representation in the imaginary register, to which her writings on the roles of drag and on mimicry testify.

And yet the paradigm of gender expression, which is uncomfortably close to the problem of essentialism, seems thoroughly entrenched in twenty-first-century American life; thus it demands additional interrogation. It is here that an unexpected turn toward the Romantic ideology, and Romantic poetics as conceived in the mid-twentieth century, can be useful. While Dean’s critique of Judith Butler’s approach to gender theory faulted her concentration on the use of mimesis (representation, mimicry), there is also something to be gained by thinking about the tension between mimetic and expressionist poetics, the organizing paradigm for understanding Romanticism according to Abrams, in relation to the gender system. By teasing out the relationships between the expressivist gender paradigm and expressionist poetics, and by demonstrating the genealogical relationship between these two traditions, we might better understand what is at stake for the subject of gender expression in comparison to the image of a Romantic poet. On the one hand, to conceive gender expression as a mode of writing the self is to preserve the agency of the

subject (by not dismissing an intervention as simple mimicry), and on the other, examining the gender expressivist paradigm in light of decades of critique of the Romantic ideology reveals the pitfalls of an essentialism that focuses on the individual. Finally, we might begin to ask why the Romantic ideology (as a paradigm for comprehending late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century English poetry) emerged with such force in the immediate post-war period, at the same time as the modern concept of the transsexual and the discourse surrounding transsexuality, and what these two traditions might have to do with a reconfiguration of a concept of life in the post-war period.

Not only is it fruitful to read Romantic literary production and criticism, especially as represented in its highly idealistic form so important to the American academy in the immediate post-war period, alongside the developing discourse of transsexuality in the mid-twentieth century, as well as trans* discourse more broadly in the twenty-first century, but I think it is possible to consider an argument that goes even further than that: the highly ideological representation of Romanticism most dominant in the early to mid-twentieth century provides a specific foundation for the construction of a kind of trans* subjectivity that has emerged in recent decades, a paradigm largely based on the elective expression of gender, and a model especially popular among trans* activist groups seeking to buttress the individual subject as an agent empowered to choose strategically a particular gender expression. One might say that a packet of concepts has somehow “traveled” from Romantic poetics to the fertile ground of gender style. In short, the terms of an expressive poetics along with its celebration of the

individual are transposed onto an expression of gender that aims at a higher truth than can be captured by the fact of sexual differentiation; the subject performing or expressing a gender becomes in this paradigm something like an artist, at work on the project of the self. Or to put this dynamic in Wordsworthian terms, to achieve authentic gender expression, by electing an appropriate gender style, is a kind of “spontaneous overflow” of feeling, aimed at a higher truth or deeper authenticity than anatomical sex. The trans* subject must walk the same line as Wordsworth did between deliberate and careful composition on the basis of nature (mimesis) and the truth of expressive spontaneity. This is how the figure of the Romantic poet becomes central to the paradigm of gender expression: each subject is conceptualized as an artist at work making an expression that matches an inner identity or core concept of the self, capable of being represented only in glimpses. Scholars of the period and theorists of gender have been slow to recognize the potential of this comparison; and indeed, this had until recently also been the case with studies of Romantic sexuality—and in particular, dissident sexualities—although some recent work seeks to address this former blind spot.¹²³ This has as much to do with the way Romanticism was periodized in the mid-twentieth century as it has to do with Romantic texts, themselves: for instance, Keats’s own working concept of subjectivity does not seem to involve a stable core that seeks expression.

¹²³ See, for example, a special issue of *Romanticism on the Net*, “Romanticism and Sexuality,” edited by Richard Sha, 2001, and a special issue of *Romantic Circles*, “Historicizing Romantic Sexuality,” edited by Richard Sha, 2006. Gender theorists usually critique this tendency in terms of identity (pointing to the ways Judith Butler’s critique of identity in *Gender Trouble* has been miscarried or misapplied when performance is celebrated in place of performativity). Yet a focus on deconstructing identity by means of performative language occludes the particularly expressivist, or traditionally Romantic, elements of this paradigm.

According to the dominant paradigm for understanding the multitude of ways a gender may be performed in twenty-first-century America, gender expression goes hand-in-hand with another concept, that of gender identity. Gender expressionism aims at the external (and, as Dean notes, is based on representation, imagery, and mimicry: clothing, dress, manner of speaking, manner of moving, etc.)¹²⁴ Gender identity, on the other hand, is often taken to be a core element of personhood, an internal essence that demands a kind of expression. This can be taken as an analogy for the claims Abrams makes for expressivist poetics, along the lines of the so-called lamp, rather than the mirror: “a work of art is essentially the internal made external, resulting from a creative process operating under the impulse of feeling, and embodying the combined product of the poet’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings” (22). To cast this in Butlerian language, what Abrams describes in terms of expression, when conceived in the register of gender, is performance (*not performativity*) as a kind of artwork, a strategic externalization of an internal identity. Romantic aesthetics as conceived in the mid-twentieth century program the self-fashioning that can be mobilized in plotting out a deliberate and strategic gender expression.

Scholars of Romanticism working in a traditional mode have generally neglected the appearance of dissident gender performances in the period, with the exception of incipient feminist discourses; yet the binary structure for conceiving sex and gender in

¹²⁴ In an earlier moment, sex object choice might have been included in this list, but the relationship of gender expression and sexuality has become vexed and complicated in recent decades. For a discussion of homophobia in the transsexual community of the 1980s, and its relationship to the traditional definition of transsexuality in relation to homosexuality and transvestism, see Judith Shapiro, “Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex,” especially 248-252.

the early nineteenth century is largely unchallenged. The reasons for this neglect are several, but one of the most important involves a kind of inertia in the field that has diverted attention away from the body (as a concept and as an object of study) and from the life sciences developing in the period in favor of more refined, humanist, and spiritual concerns. The historicist tradition (new or otherwise) that is currently so pronounced in English-language scholarship of Romanticism privileges studies more narrowly confined to a specific timespan, and because discourses of transgenderism and the conceptually related but distinct category of intersex (as such), are absent from the British Romantic period as it is usually conceived, literary scholars look elsewhere for opportunities to historicize modern discourses of sex and gender: usually to the Victorian period, where the dominance of a *scientia sexualis*, as Foucault would put it, is much more obvious.¹²⁵

Furthermore, it's certainly no longer in vogue to concentrate on the development of expressivist poetics as a straightforward way to characterize the priorities that make the Romantic period distinct in European literary history, following both formalist and historicist challenges to this representation that began mushrooming throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. And I have no desire to reverse the literary critical tendencies of the last several decades, which have, generally speaking, helpfully moved British Romantic criticism away from its traditional ideological commitments. But just because professional literary critics have largely turned away from characterizing the Romantic period with a straightforwardly expressive theory of poetry does not mean this powerful

¹²⁵ See Richard Sha's introduction to "Historicizing Romantic Sexuality" for a very useful account of these tendencies. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, New York: Vintage, 1990, especially 51-73.

formation does not continue to have important ideological effects both within the literary field (e.g., popular reading habits and patterns) and in other domains (e.g., celebrations of authentic selfhood brought to bear on self-conscious gender expression). So instead of setting aside the expressivist paradigm as reactionary to Enlightenment discourse, apolitical, potentially racist and nationalist, it is imperative to reassess its genealogy without, of course, suggesting that it adequately or fundamentally describes the texts produced in what is normally considered as the British Romantic period; my reading of *Lamia* is meant to focus the poem's preoccupations with the expressivity and vitality without being strictly faithful to the way these had been conceptualized around 1820.

I find the single most important text dealing with a supposed paradigm shift from mimesis to expressionism in poetics to be, of course, M.H. Abrams's *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), a book written about the Romantic period at a time when its place in the literary canon in the United States had been diminished by the then-dominant New Critics, and focused on the rise of the poet as a guarantor of meaning at the center of aesthetic theory within Anglo-American criticism. The book implicitly challenged the basis of the New Critics' disparagement of Romantic discourse by arguing that properly Romantic priorities continue to shape contemporary literary criticism; to move away from mimesis was to break with Aristotle and the neo-Aristotelians dominant in the American academy around the mid-century. If the central argument of the book appears much less radical these days, it is in large measure because the dominance of both the Southern New Critics and the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians feels so distant from the activity of academic literary criticism in the early twenty-first century. Abrams maps out the

parallel developments of this trend in England and Germany of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (and to a much lesser degree, France, through Germaine de Staël's—according to Abrams, sentimental and derivative—writings), focusing mainly on aesthetic theorists of the eighteenth century, and the rise of the lyric poem as a privileged form of this new aesthetic in England, and music in Germany. He uses the year 1800 and Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* as “convenient” means to “signalize the displacement of the mimetic and pragmatic by the expressive view of art in English criticism” (22), but also notes that theorists of the 1830s (including Thomas Carlyle, John Keble, and especially John Stuart Mill) proved much more radical than Wordsworth, himself, and became responsible for reinforcing the new dominance of expressivist poetics.

And even though Abrams argues forcefully for the distinct rise of an expressivist poetics in the Romantic period as a way to explain its privileging of poetry (especially the lyric) over prose, his genealogy relies heavily on much older trends in the history of Western thought, including the influence of Longinus on the sublime and Francis Bacon's remarks about poetry in *The Advancement of Learning*, as well as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates over the origin of language.¹²⁶ As I indicate more thoroughly in chapter two, deconstruction transformed Romanticism in the American academy, but this is not to say that the expressivist paradigm does not continue to perform ideological work, both in the academy, in the broader literary culture, and indeed in many other domains. Hence my purpose here in invoking Abrams's account of the

¹²⁶ See *The Mirror and the Lamp*, especially pp. 21-26, 70-99.

expressive theory of poetry is to account for its usefulness as a concept that has traveled to other domains: how does the expressivist paradigm in poetics inform the expressivist model of gender that has become so powerful, especially, in thinking through the emergence of transgendered subjectivity? The dangers of expressivist poetics (including, at an extreme, an idealism that gives way to xenophobic nationalism) have been well examined in the literary critical field. To establish a homology between this ideology and the gender expressivist paradigm is a method for exposing the limitations of gender expression as a conceptual form, in the hope of imaging new forms of trans* life that are not beholden to the limitations of this model, and the heroic subject at its center, which may depend in a hidden way on romantic notions of individualism, aestheticism, and authenticity that deserve to be complicated.

So I do indeed intend this comparison of expressivist poetics and the paradigm of gender expression as more than an analogy: both paradigms partake of a concept of the authentic, liberal individual (either the poet or the transgendered subject) striving for the freedom to express a fundamental or natural truth that has been occluded by either the workings of culture, discourse, artifice, or mistakes of nature (or biology). And generally speaking, both of these paradigms seem to aim at a more authentic kind of truth that can only be expressed (in form or performance) and not described (with straightforward content or constative speech). Because both paradigms depend so fundamentally on a concept of the individual seeking liberation from various constraints (be they political, social, or aesthetic), evaluating some of the ways they share ideologies of individualism is one way to approach this comparison.

