“Security and Destruction:” Reading the Sublime in the British Romantic Period

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Introduction

I. Reading the Sublime

This dissertation initially aimed to trace the contours of a distinctly British sublime in literary and philosophical texts that grappled with the reverberations of the French Revolution. More particularly, I hoped to explore how the political sublime—or the sublime of authority—might transform when two of its customary objects—God, king—had come into question. Yet I ultimately came to the view that the sublime, though undoubtedly a concept with a history, nonetheless possessed persistent characteristics that complicate neat divisions among periods and theorists. This realization prompted a shift in my project's direction, though my interest in the sublime's relation to political and religious power—and sovereignty in particular—remained a constant. First, the centrality of the French Revolution as an organizing topic faded, though its presence can still be felt, particularly in the first chapter. Second, my interest in articulating a distinctly British sublime was partly reworked—a decision I explain in this introduction—though my chapters are nonetheless organized around texts in the British Romantic period and do attempt to remain attentive to relevant contexts.

Most importantly, I came to the view that I needed to better account for the sublime itself—its history and enduring characteristics—if I was to productively engage with my chosen texts. What, after all, might it mean to undertake a project in which the "object" of study at least in part marks a failure to comprehend? Rather than approach the sublime as a concept to be immediately grasped, I found it was something to be tracked or traced. In order to clarify the approach I take in my chapters I offer an interpretation of

the sublime and make the case that my subject does not remain a subject but instead suggests a particular mode of critical engagement. I conclude with chapter summaries.

The sublime in eighteenth-century Britain was a topic of persistent interest, producing a wide range of writing that concerned itself with an even wider range of adjacent subjects: poetry, scripture, natural phenomena, and so on. This variety alone makes organization and classification a difficult task, but the problem is compounded by the lack of a stable theoretical or philosophical framework employed by British interpreters of the sublime. To be sure, we see the influence of empiricism as well as related associationist accounts of psychology, but Platonism and Christian theology are also present, as well as persistent resonances with Longinus's *Peri Hypsous* and Kant's *Critique of Judgment.*

The question of what to do with this complex body of work has long posed a challenge to scholarship. Samuel Holt Monk, for instance, begins his classic 1935 book, *The Sublime in XVIII-Century England*, by grappling with the problem of organization:

> To reduce to any sort of order the extremely diverse and individualistic theories of sublimity that one finds in the eighteenth century is not easy…Indeed, the chief problem has been the problem of organization. The necessity of imposing form of some sort has continually led to the danger of imposing what is essentially a false and artificial form. Once the process of categorizing ideas is begun, it is likely to become an end in itself and to give to the subject a symmetry that is entirely false. (3)

Monk's response to the danger of false symmetry and form is to offer a "loose" system of classification that points to "organic growth" in the British treatment of the sublime. In short, the sublime moves from the Longinian view (seen through Boileau's interpretation of *Peri Hypsous*) toward the "subjectivism of Kant" (4). Monk treats Kant as a heroic figure, the philosopher who rescued "thought from the slough of scepticism" by defending the *a priori* from Hume's empiricist attacks (4). It is difficult to adequately summarize Monk's detailed study, but its attempt to map a movement from an objective to subjective—or "semi-subjective"—view in British accounts of the sublime is an important feature. For instance, he lauds John Dennis for his analysis of emotion, a move that makes him "the first Englishman to see that if anything of value was to be learned, [aesthetic] inquiry must take into account not only the nature of the sublime object but its effect also, i.e., the subjective element" (45).

Monk will eventually arrive at the two British theorists of the sublime most representative of what he calls a "truly aesthetic vision:" Thomas Reid and Archibald Alison. Although Reid appears to maintain an object-oriented analysis—he claims that objects possess properties that work on the mind—his treatment of the sublime veers toward subjectivism by separating "the quality of the object and the emotion which it awakens" (146). Ultimately, Reid finds that the "qualities of a great work are attributes of *mind* only," even if we figuratively "ascribe them to objects" (146). In other words, what we truly appreciate in a great work is the mind that created the object, not the object itself. Alison's treatise, on the other hand, is "the most purely aesthetic document of the eighteenth century," a title earned by its translation of "beauty and sublimity into purely

mental 'emotions'" as well as its stress on "the importance of the individual as opposed to the object in the aesthetic experience" (148). Such a shift in stress, Monk tells us, had large reverberations, signaling an end to Neoclassicism while heralding the birth of a distinctly Romantic consciousness, a transition that left the individual free to express "his perception and values…untrammeled by tradition" (155).