For the liberal humanist Abrams, writing about lofty and rarified transitions in Western poetics, Mill, a thinker of classical liberalism and utilitarianism, emerges as the central, radical figure in the supposed transition from mimesis to expressionism in Romantic poetics (23-25). Abrams focuses on Mill's essays on poetry in the 1830s with particular interest, drawing critical attention to writings that had been neglected relative to other parts of his corpus dealing more directly with liberal subjectivity, discrimination on the basis of sex, and political economy. Mill may seem to be a rather unromantic figure to herald a new paradigm for poetics, as the traditional ideological formation of Romantic poetry stood vociferously opposed to the base world of political economy and, not least, the construct of *Homo economicus* or "economic man," for which Mill, himself, is in part responsible: an abstracted human whose motivations for economic life are to be gauged through four simple desires for accumulation, leisure, luxury, and procreation. It is almost an irony of literary history that one and the same man was made to serve as a "climax," as Abrams puts it, of the tendency of locating poetic value in the expression of the poet's pure feeling, as well as its seeming inverse, a concept of the human as a kind of economic automaton stripped almost entirely of feeling, which along with Mill's other writings on political economy, Abrams does not mention (88). Rather than challenging the traditional divisions that supposedly inhere between economic traffic and poetic feeling, Mill's essays on poetry bolster this cleavage, elevating interiority and individual feeling over external social traffic, and celebrating the poetic nature that he posits in highly idealistic terms.

So it is somewhat surprising that Abrams identifies Mill's early essays on poetry as the apex in the development of expressivist poetics in England. A thinker remembered most for his writings on classical liberalism and bourgeois political economy thus becomes the most "Romantic" of nineteenth century literary theorists with his publications on poetry, in which he strongly opposes science to poetry, that he developed after reading Wordsworth, which he credits with helping him recover from "a crisis in his mental history." The editor of a collection of Mill's essays on poetry assures his readers that Mill indeed had "a great deal of feeling and a quite poetic sensibility," going so far as to report on a dinner party with Bertrand Russell's parents, at which Mill read Shelley's *Ode to Liberty* aloud, became excited, writhed about, rocked back and forth, "nearly choking with emotion," whispering to himself: "it is almost too much for one" (viii).¹²⁷

Mill's reasoning about poetry and science is based on multiple sets of dualisms, and ultimately arrives at a poetic corollary of mysticism performed by so-called poetic souls: poetry as opposed to eloquence, inner feeling as opposed to external experience, the poetic nature as opposed to the poet of culture, Percy Shelley as opposed to Wordsworth. Abrams canonized Mill's writings on poetics in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, using his formulation as paradigmatic for the two major generations of British Romantic poets chronologically prior to Mill. Mill's desire to construct absolute barriers between

¹²⁷ And interestingly enough for the purposes of my investigation, Mill's biographers signal (in veiled language) his apparent and occasional gender deviance, as demonstrated through his overly poetic sensibility. This is perhaps related to his status as a "genius," which, as Andrew Elfenbein has demonstrated, is often related to effeminacy and the sublime (and even the specter of homosexuality) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Elfenbein's *Romantic Genius*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, especially 27-34.

science and poetry is an effect of his dualist method, and has resulted in Romantic poetry's reputation for a stringent opposition to the sciences, which many scholars have been at pains to challenge in the last several decades.¹²⁸ Mill's key concept is the "philosopher-poet," and by 1854, Mill asserts his final version of the poet's function: "The Artist is not the Seer: not he who can detect truth, but he who can clothe a given truth in the most expressive and impressive symbols."¹²⁹ This is certainly a more tempered image than that Mill constructs in the period 1826-1831, but nevertheless points to a concept of poiesis as style; we might take the use of the phrase "clothe a given truth" seriously here, in order to draw a comparison with drag as an exemplary gender expression in the expressivist paradigm.

Mill's first major essay on poetry, "What is Poetry?" was published in 1833, and then was republished with some lengthy deletions in *Dissertations and Discussions* in 1859, the same year he published *On Liberty*. He is at pains throughout the piece to delink the identity of poetry from mere metrical verse, which makes the essay clearly amenable to Abrams's project in *The Mirror and the Lamp*: Mill makes specific arguments for poetry as an expression of interiority as opposed to "mere imitation" (fueling the anti-Aristotelian argument Abrams was keen to make in the mid-1950s, when this perspective was much more dominant) in all signifying systems, words, images, and sounds, concluding with a long section on painting. Abrams's strategy, in turn, was to

¹²⁸ Denise Gigante puts in eloquently in relation to a reading of *Lamia*: "It would be critically misguided to assume that *Lamia*, ostensibly a narrative romance in heroic couplets, is outside the purview of the Romantic project of philosophical poetry or uninvolved in the same concerns as Romantic life science in its various branches from embryology to brain anatomy" (213).

¹²⁹ See Sharpless, *xvi*.

argue that this transition to “expressionism” in poetics matches modern expectations in literary culture around the mid-twentieth century much more adequately than the then-dominant critical paradigms could, a point he makes in the first paragraph of the preface, about “some criticism which professes to be anti-romantic” (v). Hence, as I seek to emphasize more thoroughly in chapter two, Abrams’s own use of the Romantics was more calculated than is usually acknowledged: he used them to make an intervention in the literary field of the period at the same time as he attempted to give an account of Romantic literary history.

Paul de Man actually echoes this sentiment when he declares in his introduction to a collection of Keats’s poetry in a tone that becomes all the more urgent, almost fiercely despairing, regarding the series of failures in literary culture to finally transcend Romanticism: “Nowadays, we are less than ever capable of philosophical generality rooted in genuine self-insight, while our sense of selfhood hardly ever rises above self-justification. Hence that our criticism of romanticism so often misses the mark: for the great romantics, consciousness of self was the first and necessary step toward moral judgment” (48). This is relatively early Paul de Man, prior to his own major theoretical turn in the late 1960s. Fifty years from these remarks, deep from the other side of the biopolitical turn, this note of despair continues to resonate, especially regarding the coincidence of self-justification and a sense of selfhood, which are linked together in a paradigm in the twenty-first century that demands the idiosyncratic but true “expression” of gender. If Keats had to use *Lamia* to work through, and work toward, a kind of self-insight that could not find expression in any other form, perhaps gender expression can

serve as an analogue of our own era for this imperative of self-insight. This, clearly, is an anxiety-inducing and unfree freedom. In either case, it has become urgently necessary to reassess the language of self-consciousness and self-insight so familiar to Romantic literary criticism and make them directly relevant to the question of the “life form” and indeed a concept of “life itself” for today.

Chapter Four

Romantic Life-Gifts and the Meaning of Blood

John Keats's "Anatomical and Physiological Note Book," which he kept while studying at Guy's Hospital in London and serving as a dresser in 1815-1816, contains his notes on twelve major lectures he attended there, the curriculum providing a foundation for the kind of medical work he would perform: opening arteries, assisting in amputations, setting bones.¹³⁰ Astley Cooper, the primary lecturer, was one of the best-known surgeons in England at the time Keats studied under him, and is thought to have intervened personally to have Keats appointed as a dresser at the hospital, a coveted position usually reserved for the best-qualified or best-connected students.¹³¹ Cooper lectured jointly with Henry Cline, Jr., a surgeon at Guy's whose father had helped train Cooper. Most of Keats's notes appear to hew closely to Cooper and Cline's lectures, although scholars and biographers invested in suggesting that Keats was a true poet ill-suited to medicine have often been quick to point out the frequent doodles of flowers in the margins, considered to be a tell that the dreamy artist lacked a properly scientific temperament. The second lecture recorded in Keats's notes, "On the Blood," is particularly interesting as a window onto the intersection of physiology and medical conceptions of "life itself" in early nineteenth-century medicine. Perhaps because of the

¹³⁰ The Holograph is held at the Keats Museum but a published transcription is available. See Maurice Buxton Forman, Ed. *John Keats's Anatomical and Physiological Note Book*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934. Notes from the lecture on the blood appear on pages 4-5.

¹³¹ For background on Keats's relationship with Cooper, see chapter fifteen of Druin Burch, *Digging up the Dead: Uncovering the Life and Times of an Extraordinary Surgeon*. London: Vintage, 2008. 194-205.

sheer force of the blood's rich symbolic association with life since antiquity, a tradition solidified through centuries of practice of medieval European medicine as guided by Galen's theory of the humors, many Romantic-era physiologists tended to reaffirm these associations while translating them to terms adequate to the experimental life sciences; John Hunter, the extremely influential Scottish surgeon who had also mentored Astley Cooper, wrote extensively about the life of the blood in the late eighteenth century, specifically as a strategy for working out an empirical explanation of a principle of life itself. As a result, blood tended to function as a material stand-in for life, often taken to express the principle of life itself, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Experimentation with blood and blood transfusion in the first quarter of the nineteenth century tends to involve inquiry about the nature of this living principle, and debates about Hunter's legacy and this living principle (or, alternatively, "vital principle" or "principle of life") raged throughout the medical community during the time of Keats's training.

The riddle that organizes these Romantic-era doctors' investigations into the blood centers around its capacity to clot: the fluid appears to be uniform, Keats notes, when it pours out of blood vessels, but if left to pool outside the body, will begin within ten minutes to separate into a serum, "a transparent fluid of saltish taste and greenish color" that will itself "coagulate at 160 degrees," and crassamentum, "the solid part that begins to form in about 4 minutes" that is composed of "*Fibrin* and *red Particles*." In 1815 it was only possible to measure the temperature of blood within a couple of degrees, hence according to Cooper it is supposed to be somewhere between 98 and 100 degrees;

he can only ascertain that the blood has the same heat in arteries as in veins by “introducing the bulb of a thermometer into the left ventricle and right auricle of a dog.” The relationships between the blood and heat are of special interest throughout the lecture, and Cooper walks through a series of experimental methods of heating the blood to test its properties, especially in an attempt to understand the mysteries of blood clotting, a puzzle of the blood’s vital activity. In fact, Hunter makes reference in his own work to the experimental freezing of eggs and blood, which theoretically robs them of the living principle, demonstrating that once frozen and thawed these organic materials will refreeze much more quickly than they had in the first place. He concludes that an intact “living principle” offers some degree of resistance to its destruction, and indeed one major element of the organic living principle for Hunter is self-preservation, especially preservation against putrefaction (107-109).¹³² To consider the macabre image of experimenting by heating and chilling vats of blood, in light of the fluid’s associations with life itself, raises some questions about particular images and turns of phrase in Keats’s poetic corpus. For instance, this intersection of his medical training and poetic production is interesting in light of Paul de Man’s observations about Keats’s habitual use of figures of heat and cold in connection with vitality and life itself throughout his poetry, as I briefly mentioned in chapter three.