Monk's approach, though influential, has received criticism. For example, Peter de Bolla attempted to "de-couple the British eighteenth-century tradition of the sublime from the Kantian analytic," finding that "much is left out or to one side" when reading "the British tradition exclusively in terms of a preparation for the Kantian description" (3). Cian Duffy and Peter Howell follow de Bolla, arguing that scholarship discerning a trajectory towards Kant wrongheadedly assumes that "it is possible to produce a complete and objective definition of the sublime which transcends specific historical or cultural circumstances." The British engagement with the sublime, on the other hand, is marked by its "'refusal to relinquish' the intermixture of cultural elements in an individual's experience of the sublime." Therefore, instead of looking for signs of Kant, Duffy and Howell suggest that it would be more sensible to approach the British sublime as a "site of complex interaction between different discourses" (3).

I agree that the sublime often entails interactions among different discourses and operates in relation to varied local practices, landscapes, political situations, and so on. Indeed, this dissertation bears out the claim. But by now the broad trend is to sequester the sublime by placing it in relation to a proximate context or in some other way limiting it. We have become accustomed to thinking about the sublime not as a unified field of

study that stretches from Longinus to Kant (and beyond), but as a heterogenous term that primarily obtains meaning—or becomes an object of study—through its relation to varied contexts. Robert Doran notes the "widely held view that the historical vicissitudes of the sublime, coupled with the sheer range and multiplicity of its usage, argue against the feasibility or even possibility of an overarching systematic account, as if coherence in more limited contexts is all that could be hoped for" (3). As early as the 1970s, in fact, Thomas Weiskel would note that the sublime as a field of study is "fairly well carved up," with "distinct emphases upon the 'rhetorical,' the 'natural,' the 'religious' sublimes, and others" (5). Although such divisions have produced valuable scholarship, "the challenge," he says, is to "find the structure that is immanent in a vast and eclectic theory and practice" (5).

The tendency to divide the subject—by period, theorist, or other limiting descriptor (rhetorical, arctic, Kantian, British, and so on)—is no doubt useful and necessary. Yet here it is also worth noting that the subject undergoing limitation often makes claims to transhistorical (and transnational) significance. Weiskel, for example, tells us that "in Longinus's text, *hypsos* is a quality immanent in great writing which refers us to eternity (*aion*); it is not distinction itself, but that which produces distinction; it is immediately communicable between author and reader (hearer) because it transcends the local determinants of culture, language, and technique" (12). Indeed, accounts of the sublime tend to involve universal claims, even when they take on an explicitly historical dimension. John Dennis, to take another example, is interested in asserting that Milton's *Paradise Lost* outdoes the work of the ancients due to its religious subject matter, a

position bound up with national concerns regarding the place of English literature in relation to French, a point made by Robert Doran. But his writing on the subject still speaks to eternity: *Paradise Lost*, he says, is the "most lofty…poem that has ever been produc'd by the Mind of Man" (132).

Such claims do not contradict the need for sensitivity to historical context, but they do remind us that theorists of the sublime often proceed as though they were describing something of permanence. That said, this dissertation is not primarily interested in producing or even defending an overarching theory of the sublime, though its readings reveal repeated patterns that operate according to a familiar logic. Instead, it seeks to trace the sublime in formative texts produced in the British Romantic period: Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, William Godwin's *Political Justice* and *Caleb Williams*, Percy Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. It operates under the assumption that the sublime is a coherent, though evolving concept, one whose major expressions are found in the work of Longinus, Burke, and Kant.

Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* offers a useful framework for approaching the sublime's persistent features, which I borrow in a compressed form. He attempts to purge the sublime of its "idealist metaphysics" and imports the language of psychoanalysis to better explain its movements. Weiskel will build on and modify the Kantian treatment of the sublime, mapping a "three phase" pattern. In the first phase "the mind is in a determinate relation to the object," a relation marked by habituality: "this is the state of normal perception or comprehension, the syntagmatic linearity of reading or taking a

walk or remembering or whatnot" (23). The second phase ruptures this state of normal perception: "The habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down. Surprise or astonishment is the affective correlative, and there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer" (23). Here we find a failure to achieve meaning or mastery: "a text which exceeds comprehension" or the appearance of an ungraspable "natural phenomenon," for example (24). One rendition of the final phase—the rendition most faithful to the Kantian treatment—ends as follows: "mind recovers the balance of outer and inner" and constitutes "a fresh relation between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which erupted in phase two is taken as symbolizing the mind's relation to a transcendent order" (24). What Weiskel will call the Wordsworthian sublime, on the other hand, concludes when the disruption is replaced by a harmonious relation, one in which the self "subsume[s] all otherness" (49).

The tripartite model helps us discern features of the sublime that remain stable across time and space while also providing a loose framework through which analysis of specific instances of the sublime might be accomplished. We see, for example, that the second phase—the moment in which the smooth flow of normal perception is interrupted—tends to involve or produce a double effect/affect, a structure Robert Doran has named "dual transcendence" (11). Here we often find, to use Kant's terminology, a flashing or "rapid alternation" between binary pairs or, at the least, the presence of opposites (potential or actual). Take, for instance, Monk's description of Baillie's *Essay on the Sublime*, which is worth quoting at length:

> He is interested in the complexity and the apparent paradoxes that make up the sublime. Thus, the sublime dilates and elevates the soul, while fear sinks and contracts it; yet both are felt upon viewing what is great and awful. The explanation is that the two opposing states 'succeed each other by such infinitely quick Vicissitudes, as to appear instantaneous.' Moreover the same idea, thanks to association, can produce the opposite kinds of sublimity. The idea of an angry God, for example, creates the emotion of sublime terror: the idea of a benign God awakens 'the joyous sublime.' (76)

Paradox, alternating pairs, or opposed terms occur with remarkable frequency. John Dennis and Edmund Burke write of "delightful horror" while Frances Reynold's finds that the mind experiencing the sublime "seems to stand or waver between certainty and uncertainty, between security and destruction" (17). Wordsworth, too, tells us something similar when he writes that the sublime "either…rouses us to a sympathetic energy & calls upon the mind to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining…or…[produces] a humiliation or prostration of the mind before some external…Power at once awful & immeasurable" (54). As early as Longinus, in fact, we find a sublime that overwhelms yet elevates. Doran writes that it produces "*thaumasion* (wonder, awe, admiration) and *ekplêxis* (astonishment, amazement, stupor)" and includes "the idea of being exalted or elevated—as expressed in the notion of *ekstasis* (literally: a going outside or beyond oneself, self-transcendence, rapture)." Again, the sublime is "paradoxical: on the one hand, being

overwhelmed/dominated by the encounter with the transcendent in art or nature induces a feeling of inferiority or submission; on the other, it is precisely by being overpowered that a high-minded feeling of superiority or nobility of soul (mental expansiveness, heroic sensibility) is attained" (Doran 10).

Thus, though the sublime produces "bafflement," "horror," or a striving to grasp the ungraspable, it also typically involves a sense of nobility or expansion of the mind, even in accounts which do not neatly replicate the Kantian discovery of a supersensible faculty within. John Baillie, for instance, finds that "every person upon seeing a grand object is affected with something which…extends his very being, and expands it to a kind of immensity" (88). Similarly, Edmund Burke writes of the feeling of "swelling and triumph" that attends "terrible objects," and he finds that "the mind always [claims] to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates" (46).