However, my primary interest here is not in turning to Romantic physiology in general, and Keats’s medical training in particular, in order to illuminate the meaning of Keats’s poetry. That is largely the project of Hermione de Almeida in *Romantic Medicine*

¹³² John Hunter, *A Treatise on the Blood, Inflammation, and Gunshot Wounds*. Notes by James F. Palmer. Philadelphia: Haswell, Barrington, and Haswell, 1840 [1794].

and John Keats, an encyclopedic history of British medicine of the early nineteenth century and its intersections with Keats's poetry: in that book, the ultimate goal of better understanding the poems, themselves, by reading them in the context of Keats's medical training and practice, is an end in itself. Along these lines, de Almeida counts sixty-two uses of images of blood in Keats's poetry, all of them beholden to John Hunter's doctrine of the "life of blood," the basis of Cooper's lectures on the blood at Guy's.¹³³ Instead of further pursuing that line of inquiry, I am more interested in considering some of the ways the interrelated discourses of Romantic-era medicine and poetics together helped to perpetuate the image of blood as vitality or life itself that was officially abandoned in medicine by the mid-nineteenth century, and yet which continues to command rhetorical purchase in our own discourses of tissue exchange and, I would argue, whole organ transfer in the United States of the early twenty-first century. Although whole organs routinely move on the global black market, and also legally from living donors, I focus on cadaveric organ harvest in this chapter. One consequence is an incredibly capital-intensive system of transplant medicine that has been organized around the supply of priceless anatomical "gifts of life." It can be instructive to take this rhetoric seriously: why do organ procurement organizations rely on "the gift" and "life itself" in their efforts to secure organs for transplant? If rapid developments in technocratic biomedicine, accelerating in the mid-twentieth century, have brought anxieties about embodiment and the question of life itself front and center, reading these in light of the Romantic

¹³³ See Hermione de Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Especially relevant here is chapter 7, "Hunter and the Life of Blood" (pp. 87-97).

preoccupation with these issues might help us make sense of our own situation, which bears a structural resemblance. If the state of biotech today tempts us to think life in terms of radical mechanism, as Ian Hacking, for instance, suggests in “Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts,” Romantic ruminations on life, themselves nestled uncomfortably between the mechanistic and vitalist, might help us think of life as something more or different than this.¹³⁴

It is fitting to consider surgical organ transfer in conjunction with the enthusiasm for human body dissection in Romantic-era medical training: both Hunter and Cooper were surgeons and anatomists, and as such were part of a developing enthusiasm for careful empirical investigation of human bodies, and directed their students to dissect. As part of a cultural history of organ transplant, Leslie Fiedler points to some popular representations of transplantation in late twentieth-century fiction, which as he argues, gain some of their persuasive force from the nineteenth-century practices of grave robbing by so-called “resurrection men,” who often dug up bodies and sold them to medical schools for use in anatomy courses (60).¹³⁵ The semiotic function of the grave robber was tied to the practice of organ transplant quite early, Fiedler argues, in popular fiction, and associated almost always with exploitation (he points to Robert Silverberg’s “Caught in the Organ Draft,” and Larry Niven’s “The Patchwork Girl,” and “The Jigsaw Man”), either by “a dictatorial gerontocracy, eager to add to its other privileges that of

¹³⁴ Ian Hacking, “Our Neo-Cartesian Bodies in Parts.” *Critical Inquiry* 34.1 (2007): 78-105.

¹³⁵ See Leslie Fielder, “Why Organ Transplant Programs Do Not Succeed,” in *Organ Transplantation: Meanings and Realities*. Ed. Stuart Younger, et al. Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1996.

indefinitely prolonged life” or as a “stratagem of the very rich, who seduce the desperately impoverished into selling their own flesh” (59-60).

Fiedler also points to four popular novels of the nineteenth century, namely *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Island of Dr. Moreau*, to demonstrate how the topos of the grave robber functions together with an ill-advised quest for immortality (60-65) to maintain a curious hold over our imaginations. He makes special mention of how blood transfusion, as precursor to organ transplant, also belongs to this tradition of attempting to prolong life through the transfer of bodily fluids, and especially because of its significance in the vampire tradition, interestingly exemplifies a clash of the realms of modern science and ancient magic (62). In these ways the newest medical technologies may be discursively married to this traditional dark magic.

In addition to examining the longer-term effects of this association of the blood, body, or body part as a figure of life itself, as sometimes plays out in contemporary bioethical debates, I would also like to read some Romantic-era strategies for thinking the relationship between life and the gift in relation to the gift-giving model that currently undergirds whole organ exchange in the United States today. Whole organs legally can only be given and not sold in the U.S., and the rhetoric that has developed around this kind of organ transfer often invokes “the gift of life,” which, as the medical anthropologist Lesley Sharp explains, originated with blood collection programs developed during the Second World War, and is now likewise commonly applied to other domains, such as surrogacy (2007, 17). The anatomical gift model for cadaveric organ transfer is not without serious problems for donor families and organ recipients alike, in

large part because, typically, anonymity of the donors and recipients precludes the reciprocation of the so-called gift of life. The result for transplant patients, donors, and their families, is a discourse shot through with contradictions: the donor is at once “cadaveric” yet capable of gifting life and participating in an additional social act; the patient receives a spare body part that performs a mechanical function, and is generally discouraged from assigning symbolic value to it (and hence avoiding feelings of indebtedness to the donor, whose death made the organ available in the first place); but the donor family might be told evocatively to take comfort in the possibility that a loved one’s heart, for instance, continues to beat, and to cherish that final act of heroic altruism. I will examine these competing elements of the routine practice of transplant medicine in greater detail toward the end of this chapter. For now, let me simply suggest that the sentimentality of the conception of anatomical gift-giving bears some resemblance to the sentimentality of some elements of a Romantic discourse of life, and that both discourses depend to a great degree on muddled relationships between the person and the body part, or in other words, on a crisis that arises from not knowing how to think the person in relation to the thing.

I think at least part of this confusion of not knowing, say, where or when the person ends and an otherwise dying kidney takes on new potentials and meanings is bound up with a long and frantic, one could almost say psychotic, tradition in the west of literally locating (human) life itself in the body or its elements, a tradition if not born with, at least accelerated by, the invention of the life sciences in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is why pro-life fundamentalists, for example, become

exorcised at the destruction of a clump of cells in the form of a dividing fertilized egg: the thinginess of the zygote has, for them, personhood that exceeds the thing. The simple assignation of life itself to biological matter (be it sacred or profane) is a dangerous game with real consequences: the histories of eugenics and sociobiology in the twentieth century are only two of the most obvious.

One might say Romantic-era physiologists, and poets, obsessed over the “living principle” as a strategy to work through the more fundamental problem of not knowing how to live up to the Kantian categorical imperative never to use persons as things, or as means to other ends, newly throws the body into question. The intersection of the supposed vitality of the blood with a theoretical “principle of life” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries indicates a problem of thinking embodiment in the Romantic period: is life itself to be considered immanent to living bodies, or might it be taken as something immaterial and soul-like, superadded to the physical body, and perhaps functioning in an analogical relationship to electricity? John Hunter had died in 1793, but the battle over his legacy would come to a fever pitch in London’s medical community in the form of the debates on life between William Lawrence and John Abernethy—Lawrence being a former student of Abernethy, and physician to P.B. Shelley, and Abernethy being another student of Hunter—over the period 1814-1819. Medical debates over the status of life in relation to the body in the Romantic period in Britain were quite heated, and by no means limited to the professionals. Elsewhere in Europe the tensions over the medical understanding of life found curious expression, in the form of riots: for instance, two days of rioting involving upwards of four hundred

people had broken out in Göttingen in 1802 over the medical teachings of John Brown, another Scottish physician, whose system of Brunonian medicine regarded all disease as a result of deficiencies or surpluses of stimulation or excitement, or varying amounts of life mapped across the body.¹³⁶

Along with this refocused interest in the properties of blood as a living, if relatively formless, substance in the wake of Hunter's work, came new experimentation with blood transfusion at Guy's Hospital in 1818 by James Blundell, an obstetrician well acquainted with blood loss in his patients. European doctors had experimented with transfusion in the seventeenth century not to treat blood loss, but rather to try to change the temperament of a human patient by introducing the qualities of some other beast: one famous example being the 1667 transfusion of a madman, probably syphilitic, Antoine Mauroy, with calf's blood in Paris by Jean-Baptiste Denis, physician to Louis XIV. The thinking ran that Mauroy's feverish insanity might be tempered through the addition of the fresh blood of a gentle and tranquil calf. Mauroy somehow survived the transfusion, but the experimental treatment began a heated debate in France and England over this kind of tinkering with blood, resulting in a papal ban in 1679.¹³⁷ This fantasy of changing the nature of a person's life or nature through the addition of some countervailing vital substance reappears with the advent of whole organ transfer in the second half of the twentieth century and is amply recorded in the medical ethnography done with organ

¹³⁶ For a discussion of Brunonian medicine on the continent, see the first chapter of James Robert Allard, *Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet's Body*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2007. 21-42.

¹³⁷ See Douglas Starr, *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998. Especially relevant here is "Part One: Blood Magic," pp 3-50.

recipients and donor families, as I will discuss below. By the early nineteenth century, Blundell was experimenting with a variety of transfusions across different species, eventually concluding that successful transfusions be restricted to members of the same species; human blood transfusions would have only inconsistent success in the nineteenth century, however, because blood typing would not be discovered until the start of the twentieth.

It is nevertheless significant that this renewed interest in transfusion appears in the historical record amidst the ferocious debates over the “living principle” and John Hunter’s legacy. This was likewise a time of speculation about animal magnetism and the relationship of life to electricity, and though we might be distracted by the ultimate medical success of blood transfusion in the twentieth century, Blundell’s experimentation was of a piece with these more fanciful figures for thinking life. The language of his published accounts of his experimentation betrays a sense of amazement at the power of draining and then replacing the blood of a dog as a means to step across the barrier between life and death, and then cross back over: “the animal seemed rather to awake from sleep, than arise from apparent death” (58), he writes, highlighting his surprise at the suddenness of the animal’s recovery.¹³⁸ Moved to a poetic register, the transfer of life, in the form of blood, blood magic, and haunting or what de Almeida calls “an unnatural transfusion of blood between living and dead” (91) occurs most prominently in Keats’s short and threatening poem, “This living hand, now warm and capable” which, “if it were cold / And in the icy silence of the tomb” promises in direct address to the reader “to

¹³⁸ See James Blundell, “Experiments on the Transfusion of Blood by the Syringe,” *Medico-Chirurgical Transactions*, vol 9, 1818: 56-92.

haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights” so that “thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood, / So in my veins red life might stream again.” This poem, which so hauntingly knits together blood, life, and writing, and in its zero-sum way fantasizes a kind of writerly power bordering on the vampiric, was probably composed late in 1819. By this point Blundell’s experimentation with his system of syringes as a technology for performing human-to-human transfusion had been underway at Guy’s, while Keats had left the hospital and his medical career behind. Both projects, however, participate in working through the period’s fascination with locating physical emblems for life itself or locating or manipulating a material living principle.

And as I’ve already suggested, the most useful prism for bringing nineteenth-century medicine to bear on our own crises of bodily fragmentation and renewed panic about the nature of life, and the neo-Cartesian image of the body that has come to new prominence in light of whole organ transplantation, is probably the years of debate between Lawrence and Abernethy in London, 1814-1819. This polarizing debate has received ample attention elsewhere, and there is no need for me to rehash it in detail here.¹³⁹ Let me simply remark that the ongoing debate between the two men over the “living principle” came to imply much more than mere disagreement over the nature of Hunter’s conception of life and future directions of physiological research among the medical establishment of London: Lawrence’s materialist approach to the problem of life was taken to bear a genealogical relationship to the French medical semiotics of the late

¹³⁹ For a clear and succinct discussion, see de Almeida (1991) 98-110. For a more comprehensive account, see Owsei Temkin, “Basic Science, Medicine, and the Romantic Era,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 37 (1963): 97-129.

eighteenth century, and thus to revolutionary politics, and to a world of bodies that ought to be subjected to the disciplinary, rational logic of the later nineteenth century. And as de Almeida puts it, a crisis in the community is brought on by Lawrence's more youthful enthusiasm in a period of "rapid specialization of the sciences and the seeming omnipotence of the empirical method" (102), and hubris born of reducing life to the biochemical and mechanical interactions of bits of matter. Abernethy, on the other hand, is usually taken to represent the more vitalist, Romantic impulse to understand life as something more than this, by appealing to analogies with electricity and magnetism to conceive of life as power, locatable perhaps in some mysterious electric fluid or other superadded something in the body. The shape of the debate in its broad contours implies a transition in conceptualizing embodiment in the early nineteenth century, and one whose echoes remain audible today.

Because Hunter's writings on the living principle ostensibly occasioned the extended Lawrence and Abernethy debates, it is worth considering some of his actual text in greater detail. James Allard claims that Hunter's argument that the blood is alive, his foray into the theory of a "vital principle," was in fact "never as widely influential as his works in anatomy and surgery, and his claim for the blood's vitality was, for the most part, made in an effort to further his claims concerning the 'perfect harmony' of the material body" (27). This claim of "perfect harmony" comes close to the physiological principle of sympathy so prominent in comparative anatomy of the early nineteenth century, and it is in fact easy to hear this in some of Hunter's remarks about the blood's relationship with the organic "solids" of the body: "an animal," he says, "is not perfect

without the blood” because “life...is preserved by the compound” of the liquid and the solids (113). Circulation and motion, Hunter claims, preserves the life of the blood, which would otherwise lose its own life in supporting the solid parts of the body. His insistence on thinking of the blood as “moving in a circle,” which he repeats three times in one paragraph, seems to resonate with ancient notions of celestial motion, and indeed the “perfect harmony” Allard privileges. Hunter occasionally seems to take this motion as an index of life in its larger sense: “not only is the blood alive in itself,” he says, but also “seems to carry life everywhere” (113). Nevertheless, life itself cannot be equated with this motion: life is, instead, “that which arises out of, or in consequence of, the motion” (113). This is an important distinction, and an attempt to give a physiological foundation to a Romantic conception of harmonious sympathy; the “complete body” is made up of three parts: body, blood, and motion, the “latter preserving the living union between the other two, or the life in both” (113). While the various body parts, the organs and the blood, can be considered alive—the proof of which is that a “residual and independent vitality seems to reside in both for a limited space after they are separated from each other” (113)—the vitalist character of Hunter’s model is the emergence of life itself from the larger, circular, dynamic interaction of the entire system. For even if this “residual and independent vitality” of either body parts or blood can be preserved in limited forms and for limited amounts of time, when the motion ends, both the body and the blood die “perhaps pretty nearly in equal times” (113).

So even though Allard wishes to downplay the direct influence of Hunter’s writings on the vital principle and vitality of the blood in the period, this model of the

body nevertheless functions, at the very least, as a correlative to Romantic-period thinking about harmony and circulation throughout the arts and in the larger social body. Traces of this habit of thought remain lodged in thinking the gift, and I will address this more thoroughly below. For the moment, it is important to emphasize the significance of Hunter's writings on these topics, if not (as Allard suggests) on contemporaneous medical research, at least on the literary critics and historians seeking to make sense of the intersection of the incipient life sciences with aesthetic form of the early nineteenth century. Indeed, many twentieth-century Romantic literary critics invoking Hunter's position on the "living principle" of the blood focus on its distinction from the criterion of organization, often turning to this rather categorical passage, or to similar declarations appearing elsewhere in his published writings: "I shall endeavor to show, that organization and life do not depend in the least on each other; organization may arise out of living parts, and produce action; but that life never can arise out of, or depend on, organization" (107). From this point of view, life, itself, is not beholden to predictable forms, and may find expression even in unpredictable organizations (that *may* arise out of living parts), but this organization is always secondary to the vital power that precedes it.

This is an important remark in light of Lawrence and the other young medical mechanists' priority to equate life exclusively with organization in the name of preserving Hunter's legacy. Hunter declares time and again, however, that life cannot be based on organization, and that we need a living principle in order to make this conceptual leap: not having it, he says, would be "like dissecting a dead body without having any reference to the living, or even knowing it ever had been alive" (105). Blood

becomes the fascinating figure *par excellence* of this kind of life because of the way it flows, moves around, and shape-shifts, not to mention its ancient associations with vitality since antiquity; its capacity to clot, and hence to take on other forms of dynamic organization at different times outside of the body, indicates a kind of agential power of biological matter that may give rise to solid organization. These features make the blood an appropriate figure, but even these—movement, clotting, etc.—are not by Hunter's definition intrinsic to life, which has more to do with "some power" or, more specifically, "the power of preservation" (107). As Hunter emphasizes again and again, the largest difficulty in arriving at this conception of the living principle and the blood is in "its being fluid, the mind not being accustomed to the idea of a living fluid" (106). In order to think the blood as vital "requires a new bend to the mind" (107) because of our habitual connection of life with solids, with organic bodies.

Beyond stretching the concept of the living principle so that it is "not wholly confined to animals, or animal substances endowed with visible organization and spontaneous motion" (107), and applying it to substances less commonly thought, themselves, to be alive, Hunter leaves a provocative opening in his writings for the vitalist theorization about life in relation to electricity and magnetism that would preoccupy Romantic physiologists in the generation following his death. This is the view perhaps most notably championed by John Abernethy. Hunter indicates some interest in the relationship between electricity and the blood, and more importantly between electricity and life, when he provides some observations and experimental results surrounding irregular blood clotting, already taken to be associated with the life of the

blood: “in many modes of destroying life the blood is deprived of its power of coagulation, as happens in sudden death produced by many kinds of fits, by anger, electricity, or lightning; or by a blow on the stomach, &c. In these cases we find the blood, after death, not only in as fluid a state as in the living vessels, but it does not even coagulate when taken out of them” (42-43). This provocative set of associations almost authorizes the kind of analogous thinking in physiology that would be continued through the first half of the nineteenth century—electricity and magnetism with apoplectic attacks and nervous fits, or passion with life itself—with the blood functioning as an index, or physical remainder, or a way of tracing the workings of the living principle in living bodies.

What is important to note is the provocative vagueness of Hunter’s formulations: life is somehow in the blood, and spread by the blood, and the blood appears to *express* a “living principle” without *being* life itself, which instead emerges from the dynamic circulation of this fluid in relation to bodily “solids.” Hunter’s writings tend to emphasize empirical research, recording the results of experimentation, while leaving theoretical issues less determined; this is part of the reason why his authority could be invoked on either side of the debates between theoretical vitalism and mechanistic biology that would ensue in the generation following his death.

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of the period’s various crises over life and embodiment to the ways scholars of Romanticism have interpreted the Romantic and post-Romantic legacy in the decidedly unromantic world of the later nineteenth century and beyond. Gigante ends her book *Life*, for instance, with a provocative question about a

Romantic understanding of the sense of tragedy that comes with a ruthlessly materialistic or mechanistic conception of life and bodies. This crisis is all the more acute in our own time, and that is why the Romantic moment can serve as such an appropriate presage for our own problems of life and neo-vitalist fantasies. “Perhaps,” Gigante suggests, “the great tragedy for the Romantics was not the reduction of the human being to a mechanism of heavy limbs, a body stripped of the living principle like Newton’s rainbow deprived of its poetry” (245)—or in other words, the body, and life, reduced to mechanical parts, that can even be used as spare parts in other bodies, or that can be reduced to their physicochemical foundation—and that “the real source of despair” was instead “the fact that to imagine life as anything *more*—more than given forms and organizations, biological or cultural—was to risk becoming monstrous in the eyes of a calculating world” (246). Gigante seems to share this sense of tragedy with her Romantic subjects, but this outlook on late capitalism does not exactly amount to nostalgia. Nevertheless, as the sciences fragment and become increasingly specialized, and as scientizing and quantifying engines imperialize more and more fields, the space for a kind of imagination of life as something that exceeds discourse shrinks away. And with this, the mechanistic young Lawrence becomes something of a boogeyman, who eviscerates life in the name of a superficial kind of truth, not because of his insistence on restraining biology to materialism, but because of the hubris of it: his successors declare it madness to think any other way, or to imagine life to mean more than what it appears to be. The horror that comes with the emergence of the life sciences in this era seems also to be their promise, namely, demystification. This even as Gigante provocatively suggests

that twenty-first century life sciences, especially stem-cell research, “keeps alive the public fascination with epigenesis and the biological power of regeneration” that had organized Romantic debates about life (246).

Part of the seeming intractability of this problem is a recurring tendency in thought to collapse distinctions between biological life and life otherwise conceived, in excess of the biological organism. Or to recast this in terms of persons and things: for those who desire ethics based on clear rules, one simple way around the problem of the disjunction of person and thing is to conceive of a person as the sum of its body parts. This is why most Romantic ideologues, in parsing the debates about the nature of life between Abernethy and Lawrence, have sided with Abernethy and superadded life forces, electrical sparks, and mystery, against the allegedly mechanistic Lawrence who would seek, to invoke Keats once again, to “[c]onquer all mysteries by rule and line” (*Lamia* 2.235). De Almeida, for instance, puts it this way: “The attitude of mind revealed in the radical mechanistic philosophy voiced by Lawrence was, as Coleridge and Abernethy correctly saw, dangerous to the quest for knowledge and injurious to human society” (103). What appears most offensive about Lawrence’s atheistic and materialist approach to the new life sciences from this point of view again appears to be its hubris: how dare life itself be reduced to a series of interconnected mechanisms? (There is more than an echo, here, of the passion unleashed in the scholarly community over de Manian deconstruction, linguistic materialism and the mechanical workings of language in the 1970s and 1980s.) That a physiologist would so arrogantly try to claim the legacy of the famous John Hunter to this godless purpose infuriated Coleridge, for one, whose writings

on the principle of life (“An Essay on Scrofula” and *Theory of Life*) were composed in the heat of the debate.¹⁴⁰

Writing at a moment in his life when he is most enthusiastic about the philosophy of the German *Naturphilosophen*, Coleridge ravages Lawrence in *Theory of Life* while writing in ostensible support of Abernethy, but actually twists some of Abernethy’s arguments so that he can come into agreement with him: most notably, Coleridge insists on understanding the relationships between organic life and what he calls the highest inorganic powers (magnetism, electricity, and galvanism) through analogy, whereas Abernethy really does seem to simply equate life with electricity in his own work. Contra Lawrence and the materialists, in working out his own “living principle,” Coleridge aims at an altogether different order of “Life” than would pertain to the life of a thing: “By Life I everywhere mean the true Idea of Life, or that most general form under which Life manifests itself to us, which includes all its other forms” (517), he says in exasperation, and concludes his treatise with a distillation of his hypothesis, namely that “life in the human body” is drawn from three constituent forces (reproduction, irritability, and sensibility), and that “Life itself is neither of these separately, but the copula of all three” (557). Coleridge repeats this association of “Life” with a copula multiple times throughout the piece, which seems to serve the purpose of the designation of “Life” as that force or power that holds together, or undergirds, polarities of different orders: theses and antitheses, negative and positive poles of magnets, north and south, etc. That’s Life.

¹⁴⁰ Both essays are included in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Short Works and Fragments*. Volume 11.1. Ed. H.J. Jackson and J.R. de J. Jackson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Individual lives, or organic forms, body parts, eggs—where it is appropriate, according to Coleridge, to think of living things—can give a face to, or “*figure*” Life, but only through the working of a certain “negative principle” or “limitative power” that works in tension with the “positive or universal principle” of “Life, *as* Life” (557). The specificity of the living form, the face of life expressed in or as a living thing, involves the action of limitative power, but the plenitude of the biosphere is nevertheless resonant with the larger, positive principle of life: hence Coleridge’s insistence on an ultimate “unity in multēity.” As a force or power, or act or process—Coleridge uses each of these terms variously to arrive at “Life”—“Life itself is not a *Thing*... pitiable as the prejudice will appear to the *forts esprits*” of medicine (557), as he refers to Lawrence and his allies in a final barb in the concluding paragraph of the essay.