The model also helps us understand the sublime's persistent relation to meaning making. It comes as a disruption, a break in a preexisting state of perceptual normalcy, and thus bears a certain correspondence with the problems that emerge in textual interpretation. Weiskel, for example, will discuss the "hermeneutic" or "reader's" sublime which he relates to theological mysteries that lack an "evident key" or the emergence of "absences in determinate meaning" that trouble the process of signification:

> The reader's sublime is a similarity disorder. Jakobson quotes a clinical description: patients of this type 'grasped the words in their literal meaning but could not be brought to understand the metaphorical character of the same words.' This is roughly the situation of the reader

> confronted by theological mystery, the dark conceits of allegory, or any text whose ultimate meaning lies in just the fact that it cannot be grasped. So too with the beholder of a natural scene, which can be literally seen well enough but which cannot be wholly read and seems instinct with latent significance. (29-32)

Neil Hertz will note something similar, tracing the "difficulty" that attends the sublime to scriptural interpretation (47). He quotes Angus Fletcher on religious writing's "calculated obscurity"—Augustine "point[s] to a cosmic uncertainty embodied in much of scripture," an uncertainty that results in the "mixture of pain and pleasure" that marks "exegetical labor"—and finds that "Augustinian *ascesis* organizes reading so that it becomes a movement, albeit with difficult steps down the line toward a pleasure that is also a guarantee of the proximity of the sacred object" (47-48). As Hertz would have it, the moment of blockage—"checking," "bafflement," "difficulty," and so on—is the means by which the critic constitutes the self: "The scholar's wish is for the moment of blockage, when an indefinite and disarrayed sequence is resolved (at whatever sacrifice) into a one-to-one confrontation" (53).

More recent theorizations of the sublime retain a concern with difficulty while maintaining engagement with Burkean, Longinian, and Kantian treatments of the subject. Jean-François Lyotard's engagement with the Kantian analytic, for instance, stresses that the sublime involves more than "simple gratification" but the "gratification of effort" (68). Though our inability to "represent the absolute" is ungratifying, "one knows that one has to, that the faculty of feeling or of imagining is called upon to make the

perceptible represent the ineffable—and even if this fails, and even if that causes suffering, a pure gratification will emerge from the tension" (68). But although "absolutes in general" are not demonstrable or representable, "one can demonstrate that the absolute exists through 'negative representation,' which Kant called the 'abstract'" (68).

For Lyotard, in fact, both Burke and Kant will provide the theoretical foundations for the visual avant-garde. Though the prior privileges language over painting, he nonetheless "puts his finger on an essential feature of [Barnett] Newman's project," finding that "certain 'objects' and certain 'sensations' are pregnant with a threat to our self-preservation." Such objects—"shadows, solitude, silence, and the approach of death"—result in the feeling that "soon nothing more will take place," but the "sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere 'here,' the most minimal occurrence" (84). Kant, on the other hand, more directly offers "a solution to the problem of sublime painting." Though it is impossible to represent the absolute, "infinite might," or "pure Ideas," "one can at least allude to them, or 'evoke' them" (85). Lyotard will point to Kant's citation of the "Mosaic law which forbids the making of graven images" (85). Though such a citation, for Lyotard, "is only an indication," it is an indication that "prefigures the Minimalist and abstractionist solutions painting will use to try to escape the figurative prison" (85). Newman, for example, will accomplish the escape via an "[interruption of] presence [in] the chaos of history"—by "inspir[ing]" the "wonderful surprise…that there should be something rather than nothing" (85-87). Though "chaos threatens," the zip—vertical lines through

solid colors—flashes out, a flashing Lyotard will associate with the *Tzim tzum* (86). "There is," he says, "something holy about the line itself" (86). In this regard, Lyotard finds common ground not only with Kant but also with Longinus who praised the *fiat lux* of Genesis.

This dissertation is not primarily concerned with visual art but instead centers on moments in which texts stage a crisis in reading, a confrontation with unknown that often involves strife or struggle. The project's title—"Reading the Sublime"—contains a certain irony, for the sublime is precisely that which cannot be read or at least involves a difficulty in the process of reading. I thus organize my project around those moments in which my chosen texts stage, investigate, or produce perceptual crises. Edmund Burke, for example, will depict the French Revolution as an astonishing event, one which he traces to the mystery of divine will. William Godwin's *Political Justice*, on the other hand, depicts humanity's development as a voyage on an "ocean of infinite truth"—a voyage which will result in a confrontation with the limit of the thinkable. Percy Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" grapples with the impossibility of fully apprehending a mental divine—an "unseen Power" that is "dear, and yet dearer for its mystery"—and Mary Shelley's last man is confronted by a "dread blank," an uncertain future in a plague-ridden world. In each of these cases we find not only bafflement but struggle: an attempt to grasp the ungraspable, a situation in which object and spectator exist in a competitive relation, the prior interrupting or troubling thought and the latter working to achieve comprehension.