The bitterly ironic tone Coleridge uses against Lawrence pervades *Theory of Life*, flashing especially brilliantly at some moments. Using Lawrence’s emphasis of life as organization against him, Coleridge bemoans the fact that “we cannot force any man into an insight or intuitive possession of the true philosophy... we cannot organize for him an eye that can see, an ear that can listen to, or a heart that can feel, the harmonies of Nature” (525). Writing about “a man” made to represent Lawrence and his ilk, Coleridge tells us that the dry corpuscularian philosophy has “paralysed his imaginative powers,” which “have been *ossified* by the continual reaction assimilating influences of mere *objects*” (525): his “is the philosophy of Death, and only of a dead nature can it hold good” (530). Coleridge repeatedly interrupts his own argument throughout the piece to

sustain page after page of this kind of invective against reducing life to the status of a thing.

And so while materialist anatomists and physiologists of the period obsessed over the thingliness of life, so to speak, by attempting to locate a living principle in the body—by variously placing it in bodily fluids, drawing it out from dynamic circulation, or supposing it to arise from the organization of interconnected biological mechanisms—other Romantic writers seized on these formulations to pursue other ends, for instance thinking the transmission or exchange of life among discrete forms, biological or cultural, that would move in harmonious accord with the same natural laws. One especially privileged mode of vital exchange is that of the gift. Robert Mitchell's chapter on Coleridge's forays into the debates on life, "Life, Orientation, and Abandoned Experiments," is helpful to use in thinking through a Romantic paradigm for comprehending the intersection of life and the gift, and I would like to use it to orient my own discussion of Romantic life-gifts, before comparing the legacy of this concept to the seemingly very different scene of transplant medicine and anatomical gift-giving today.¹⁴¹ As we shall see below, whether we consider a gift of life to be more or less literal (to receive blood or an organ), or more or less figurative (to receive an "orientation" in the world, help in finding direction for living a life), the business of giving and receiving "life-gifts" is incredibly fraught. The matter of giving or accepting an anatomical gift, especially a major organ, activates complicated and passionate responses in recipients and donor families, in spite of many transplant surgeons' best

¹⁴¹ See Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science & Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. 74-103.

efforts to demystify the transaction and to strip the organs of their vital associations: a heart is just a pump, a kidney is just a filter. Yet the medical anthropology done in this area betrays the futility of appealing to mechanical surgical processes as an ultimate truth of transplant to quell the magical thinking attaching to strange parts in new bodies.

In his chapter, Mitchell uses the examples of Coleridge's authorial collaborations with William Wordsworth, in *Lyrical Ballads*, and James Gillman (a doctor Coleridge starting living with in 1816), in "An Essay on Scrofula" and *Theory of Life*, in order to construct a context and a reading of these works in light of recent science studies theorizations of experimental labor and experimental economies, in which collaboration with colleagues can be understood under the sign of the gift—and by virtue of this can also breed destructive resentments and rivalry. This is in keeping with the larger topic of Mitchell's book, namely, the development of a concept of "experimental life" in the Romantic period, a kind of vitalism rooted in scientific and artistic experimentation, which can be brought into productive comparison with the ways we think experimental work in twenty-first century laboratories. Mitchell uses Coleridge's collaboration with Wordsworth as an example of this dark underside of the free exchange of textual gifts: what had begun as an "experiment" for the two of them in 1798 of breaking with hierarchy, publishing anonymously, and spurring additional experimental writing in the medium of common language became an emblem of resentment for Coleridge when Wordsworth reissued the book in subsequent editions, appropriating Coleridge's ideas for the preface without attribution and also editing, moving, or entirely removing Coleridge's poems (83-86). Mitchell argues that the bitter rivalry that ultimately resulted from *Lyrical*

Ballads can be explained through the rhetorical complexities of Wordsworth and Coleridge's invocation of the scientific "experiment" in letters in the late eighteenth century: by mixing "aspects of sixteenth-century patronage science with eighteenth-century institutional science" (83) and their corollaries in the world of letters, which was understood by the late eighteenth century, Mitchell claims, "as having shifted from a patronage system to more purely market-based relationships" (85), the two writers moved into a new context of writerly gift giving without the benefit of a clear social framework for understanding mutual reciprocation, credit, and personal ownership in that sphere. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that part of the result of the experiment involved significant strain on their personal relationship. But as Mitchell goes on to argue, partially as a result of this experience with gifting and experimental literature, Coleridge entered into another experimental collaboration involving the exchange of gifts (including gifts of life), that provides a helpful constellation for thinking about life-gifts today.

So to briefly summarize the interesting biographical and textual history pertaining to both "An Essay on Scrofula" and *Theory of Life* that Mitchell provides, let me note that Coleridge had been devastated by his opium addiction by this point in his life, which left him largely unable to write, and in April 1816 he moved in with Dr. Gillman who offered him free lodging and helped him kick the habit: Mitchell comprehends this for Coleridge as a gift of life, or more specifically, as a gift of volition. Coleridge was so fundamentally unsettled by his addiction because he was conscious of having the will to stop using (the will being a fundamental element of his philosophical outlook), but lacked the power or volition to make the will effective. This was a crisis of embodiment for

Coleridge, who obviously couldn't have had a sophisticated biochemical understanding of addiction, and yet was stuck in thought with an impotent will lacking the vital power of volition and a cooperative body. Gillman helped him temper his use by reorienting him, Mitchell says, largely by "isolating the author from those disorienting and disabling forces—druggists, friends, and acquaintances willing to supply the author with opium—with which the poet had found himself unable to contend" (80). In Mitchell's telling, when Coleridge made strides, reduced his opium use and began writing again, he wanted to reciprocate the gift of volition to Gillman, and offered to write half of "An Essay on Scrofula," which was planned as an entry under Gillman's name in competition at the Royal College of Surgeons for the Jacksonian Prize. And thus another experiment in collective authorship. Although the essay was never ultimately submitted—largely because Coleridge decided that the inquiry required a section on the nature of life itself, and Gillman didn't have the time to account for this before appending his more practical sections on matters such as diagnosis and treatment—it developed for Coleridge into *Theory of Life*, the title by which it is now known by scholarly convention, but published posthumously as "Hints towards the Formation of a More Comprehensive Theory of Life" in 1848. In both pieces Coleridge writes from Gillman's position—that is, as a doctor addressing colleagues, and occasionally citing his own writings in the third person—because the writings were intended as gifts for Gillman to accept by presenting them as his own work, in the interest of his professional advancement. The two pieces constitute Coleridge's participation in the debate between Lawrence and Abernethy over Hunter's legacy in Romantic medicine, and given their content as well as the context of

their composition, knit together a series of other topoi relevant to thinking the so-called “living principle”: the life-saving gift of volition, or of bodily power, collective ownership and authorship, and experimental reconfigurations of vitality embedded in the social.

“An Essay on Scrofula” is the kernel out of which *Theory of Life* developed, but is interesting on its own terms because it leads Coleridge to consider some interrelationships between life, health, servitude and sovereign gifts. Coleridge wrote on scrofula because the Royal College of Surgeons had announced that the prize would be given that year to a dissertation on either scrofula or syphilis, and Gillman had had particular interest in treating scrofula. (The College ultimately received no entries on scrofula and did not make an award for work received on syphilis, either.¹⁴²) So while this object choice was constrained by external circumstances, Coleridge’s approach to writing about it touched on traditions of sovereignty, the gift, and the physiological concept of sympathy, still current in Romantic medicine, through which life itself operates to coordinate the various parts of an organism. Scrofula was something of a catch-all medical term in the early nineteenth century for hard swellings, usually around the neck, armpits, or groin, and it had been traditionally attributed to the overproduction of phlegm in the tradition of Galen. As such, it is a disfiguring disease: the disruption of a harmonious constitution is written on the body and comprehensible in terms of form. In his historical overview of scrofula, he claims that, in England, we fear it is “an encreasing [sic] enemy of the human species” (457), and that its frequency has risen since the end of

¹⁴² *Calendar of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*. London: Taylor and Francis, July 12, 1888. 21.

the Roman empire and the “establishment of independent kingdoms” in the North, removed from the healthful climate of Greece and Italy, and that the primary victims have been “enslaved peasants” (461). Through this manner of organizing the problem, Coleridge constructs a holistic approach to comprehending this disfiguring disease: a difficult and unhealthy lifestyle, exacerbated by cold air and rain, weakens the flourishing of life, and the swellings function as the biological significations of this cramping of life. Scrofula becomes, in Coleridge’s telling, a “constitutional disease,” which means, he says, “a derangement of some one or all of the primary powers, in the harmony or balance of which the health of the human being consists” (478). With the context of Coleridge’s opium problem in mind, it is difficult not to hear in this his thinking about the life-destroying effects of laudanum; indeed, as Mitchell points out, Coleridge had once self-diagnosed scrofula in 1802, blaming it for his “indolence,” and only later coming to understand the effects of the drug on his constitution (86-87). Gillman was to write the section of the essay dealing with the actual treatment of scrofulous swellings, and that section was either never written or lost.

The most compelling aspect of the history of scrofula is, however, its centuries-long association with enslavement, sovereignty, and heavenly gifts—supernatural gifts that would be reoriented in Coleridge’s account to secular life-gifts. Scrofula had been known as the King’s Evil because it was thought that the touch of a royal would cure it, an “old tradition,” “universally received, that the Kings of England had been intrusted [sic] with this Supernatural Gift” (464). And furthermore, according to Coleridge’s recounting of the history of the disease in England, after the split of the Church of

England from Rome, “it was to be presumed, that as this precious Gift commences at the reception of the true faith, so with the abandonment of the true faith, it would take its departure” (464). The “experimentum crucis” awaited by papalists would come when the Queen attempted to touch for the disease and would find herself as a heretic deprived of the former power. Leaving aside the “King’s Evil” for “scrofula” implies then another kind of reorientation for the medical community. The tradition of a sovereign’s command of a supernatural gift of cure is displaced by gifts freely given among members of a professional society.

A Romantic power of life finds expression in material bodies (both living and nonliving: for Coleridge, importantly, there is no essential difference), physical organization, interpersonal relationships, and social formations. Life itself thus becomes one face of that quintessentially Romantic power of analogy that enables and authorizes imaginative leaps from one domain to another, underwriting a sense of interconnection within one holistic, universal network. The gesture of the gift, as a mode of free exchange, becomes a key vector of this vital gathering together of unities: a living out, or an expression, of a universal creative power. So what is instructive about this tortuous Romantic experimental system, between Coleridge and Gillman, and how might it illuminate other types of life-gifts? The sorts of exchanges between these two men—the means of life in the form of room and board, support and power of volition to help someone with an addiction, textual gifts meant to give new direction or orientation to another’s research, a proffered reorientation of the entire medical field away from materialism or mechanism—are predicated upon their exchange and reciprocation, which

amplify and reconfirm the personhood of each party, instead of a one-sided conception of selfless altruism. The best result of experimental life-gift exchange is the cohesion that results from treating a person as a person, a kind of life-affirmation born of mutual responsibility to one another.