The sublime's involvement with struggle—or even combat—might be traced back to one of its earliest theorists: Longinus. Here Neil Hertz's treatment of *Peri Hypsous* provides useful direction. He begins with a familiar truism, most often attributed to Alexander Pope, though versions of it can be traced to both Boileau and Gibbons: Longinus "is himself the great sublime he draws" (1). Hertz takes the claim seriously and attempts to locate the Longinian sublime in *Peri Hypsous*. The method he employs involves tracing the text, though not in a linear fashion, as though it were an argument. He discovers thematic "slant rhymes" and a "thickening of texture," a set of repetitions and resonances among its commentaries and quotations. What emerges is a sublime of reversal, a movement from being "under death" to "being out from under death" (6). These phrases come from an example taken from Homer, but the movement they indicate possesses wider applicability. Sappho, when placed in relation to Homer, the *Phaedrus*, and Longinus's commentary, accomplishes a similar transition: "victimized body" becomes "poetic force," disintegration becomes organic unity.

After locating this victory, Hertz schematizes Longinus's commentary and finds the presence of the paradoxical:

> The grounds for comparison [of Homer and Sappho] are now seen to be not the grandeur of the hero's calling but its ambivalent connections with both violent action and the pathos of self-loss. Wordsworth's paradoxical description of the poet as "weak, as is a breaking wave," is a simile which brings together the chapter's themes of power and disintegration in a turn Longinus could appreciate. (8)

Here, then, another reversal appears, and we are now confronted with ambivalence and incompatibility, simultaneous weakness and strength. Later, Hertz will discover a further reversal. It is "in some ways a parody" of the Longinian sublime, he says, and it unfolds according to the pattern of an Oedipal conflict (16). This reversal emerges from the relation between an authority and subordinate—king/subject, father/son, master/slave—and entails a turning of the tables: the son might outwit the father or the subject expose the king to ridicule. This conflict will ultimately be associated with the relationship between *hypsos* and figurative language itself.

Hertz will turn to deception—figures used to hide figurativeness, art used to disguise art—and work to show that the sublime is vulnerable to exposure, to being revealed as mere language, but I am here most interested in its repeated involvement with strife and transition. Burke, in fact, will offer something similar to the Longinian model. There are, he tells us, "positive pleasures"—these are broadly those which we typically associate with the word—and *delight*: the sensation that results "from the cessation of pain or danger." Burke is clear that the removal of pain is not merely pleasurable. Instead, the "delight which arises from the modification of pain" will bear the marks of the "stock from which it sprung." He asks us to recollect

> in what state we have found our minds upon escaping some imminent danger, or on being released from the severity of some cruel pain. We have on such occasions found, if I am not much mistaken, the temper of our minds in a tenor very remote from that which attends the presence of positive pleasure; we have found them in a state of much sobriety,

> impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed with horror. (32)

Burke here invokes Homer, likening delight to the feeling of a hunted criminal who escapes his "native clime" and gazes on "some frontier" with feelings of wonder (32). The similarities with the Longinian sublime are apparent, but the Kantian variant also resonates with such a transition—or even "escape." Weiskel will associate Burke's and Kant's sublime with patricidal fantasy and guilt, drawing on the passage I have just quoted. Yet we need not rely on the language of psychoanalysis in order to detect sympathies between the theories, though the appeal of such a language is understandable. (Kant's reason, with its demands on an inadequate imagination, does bear resemblance to the father/superego).

Burke's immediate aim is the description of a feeling, but his reference suggests a relation to narrative. Here the criminal's homeland—a space of comfort and belonging—has become a threat. The moment of delight is precisely the moment in which the hostile environment is exchanged for new land: a frontier that produces awe (or "tranquility shadowed with horror"). Kant will similarly stage a catastrophe—a moment in which mind finds itself endangered—followed by a recuperation which appears as a "negative pleasure." We might read Kant's pursued criminal as the imagination itself and the threat a failure of perception. In Kant's mathematical variant of the sublime, for example, the imagination finds itself incapable of comprehending—or keeping up with—that which it attempts to estimate or grasp. Instead, it "strive[s] towards progress *ad infinitum*" but is unable to satisfy the demands of reason for "absolute totality" (81). Kant, by way of

example, will note that the pyramids of Egypt, when viewed from a certain distance (not too close, not too far), trouble the eye's ability to take in the whole. This failure, however, ultimately opens a new vista: the discovery of "a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses" (81).

The movements that I trace largely comport with the struggles this introduction outlines. My first chapter, for example, is interested in the French Revolution's challenge to knowledge—the interpretive difficulty it poses—and consequently treats Burke's claim that it "astonishes" seriously. Ultimately, the "hideous phantom" will be deciphered and countered, yet Burke will also associate the Revolution with divine will—the "dispensations of a mysterious wisdom"—thereby troubling the possibility complete comprehension. My chapter on Mary Shelley, to take another example, is informed by a Kantian or, more specifically, Schillerian understanding of the sublime as a movement from the pathetic to a recognition of human freedom. (In short, I argue that Shelley's depiction of the last man's future suffering comes to signify humanity's capacity to reimagine itself—even in the face of impending doom).

Monk claimed that "it would be unwise to embark on the confused seas of English theories of the sublime without having some idea as to where we are going" (6). This introduction's primary concern has not been a destination but a definition. In short, I find that the study of the sublime requires one to approach texts with something already in hand—some idea of what is to be discussed or discovered. By drawing out resonances and repeated patterns among various sublimes I do not mean to ignore the unique texture of specific sublimes or erase differences among periods and theorists. Instead, I have

attempted to provide a schematic by which individual instances of the sublime might be better approached. Consequently, my arguments, though informed by a belief in a persistent sublime, are derived from textual analysis. I hold the view—one that has remained consistent throughout this project—that making sense of a particular example of the sublime requires the reader to follow its parts wherever they might lead: thinking the logic and texture of the antecedent situation, discovering the disruption (as well as mapping its characteristics while working to explain how and why the preexisting situation produced them), and finally attempting to understand what comes out on the other side, as it were.

As I see it, the sublime both suggests a mode of analysis (a way of reading) and indicates an integral feature of a particular species of writing. My aim, then, is not only to note moments that might be named sublime but to show how large swathes of text operate according to a sublime logic or, at least, develop toward moments that are typically named sublime. Moreover, I find that the texts I study persistently enact their own readings of the sublime—proceed, in other words, as a kind of theory. I therefore do not mean to stand above my objects of study only to bring a preconfigured stamp heavily down upon them. Instead, I work to draw out the markedly individual means by which my chosen authors stage and negotiate confrontations with the unknown, mysterious, and awe-inspiring.

II. Chapter Summaries

My first chapter examines the relationship between Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and his early aesthetic treatise: *A Philosophical Enquiry into*

the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. For Burke, the social order is bound together by predictable responses to stimuli. I name this order "affective sovereignty," a term which links Burke's aesthetic, religious, and political views. But where the *Enquiry* tracks stable responses to stimuli, the *Reflections* focuses on the aberrational, finding that a hubristic form of reason holds the potential to override or block proper sentiment. Burke will ultimately analyze and combat this disturbance with figurative language, depicting the new order in terms of unnatural social nudity while contrasting the unity of his own nation with the disintegrative violence visited on France. In the end, I find that Burke's poetic language functions as a mode of analysis through which he diagnoses the sociopolitical and historical consequences of the Revolution.

The second chapter situates William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* in relation to his philosophical treatise *Political Justice.* Beginning with the latter, I trace Godwin's view that humanity's capacity for perpetual improvement promises to result in the emergence of ever-greater knowledge and suggests that a society of immortals might emerge. I find that this vision is complicated by Godwin's account of the development of alphabetical writing, which, as I read it, places a mystery at the center of human history. I next argue that *Caleb Williams* imports and amplifies *Political Justice*'s concern with the unknown, though here it is a character—Ferdinando Falkland—that troublingly resists interpretation. Ultimately, I suggest that the novel's confrontation with this challenge indicates a development in Godwin's thought: namely, a recognition that feeling is an essential component of political and social progress.