This concept of the life-gift can pertain to textual exchanges, material exchanges, and anatomical exchanges. This chapter itself constitutes an experimental bringing together of two domains, Romantic medicine and transplant medicine, and at least two interrelated problems, the first bleeding (as it were) into the other. The first problem I've tried to identify is that of the location of vitality in the body, and the fantasy of Romantic-era medicine, obsessed as it is with discovering a "living principle" in the blood and in the mechanical operations of the body, of producing, sustaining, and amplifying life. The focusing of these particular physiological concerns is more or less coincident with the birth of biopower, and they put into relief the strangeness of the human body and its imbrication with those other discourses that seek to enhance life "by rule and line": demography, biostatistics, eugenics, etc. This first problem is born of some quintessentially Romantic contradictions of the human body, somewhere between its thingliness and personhood. And not knowing how to mediate between the body's thingliness and personhood is probably *the* problem of the ethics of transplant medicine. The second problem, the problem of the gift of life, focuses on this issue of mediation by attempting to think the intersubjective exchange of life itself. But as well shall see below, the dominant model for organ exchange in the United States—the altruistic gift—produces serious problems for organ recipients and donor families when it elides the

complexities inherent in this kind of exchange by sentimentalizing the gift as the “most precious,” somehow mystical and magical “gift of life.” These difficulties are only compounded because the system of transplant medicine, taken as a total system, depends upon having priceless organs available for transplant, but otherwise generates vast wealth for the personnel and institutions involved in its administration.

I turn now to a short literary-philosophical text that addresses some of these complexities. In “Dialogue Beneath the Ribs,” a reflection on his heart transplant composed twenty years after the fact, and presented at a conference in 2011, Jean-Luc Nancy creates a dialogue between a transplant, the heart in this case, and what the translator renders as “transplantee.”¹⁴³ It is a short text that nevertheless goes some way in suggesting the ways organ transfer exceeds the mechanical or, perhaps, dominant neo-Cartesian framework for understanding transplant medicine from a surgical point of view. Nancy’s new heart had come from a thirty-year-old when he was fifty: they reminisce, after living together for twenty years, about the surgical and health maintenance procedures involved in the transplant, the “steel wires that have been tightened around my chest” and the candida infection that had “colonized the catheter of the pacemaker,” from which they together “had a narrow escape” (172-173). The transplant and the transplantee are in this together, until the end more or less, although Nancy jests about jettisoning it for yet another transplanted heart, or an electrical model, and the chance “to reboot, to be revived, to start again” (173). In this way, the dialogue occasionally seems

¹⁴³ This short piece is included in Verena Andermatt Conley and Irving Goh, Eds., *Nancy Now*. Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2014. 171-174. Translated by Irving Goh, with assistance from Verena Andermatt Conley and Jean-Luc Nancy.

to take on the form of pillow talk, the transplantee and the transplant both naturally and artificially joined together like lovers, an organ machined like the rest of the body, at once an alien other, and a little piece of “myself in me,” as Nancy puts it (174).

The dialogue is organized primarily around the question of feeling, or sensing, the presence of the heart in a circular relationship: Nancy as the transplantee acknowledges “that it makes no difference” that the heart has “come from elsewhere,” and the transplant announces that it “only takes care of the machine that allows [him] to feel, act, and think,” and yet that thing that makes feeling possible produces terrible “worry” when it, itself, makes itself felt: the beating of this organ from elsewhere *leads* Nancy “drums beating, like a *chamade*...” (172). The question of where, specifically, Nancy is being led by this drumbeat of the heart is not answered, but the associations of the *chamade* with emergency, capitulation, surrender, and death are made very clear. This drumbeat, figured as a *chamade*, or an invitation, call, or summons, with overt militaristic associations, is how the heart makes itself felt, announces its own personhood, as it were, and enjoins the transplantee to dialogue.

Nancy and his heart volley the medical terminology suggestive of the layers of intervention that makes their association possible: “the coronary angiographic screen,” “long coronary claws,” “anticoagulants,” “immuno-depressors” (173). This they do as they discuss the machinery of Nancy’s body, which the heart notes, “if it were allowed to have its own way,” would reject and destroy it. Nancy refers to his body as “that poor thing – it believes it is a self-sufficient machine [...] it is machined, and it functions like a machine [...] nonetheless the doctors keep the system running...” (173). This seems to

land us squarely in the territory of the vital mechanism of the late eighteenth century pioneered by La Mettrie and Bichat, and inherited by the British Romantic physiologists, anatomists, and body theorists described in the first part of this chapter.

To live with the success of organ transplant, the fulfillment of so many Romantic-era fantasies and fears about life and embodiment, can certainly be unsettling. Anecdotes about these challenges abound in the various ethnographies and other studies of transplant patients over the last several decades. To move out of the playful register of Nancy's dialogue with his own transplanted heart for a moment, and into that of the *American Journal of Psychiatry*'s section on Clinical and Research Reports from the late 1970s, three doctors report on a man whom they call Mr. A, who is experiencing "Problems with Internalization of a Transplanted Liver."¹⁴⁴ Mr. A, an alcoholic who had suffered liver disease, received a transplant and soon began to suffer from what he, himself, dubbed "Frankenstein syndrome," by which he meant that as a fragmented person who had been "pieced together" he felt he was no longer a "regular human" (1091). This feeling of "Frankenstein syndrome" coincided with the patient's initial habit of referring to the new liver as "an alien piece of meat" but then, beginning to feel "married" to it, such that when his surgeon referred to the organ as "foreign tissue," Mr. A responded: "That's a hell of a way to talk about my new wife" (1091). The donor in his case had, in fact, been a woman (a thirty-year-old victim of cerebral hemorrhage), and the psychiatrists studying Mr. A suggest the incomplete "internalization" of the liver

¹⁴⁴ See Steven L. Dubovsky, Jeffrey L. Metzner, and Richard B. Warner, "Problems with Internalization of a Transplanted Liver," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 136(8): August 1979. 1090-1091.

produced the symptom of confused or hybrid gender identity, and his belief that the transplant had literally made him “part woman.” This belief dovetails with Mr. A’s caretaking of the new liver: when he is occasionally successful in tempering his alcohol consumption, it is out of a feeling of responsibility to the donor, whose liver he incubates in his body. The authors of the study note that Mr. A begins wearing an earring with the Virgin Mary following his surgery, as a magical protective charm for the new organ; they interpret this as an amalgamation of his mother and the donor (whose name was, in fact, Virginia). I would add that the Virgin for this patient seems to invite a comparison of transplant surgery with immaculate conception, as a strategy to make sense of this little bit of alien life only partially “internalized.”

The transplant patient is such a compelling figure for me because of the way its situation hypostatizes the fragmentation of all of us, and the ways we are shot through at the level of the body with social systems of enhancement, control, and maintenance; in this way the transplantee can become an icon for the modern subject, a formation that the Romantic-era thinkers I’ve tried to bring to bear on this problem were just beginning to think through the prism of life. Nancy’s term for this kind of heart is “intruder,” and in the final part of his dialogue with his transplant, he acknowledges: “You are myself in me...and yet you are an intruder, for you do not fulfill your office without being armed with chemical, electronic, and mechanical auxiliaries ... composing in me another fellow who, however, is not an other” (174).¹⁴⁵ This after answering the call of his beating heart,

¹⁴⁵ Nancy elaborates this more thoroughly in a short book, entitled, *L’Intrus*, Paris: Galilée, 2000. It also appears as an essay, “The Intruder,” in *Corpus*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 161-171.

after having been summoned by its *chamade*, and after reminiscing about all of the follow-up appointments, new pacemakers, stents, yeast infections, immunosuppressives. Or, as in the case of Mr. A, psychiatric follow-up care; the diagnosis and treatment of pathological failures to “internalize” the foreign, live-extending tissue; the participation in a clinical study. It is Nancy’s heart that answers back with a series of questions: are we not all intruders to ourselves, and don’t we all bear the “polymorphic marks of instruments and substances, of observations and interventions, of information and phantasms of all those who conspire in the strange scheme to prolong and propagate the life of the living without any moderation—for where would the limit come from?” (174). This is a “strange scheme” indeed, and it characterizes the pro-life nature of our moment, with all of the contradictions pro-life ideology entails. Part of what is so strange about this scheme is, of course, that certain subjects don’t matter and can die: American police violence against black people that goes mostly unpunished is just one example currently in the forefront of public consciousness, the use of homeless drug addicts in phase one clinical trials another. In this way, Nancy’s heart intends its characterization of the intruder in excess of the scene of technocratic biomedicine, but I would like to continue to work through this problem by focusing on the strange business of exchanging cadaveric life-gifts in the sanitary space of modern medical centers.

The French anthropologist David Le Breton makes an emphatic case for taking seriously the fragmentation of identity that comes with the consumption of other people’s

organs.¹⁴⁶ Le Breton argues against any understanding of an “essential self” as separate from the body, which he claims the mere fact of surgical interchangeability of body parts seems to imply, and instead takes the body as “the root and support of our identity,” quoting Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of it as “the general instrument through which we understand the world” (41). By claiming that the status of the body is “the touchstone of our status as subjects” Le Breton nestles his commentary of the organ donor within an intellectual tradition clearly oriented away from a Cartesian mastery of the soul over the body (41). Thus, he declares, even legal organ transplant necessarily opens a crisis in self-identity, as the body is breached and artificially altered in that process. Evidence for this is that transplant patients (even after successful transplants) develop intriguing and warped relationships with their new organs; for one thing, they associate the new organs with the immunosuppressants they’ll have to take for life, and for another may begin to have cannibalistic fantasies about how the new organ has led them to take on elements of the donor’s personality.¹⁴⁷ Le Breton claims organ transplant “is far from being a ‘cure’ – it is simply a complicated way of continuing to live...not a return to ‘biological innocence,’ but the price of keeping death at bay” (41). But at this late date, to hope for a state of biological innocence for any of us is probably naïve.

¹⁴⁶ See David Le Breton, “Identity Problems and Transplantations.” *Ethical Eye: Transplants*. Ed. Sir Peter Morris. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2003. 41-50.

¹⁴⁷ In addition to the gender dysphoria allegedly brought on in the case of Mr. A’s new liver, discussed above, another example of this type of fantasy is that of a young Canadian WASP who “came to experience himself as more outgoing, more excitable, more romantic, less stoical, less stolid” all as a result of receiving a kidney from an Italian-Canadian motorcycle accident victim (Hacking 93-94).

Le Breton argues instead that we take the implications of the gift relationship seriously, at least with respect to cadaveric organ donation, and the resultant tyranny of debt that comes with a gift received that cannot be reciprocated. In this sense, coding the organs as anatomical gifts can actually be harmful to transplant patients, who understand that obligations to reciprocate are part and parcel of gift exchange. The concomitant sense of shame and guilt inheres not least because the transplant patient, having spent agonizing weeks, months, or years on the donor registry list, had been in some sense hoping for the anonymous donor's death up until the time of the transplant (41-43). These are important considerations to take into account in providing follow-up care for transplant patients, as well as future possibilities for change to organ procurement policy, and might go some distance in explaining why the strange organ consistently "nurtures obsessive speculation with the donor's individuality" (43), as in the case of Mr. A above, and opens a sense of fragmentation and strangeness of having a trace of the Other within.