My third chapter focuses on Percy Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Here I work to understand Shelley's secular form of worship, finding that the poet approached his mental god in ways reminiscent of Neoplatonic and mystical accounts of divine obscurity. I argue that Shelley transforms skeptical accounts of knowledge into a form of apophatic, though secularized, theology, a move that allows him to articulate and hone a new mode of religious devotion. Here the imperceivable operations of mind become an object of worship that the poet approaches *via negativa*. Though Shelley finds it impossible to fully stave off the dangers of "desolation" and "vacancy," his new religion nonetheless offers justification for faithful worship of his mental divine.

I end my dissertation with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, arguing that the novel utilizes the lastness theme to imagine the potential for social and intellectual regeneration. I trace the ascent of the novel's hero—Lionel Verney—as he moves from the position of savage shepherd to godlike author. *The Last Man*'s plague, I find, undermines this journey and spurs Verney to rethink what it means to be human in relation to the ultimate limit: death. Verney, I argue, is able recuperate the possibility for change when he shifts from the position of author to reader. In the end, he becomes an explorer and thereby suggests a model of engagement with the world that points to a transformative potential. The last man's struggle will ultimately function as pedagogy, a means of spurring readers to rethink humanity's capacities and destiny.

Affective Sovereignty and Aesthetic Collapse:
Edmund Burke and the Phantom of Revolution

I. Introduction

Published in 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* exerted a large influence over the development of British aesthetics and later shaped the interpretation of Burke's political writings, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in particular. In fact, it has become common to approach the texts side by side, reading Burke's later work in relation to the *Enquiry*. As early as 1964, in fact, Neal Wood would claim that Burke's "aesthetic categories" function as a "unifying element" in his *oeuvre*, offering "a degree of coherence to the welter of words he bequeathed the world" (42). This chapter follows Wood's claim, finding that Burke makes sense of the French Revolution by drawing on concepts developed in his early aesthetic treatise.

My argument comes in three parts. First, Burke's conception of political authority has been interpreted to comfortably fit within the Natural Law tradition and stand in opposition to contract theorists, a view defended by Peter Stanlis. I agree with this position but supplement it with a focus on the role that aesthetics play in the justification and perpetuation of the social and political order, finding that Burke formulates a power greater than the political sovereign that binds individuals into a coherent community while mitigating tyrannical and antisocial tendencies. For Burke, this greater sovereign is the consequence of humans' status as created beings who experience the world in predictable ways. I name this system "affective sovereignty," a concept which is

primarily indebted to the work of four scholars: Terry Eagleton ("Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke"), Peter Stanlis (*Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*), Neal Wood ("The Aesthetic Dimension of Burke's Political Thought"), and Stephen White ("Burke on Politics, Aesthetics, and the Dangers of Modernity").

Second, I find that for Burke the French Revolution results not only in political collapse but also comes as a disturbance in the predictable feelings through which society legitimated and perpetuated itself: that is, the French Revolution was more than a political mistake, betrayal of history, or failure of language, but also marked a shift in predictable sentiment. Stephen White phrases the shift as follows: Burke comes to "to see that when political society loses its affective underpinning, the authority of government is no longer a phenomenon that evokes a sublime experience *of the sort he judges valuable*" (516). Where the *Enquiry* tracks stable aesthetic experiences, then, the *Reflections* finds unexpected deviations.

Finally, I show that Burke's aesthetic philosophy, as well as his theory of taste, become a diagnostic toolkit, a method for deciphering the Revolution. In particular, he will think through the problem posed by the Revolution with figural language, depicting the aesthetic disturbance as the birth of a new order destitute of "taste and elegance"—an order that comes as a "hideous phantom." The catastrophe Burke tracks, then, is not only the story of collapse or simple negation but also the story of creation: the emergence of a new, "monstrous" double of the old order. Burke will ultimately diagnose this new order in terms of unnatural nudity—a stripping of society's "decent drapery"—while playing the unity of the British constitution against the disintegrative effects of the French

Revolution. In the end, I suggest that his writings on the Revolution might in part be read as enactments of the "distant" judgments he lauds in the *Enquiry*.