Thus Le Breton focuses on "a powerful tendency [among transplant patients] to identify with the unknown donor," such that the transplant experience is quite often "experienced as a loss of self and possession by another person" (45). Contrast this well-documented trend in the anthropological literature with Ian Hacking's very different but provocative argument that organ transplant is just one example of how biotechnology is currently pulling us toward a neo-Cartesian paradigm for understanding the body as a substance essentially separate from the person, parts of which may be alienated at will, either freely given or sold. Hacking goes so far as to say that "with the ongoing advances of technology, neo-Cartesianism is bound to win in the end" (105), and he uses the

example of brain death in the context of American ICUs—“the soul, we think, has flown; now there is only a body kept going by chemistry and mechanics” (105)—as an example of the degree to which our moment has allegedly become neo-Cartesian. I shall discuss brain death at greater length below. For now, to continue briefly with Hacking’s thesis: even if the body is understood as a separate thing that can be alienated from a person, these sorts of alienations and transfers are nevertheless subject to ethical and legal obstructions, but this fact alone does not bear on the question of whether or not a neo-Cartesian image of the body makes these transactions thinkable. It is nevertheless a paradox that, if Hacking is correct in thinking that we are coming to view our bodies increasingly as things more and more tenuously attached to our personhood, our appetite for legalistic regulations and procedures governing the care and proper disposition of body parts and human remains (regardless of whether they are intended for memorialization or a medical or some other purpose) is becoming increasingly voracious. Perhaps this is symptomatic of some deeply ingrained resistance to the neo-Cartesian paradigm. Hacking offers the example of “extraordinary attempts to identify the DNA of tiny pieces of cooked flesh in the rubble of the World Trade Center” (92) as well as the imperative to bring home the “bodies of soldiers killed in action—often just bits and pieces” (93) as apparent counterexamples to the neo-Cartesian paradigm he describes, but then argues that these bits of bodies, the fragments—“the ear, the fused eyeball, the foot”—amount to “no more than symbolic value” (93) for the grieving family and friends who demand their return. In a coded way, then, Hacking seems to suggest that the legal imperative to return the bodily remains of 9/11 victims or fallen soldiers in the U.S.

context is a symbolic response to the demand of the return of the person whom the fragments have come to represent, the person who should not have died.

This is a plausible reading, certainly, but I am not sure that these bodily fragments do not signify in excess of a symbolic replacement of a dead loved one: there seems to be something more about the body, and this is part of the reason why I think it is more helpful to think this problem through the lens of Romantic physiology and the birth of the life sciences, rather than Cartesian dualism, even when certain Romantic physiologists begin to sound like Cartesians. Hacking clearly privileges Descartes, but there are many ways to think about mechanism and the human body that do not land in Cartesian dualism. David Channell's insistence on distinguishing between La Mettrie and Descartes is helpful as an example here, and I paraphrase the three points he makes to differentiate between a Cartesian image of the body qua machine and a more vital man-machine in La Mettrie's sense. Unlike Descartes: La Mettrie insisted that the soul and the body were inseparable, which made the problem of the mind a problem of physics and chemistry; La Mettrie extended the "beast-machine" concept to humans; La Mettrie did not depend on a concept of God to join body and soul (41-42). This is how Channell historicizes the concept of a "vital machine" that denies the terms of Cartesian dualism but nevertheless thinks organic life together with technology.

Regardless of which historical lens helps us make sense of our rapidly biotechnologizing world, and which discourses of the body it repeats and recreates, it is undeniable that bodies and body parts have become subject to ever greater regulation over the course of the last couple generations, with increasingly tighter demands that

human remains, in certain institutional contexts, be treated with the utmost dignity and respect: in short, with more dignity and respect than we typically demand for living human subjects. Hacking's example of the extraordinary use of DNA testing on every fragment of human tissue found at the site of the World Trade Center is just one example, but I think this tendency goes beyond ancient requirements of burial and memorialization in our pro-life moment: it is as if these days any body, not just those of the saints, can attain the special status of a relic. Not to treat human remains with the utmost care is reputational suicide for organizations that regularly abuse the living with impunity. One example from the University of Minnesota, which made its way to the state's highest court, involved a 2009 Facebook post by a student enrolled in a mortuary science program. After breaking up with her boyfriend, the student wrote that, in anticipation of the next meeting of her embalming lab, she would like to take out some of her aggression with a "trocar" (a surgical instrument used to drain bodily fluids) and also made a reference to Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* and joked about gaining access to the campus crematorium. She also referred to her study cadaver as "Bernie" (a reference to *Weekend at Bernie's*). When she arrived at class, she found the University of Minnesota police waiting for her, and she was frisked, questioned, banned from campus, and disciplined for the postings. As a condition of her eventual return to campus, she was made to take a clinical ethics course and to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. Perhaps it is off-color to joke online about trocars and cadavers, but to activate the institutional disciplinary apparatus in the face of what was later legally determined to be "satirical commentary and violent fantasy" is an indication of the special status human remains have come to

command, in a way that exceeds the straightforward symbolic representation of the person.¹⁴⁸ While one might even assume macabre jokes to be not unfamiliar in mortuaries, this student's clear error in this case was to deviate in public, on Facebook, from the tone of sanctity that must pertain to human remains.

Pace Hacking, Le Breton argues vehemently against the notion that we are coming to view the body as a machine made of component parts, but he acknowledges the ultimate malleability of a body concept, and the resultant status of the human corpse, in the closing section of his essay (47-49). He also insists that transplant patients very often experience "a kind of mourning in reverse: having to rebuild their existence by accepting the loss of part of themselves, and the addition of an organ taken from another [usually anonymous] person" (46). This fragmentation betrays the way the usually anonymous nature of purportedly gift-based, modern organ procurement systems almost work toward the subtraction of the aspects of the gift relationship that had guaranteed a sense of social interconnectivity. In this way, he suggests that contemporary organ procurement systems are mere shells of traditional gift relationships, upon which they are purportedly based. Transplant patients accumulate a sense of shame because they are left unsure of how to reciprocate the "gift of life" they have received. The pervasive failures of the gift relationship as applied to modern organ exchange (which has never been adequate for society's transplant needs, nor has it ever conformed to a "pure" gift model) might be taken to exacerbate and amplify the fragmentation in the identity of transplant

¹⁴⁸ See Jenna Ross, "Student Banned from U after Facebook Posts," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, 15 December 2009; Emily Gurnon, "Amanda Tatro Dies; University of Minnesota Student Challenged U's Facebook Policies," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 10 November 2015.

patients. As such, organ transplant itself might be taken as an emblematic and symptomatic medical procedure for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in which new social formations are pervasively marked by these sorts of fragmented and atomized models of exchange.

In what follows I read the rhetoric of the anatomical gift in the light of these problems, as informed by Romantic and post-Romantic ruminations about life and the body. I should clarify that my critique of the life-gift is certainly not meant as sideways advocacy for organ sale, or for that matter, less radical forms of material compensation for the donation (as some jurisdictions have begun experimenting with tax deductions and payment of funeral expenses to encourage donation), even though these are often the alternatives that structure debates among transplant specialists and medical ethicists about how to address critical organ shortages. I offer nothing in the way of a public policy proposal and only wish to consider some of the ways the model of the anatomical gift, and its problems, might be understood as part of the vexed legacy of the Romantic-era reinvention of life, and the battles over vitalism, the body, and life itself that have followed in its wake. I ultimately think this is worth considering because all too often in debates over organ sale, the cadaveric anatomical gift is represented too simplistically: a supposedly selfless “gift of life” that sentimentalizes the exchange as it covers up the strangeness of the transaction. Appeals to “life itself” in transplant rhetoric are riddled with inconsistency and contradiction: for instance, on the one hand, recipients are reassured that new organs in their bodies perform purely mechanical functions (e.g., pumping, filtering), but on the other, donor families are told by procurement

professionals that organ donation is a way “that donors can live on in others, granting new or ‘second’ lives to transplant recipients who, in turn, frequently describe their own surgeries as cathartic ‘rebirths’” (Sharp 2006, 83). This sentimental appeal to transferring life itself through the organ happens to be one of the most effective ways to convince hesitant family members to consent to the donation, and so it is frequently deployed: a kind of benevolent inversion of Keats’s “living hand.” It is nevertheless important to take the metaphor seriously because by interrogating it, we might get closer to what is at stake in this bizarre organ economy: uncertainty and anxious hedging regarding the relationships between bodies, parts, and life itself.

I refuse the either/or structure of thinking organs for transplant either as purely altruistic gifts or as commodities, and note instead the radical contradictions that remain lodged in transplant rhetoric. By this I mean that many of those engaged in transplant ethics and policy debates participate in a pattern of refusal to interrogate the troubled concepts of “altruism” or “gift-exchange” with any degree of rigor. For example, Peter Morris, in an introduction to a volume that focuses on the ethics of organ transplant, addresses the problem of organ trafficking by facilely reminding readers that it is illegal, and claims instead that donating a kidney, “is one of the most extraordinary acts of altruism that can be imagined, and this should not be tarnished by making it a commercial transaction. The whole of transplantation is based on the gift of an organ to the recipient whether the donor is alive or dead” (15). This is more or less a consensus position, and he ends the debate over organ sale there. Morris is a major figure in renal transplant, a surgeon who has served as President of the Royal College of Surgeons, and who was

knighted in 1996. He is much better known for his work in surgery than in medical ethics, but because surgeons tend to command considerable authority in the ethical debates in this area of medical practice, it is important to take note of his words as a way to acknowledge just how simple dominant transplant ideology considers the anatomical gift to be. On what possible basis can it be said that donating an organ at brain death is “one of the most extraordinary acts of altruism” imaginable? It is, of course, literally “extraordinary,” but in using this word Morris reflects instead a tendency to sacralize a kind of life-gift giving that might otherwise be routinized, and indeed made ordinary in the daily business of a modern medical center. I reiterate that I do not write in support of organ sale, but I find utterly bizarre the dominant form of transplant discourse that celebrates in quasi-religious terms what might be reasonably considered a very different kind of transaction. Nevertheless, it is a common feature of transplant rhetoric to protect the “sanctity” of the donor body. That such passion routinely erupts in the paradigm in the name of protecting this most precious figure of “the gift of life” from the “tarnish” of commerce only indicates the degree to which it has been invested with symbolic value throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first.¹⁴⁹ As Morris insists, the same figure of the altruistic gift must be applied to all whole organ transfers regardless of whether the donor is alive or dead. It is much easier to comprehend the gravity of organ donation for a living donor, and to bring the gesture of giving a life-saving piece of the body to a desperately ill person under the sign of altruism, but is there

¹⁴⁹ Ian Hacking cites the film *Jesus of Montreal* (1990) as a saccharine example of the ways organ donation can be married to altruism and resurrection (84). Daniel, the Jesus figure of the film, becomes brain dead following an accident, and his organs are harvested and transplanted in patients across the city.

not a qualitative difference in the case of brain-dead donors? These donors relinquish organs for which they clearly have no further use: organs that might instead be thought, not unreasonably, through a utilitarian logic, by which it would be considered extraordinary madness *not* to save other lives with spare body parts made available elsewhere in the medical system. To extend the terms of the Lawrence and Abernethy debates to the scene of renal transplant is a fulfillment of the mechanistic Lawrence's dreams. And yet transplant ideology is based on a rhetoric of extraordinary generosity that is thought somehow to trump these kinds of utilitarian calculations: the special status of the body, and life, romantically resists the cold calculation of surgical innovations that threaten to reduce life to mechanical processes. The anatomical gift of life seems to function, then, not primarily as a safeguard against the exploitation of dying or vulnerable patients, as it is so often represented, but as a romantic figure of resistance against the reduction of the mystery of life that mechanical interchangeability of bodies might threaten. I think this is the more interesting, and usually neglected, ideological work that the anatomical gift performs. It is in this way that the anatomical gift functions today as a way to ensure life means something *more*, to invoke Gigante's formulation once again, "more than given forms and organizations, biological or cultural" (246), than the advances of technocratic biomedicine would otherwise imply.

The paradigm of the anatomical gift ultimately helps produce an alibi for using bits of human bodies—in the most successful cases, nine whole organs, including two kidneys, two lungs, two sections of liver, one heart, one pancreas, and one large intestine, in addition to other bones and tissues—as means to other ends, in Kantian terms, and not

treating the donor body as an end in itself. This is why it is so crucial for transplant ideology to rely upon a straightforward medicolegal definition of brain death, an innovation of the twentieth century, so that organs may be harvested legally and within ethically acceptable parameters. Once brain death is declared, the patient theoretically ceases to be a patient, and instead becomes a donor body or neomort, a corpse that strangely has a still-beating heart, and muscles that may contract and body parts that may move because of residual activity in the spinal column: this is clinically known as a “Lazarus sign,” and Lesley Sharp mentions a case she observed in 1995, in which an ICU nurse “attempted to flee the room” when a brain-dead donor body “appeared to shrug in response to a question she had posed about his status” (74).¹⁵⁰ Brain death is distinct from coma or a persistent vegetative state because at brain death, a patient’s brain stem fails completely, effectively ending all brain activity. Transplant ideology relies upon this straightforward definition and legal declaration to ensure that organ harvest never be considered to hasten or cause a patient’s death, because the donor is already officially dead by the time the harvest takes place. According to the wonderful ethnographic work done in this area, accepting brain death as true death appears to be the single biggest sticking point not only for donor families, but also health care professionals, and the single most significant way that transplant medicine continually reproduces visceral resistance to the mechanical or “neo-Cartesian” body. Sharp cites survey research

¹⁵⁰ Lesley A. Sharp’s work has shaped my understanding of these issues. See her *Strange Harvest: Organ Transplants, Denatured Bodies, and the Transformed Self*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006, especially pp. 42-100. For an excellent comparative account of resistance to the paradigm of brain death in Japan, see Margaret Lock, *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

conducted in the late 1990s on 172 potential donor families from three different regional organ procurement organizations (OPOs) that found a full twenty percent “believed that brain dead individuals could recover” (2006, 81). Margaret Lock similarly found among thirty-two ICU specialists she interviewed that not a single one believed that “brain death signals the end of biological life,” although they all agreed that brain death is irreversible (qtd in Sharp 2006, 84).

There is something almost comical about the unrelenting insistence of transplant ideology on the absoluteness of brain death in the face of such reflexive skepticism among family members who are presented with a “dead” body that appears to be alive. One subject Sharp cites, a thirty-year-old woman considering consenting to the donation of her mother’s organs, put it this way: “She was breathing. Her heart was going. . . . They’re telling you that she’s dead, but she’s still there” (qtd. in Sharp 2006, 82). To counter these visceral challenges to accepting brain death, OPO staff must engage in extraordinary acts of what Sharp calls “semantic policing,” and must become “masters of technological euphemisms”; for example, instead of using the term “life support” to describe the ventilator, upon brain death, OPO staff refer instead to “artificial” or “mechanical support” (2006, 77), which maintains the “living cadaver” so that organs may be surgically removed (2007, 19). The “donor” is no longer a “patient” and OPO staff adhere to this semantic shift upon declaration of brain death, even if ICU staff usually do not. Surgeons typically refer to “cadavers,” “corpses,” and “neomorts,” especially in the literature, but OPO staff, who are responsible for selling potential donor families on anatomical giving, never use this kind of language when discussing the

potential donor, and instead usually use the donor's first name when referring to his or her organs (2007, 20). Among themselves, the primary linguistic challenge is to control their professional discourse so that it remains true to the definition of brain death as absolute death that undergirds the cadaveric organ economy. But this is an uneasy negotiation over the body of a "living cadaver" and the business of extracting organs from an officially but somehow not quite dead body. It is therefore unsurprising that transplant rhetoric tends to downplay the deaths of donors so that it can dwell on "life" instead: this tendency is clear even in the very names of many of the regional, federally registered organ procurement organizations (e.g., Minnesota's "LifeSource").¹⁵¹

It is the immense gulf between the very tightly regulated and legally encoded procedures for arriving at a precise moment of brain death, on the one hand, and the apparently unshakeable belief in the vitality of the body and strong resistance to the technocratic determination of a precise moment of death, on the other, that makes transplant medicine legible, for me, as a Romantic problem, or as another form of the Romantic obsession with locating a "living principle" in and between bodies. In this light, transplant ideology and its technocratic foundations might be regarded as the inheritor of the mechanical physiology of the early nineteenth century, the fantasy of biological reductionism figured by William Lawrence, coupled with its vitalist resistance,

¹⁵¹ Sharp (2006) draws attention to this tendency, and provides the following list of names of various OPOs: LifeCenter, Life Choice, Gift of Life, Life Link, Life Alliance, TransLife, LifeQuest, LifeCenter, LifeSource, LifeShare, LifeNet, LifeBanc, Life Connection, and Lifeline (251n10). For a discussion of the way transplant rhetoric is routinely "greened," as she puts it, see her "Commodified Kin: Death, Mourning, and Competing Claims on the Bodies of Organ Donors in the United States," *American Anthropologist* 103 (2001): 112-133.

figured by John Abernethy, or other medico-philosophical work-arounds such as those Coleridge composed. The problem of brain death is beholden to the terms of debates over life set by Romantic-era thinkers, and in this sense can be taken to represent a twenty-first-century face of a much older problem.

Medical anthropologists working in this field regularly, and romantically, bemoan the ways transplant ideology insists so strenuously and arrogantly on the absoluteness of brain death that can be located at a particular moment in time, to the exclusion of more plastic conceptions of death as a social process that can follow alternative temporalities: there is a well-documented disjunction between the rhetoric of transplant ideology regarding brain death and the privately held views of nearly everyone involved in the system, from physicians and nurses to OPO staff, to donor families. Even OPO staff, who are most responsible for policing discourse about the donor body and its death, deviate from this position somewhat in private. Sharp cites staff meetings at an OPO that she observed, in which “employees regularly distinguished brain death from cardiac death by describing individual donors as moving from the state of being ‘kind of’ or ‘sort of’ dead in the ICU to being ‘dead dead’ following procurement surgery” (2006, 83). This type of qualification about brain death being a “sort of” death would not be used with potential donor families for obvious reasons.

Sharp suggests it is common among organ procurement professionals, who work on site at hospitals when a candidate for organ donation is admitted, and whom hospital staff frequently refer to as “ambulance chasers,” “vultures,” and “the death squad” (56), to express tremendous frustration with people who opt not to donate a family member’s

organs because of a refusal to accept brain death, people they often claim to be “superstitious,” “religious,” or “uneducated” (82). OPO staff members have incredibly difficult jobs, as they must counsel grieving families while at the same time working toward procuring organs for transplant; the pressure to perform occasionally seems to match that of a high-pressure sales environment, and burn-out is common. In light of these working conditions, it is unsurprising that OPO staff may vent along these lines among one another. But this fairly common assumption that specifically religious thinking interferes with a properly rational and scientific determination of brain death is actually not borne out in the ethnographic data: whether or not families are religious, more important to the ultimate decision about whether or not to consent to donation are the “visceral reactions to what happens to the body at the time of death,” their concern to minimize the suffering of the family member, and their interest in making the death peaceful (82).

Sharp characterizes this pattern of response in donor families: instead of accepting the standard explanation that brain death is absolute, they often seem to sense instead “that a damaged brain may rob the beloved of their humanity but not necessarily their essence or life force” (92). This indicates a very real and widespread resistance to the official paradigm of the death of the person and the temporarily continued life of the body that Hacking associates with our gradual shift toward a neo-Cartesian universe. What is so telling about Sharp’s ethnography is that this resistance is not based, at least primarily, in religious or spiritual convictions about the soul and its relationship to the body, but to the body and its biology—vital signs, the circulation of blood, the beating

heart, and functioning organs—a very literal kind of biological life that has much more to do with personhood than we might typically assume, even in a brain-dead corpse with no capacity for continued social existence.

The mid-twentieth-century architects of the national organ exchange network anticipated many of the ways the public would bristle at the prospect of organ transfer, and certainly at debasing vital organs through sale on a regulated market. And part of the problem with the model of the anatomical gift, the basis of legal organ procurement in the United States, is its apparent disingenuousness as a foundational policy principle: it is happily deployed by the national Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, and the various regional and local Organ Procurement Organizations that do the work of attaining organs for transplant, but its very enshrinement as a legal condition of organ transfer appears to have been deliberately undertaken as a necessary justification for surgically removing organs from brain-dead patients.¹⁵² Kieran Healy makes a compelling argument that gift exchange models were employed as dominant lenses for understanding organ transfer as part of this politically shrewd strategy for managing a sense of squeamishness among the members of the general public in the years when

¹⁵² According to Sharp (2006), the strong consensus among most medical historians and ethicists is that the invention of brain death, itself, as a legal definition of death and criterion for cadaveric organ donation, was motivated by the desire to produce a supply of transplantable organs. As she notes, the work of the 1968 Ad Hoc Committee at Harvard Medical School became the basis of national and state legislation regarding brain death, and the committee worked with two deliberate goals in mind: to make organs available for transplant and to carve out safe legal space for turning off patients' ventilators (15-17).

organ transplant was extremely novel (23-42).¹⁵³ As Healy describes, surgical techniques for organ transplant were developed in the twentieth century before a renewed discourse of the anatomical gift could be developed; organ procurement was controversial “because it crosses two sacred boundaries. It introduces a utilitarian calculation at the time of death, and it threatens to place a cash value on human life...transplant advocates developed a specific cultural account of donation to fix these breaches” (23). By turning to the gift, these advocates (sometimes referred to disparagingly as the “transplant lobby”) reached for a feel-good model of exchange, and the promise of redeeming a death—often a gruesome one, as many organ donors die young and suddenly from automobile and motorcycle accidents, gunshot wounds, suicide, and other head trauma—by using it to perpetuate the life of a stranger. At its best, the gift, even when its language is coopted and used shrewdly and covertly by the medical system, can help a grieving family mourn a terrible loss. And yet the system that has been devised for collecting and distributing organs for transplant never succeeds in meeting demand, and each year thousands of people die awaiting a transplant.

With this element of the history of its institutionalization in mind, the anatomical gift becomes a discursive strategy that makes acceptable the otherwise unacceptable, under cover of an idealizing altruism that otherwise flies in the face of the reality of gift exchange. If Hacking is correct in thinking that the future of the Western body is or will be neo-Cartesian, a time may come when we no longer need to appeal to “the gift” in order to make bits of ourselves circulate. In the meantime, “the gift of life” and our

¹⁵³ See Kieran Healy, *Last Best Gifts: Altruism and the Market for Human Blood and Organs*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

current system for collecting and allocating organs betrays, romantically and ironically, the fissures in a regime of technocratic medicine that seeks to account for life.

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