II. Affective Sovereignty

Two strands of Burke's thought help clarify his political views. The first is the Natural Law tradition. Broadly speaking, Burke can be said to adhere to the view that immutable principles remain persistent throughout human history. The parliamentary summary of Burke's remarks during the trial of Warren Hastings, which I extract from Peter Stanlis's study, is instructive:

> [He]…laid it down as a general principle, that all law and all sovereignty were derived from Heaven…[and that] every nation…breathe[s] but one spirit, one principle, equal distributive justice between man and man, and the protection of one individual from the encroachments of the rest. (65)

The second strand could be called Burke's theory of organic development, a position that holds that society functions as a slow-moving organism that develops over time. This view is articulated by Burke when he advocates for careful reform (rather than hotheaded innovation) and is also related to his view that the government and society of Britain function as an "entailed inheritance" or "contract" between the living, dead, and those yet to be born. Though it might seem that this second strand is in tension with the first (how could a conception of unchanging "Natural Law" coincide with historically realized communities?), Stanlis harmonizes the two views as follows:

> For Burke, civil society is organic, not in any evolutionary sense that it follows laws of mechanical necessity, but as a creation of human corporate

> reason and will, or wisdom and power, working analogically through precedents and historical continuity to fulfill the unchangeable principles and spirit of moral Natural Law. (99)

Though these two strands of scholarship account for much of Burke's political vision, another focuses on his aesthetic work. This chapter takes a similar approach, finding it productive to place Burke's political texts in conversation with the *Enquiry*.

Burke organizes his study of aesthetics around the sublime and beautiful and analyzes these categories by hypothesizing physiological and psychological responses to a variety of stimuli: smells, sounds, light and darkness, "obscure" language, and so on. That said, Burke's treatment of the sublime and the beautiful is not neatly separable from other aspects of his thought. Stephen White writes that Burke "kept aesthetic reflections intimately entangled with moral-political concerns." To speak of aesthetics, then, was also to "speak of power, gender, moral sentiment, tradition, and social hierarchy" (508). All of these issues will become important to my argument, but here I wish to highlight two of Burke's claims about the nature of sensory experience: 1) the human mind is uniform and 2) aesthetic experience is involuntary (or at least largely predictable).

Burke opens the *Enquiry* with an essay on taste where he provides a defense of a universal human mind, claiming that it is "probable that the standard of both reason and taste is the same in all human creatures" (11). He later claims that any study of taste necessitates uniform cognitive traits, "for if Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labor is like to be employed to very little purpose" (12). That said, Burke does allow that

individuals possess varying levels of sensitivity to external stimuli, note that differences of opinion might emerge when judging slight differences among objects—the relative smoothness of similar tables, for example—and claim that taste is subject to an individual's sophistication, education, and experience. What emerges, ultimately, is a tripart theory of taste:

> On the whole it appears to me, that what is called Taste, in its most general acceptation, is not a simple idea, but is partly made up of a perception of the primary pleasures of sense, of the secondary pleasures of the imagination, and of the conclusions of the reasoning faculty, concerning the various relations of these, and concerning the human passions, manners and actions. (22)

The first two elements of taste ("primary pleasures of sense" and "secondary pleasures of the imagination") are uniform, varying only in degrees of intensity based on an individual's sensitivity to stimuli. Likewise, Burke will find that aesthetic experience is uniform. (Objects possess properties that yield predictable results). It is only through the final element of taste (the reasoning faculty) that an individual is able to reflect on prior sensations. As Neal Wood notes, it is not reason "but the passions arising from the workings of the imagination that cause the individual to focus upon a particular thing or activity and stir him to admiration or abhorrence," yet reason might be subsequently "brought into play to analyze the object of perception" (46).

Consequently, Burke claims that although individuals will always similarly experience stimuli, their judgments will alter based differing levels of critical sophistication:

> Wherever the best Taste differs from the worst, I am convinced that the understanding operates and nothing else: and its operation is in reality far from being always sudden…Men of the best Taste by consideration, come frequently to change these early and precipitate judgments…It is known that the Taste…is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise. (25)

Good taste and good judgement, for Burke, are closely related. In order to achieve sensible analyses of objects one must obtain distance, a period after the initial physiological and imaginative response to stimuli. Sudden judgements are therefore suspect, while judgments that rely on reflection, study, and practice tend to lead to better results. What Burke offers, then, is a two-order system of sensory experience, the first a universal response to objects and concepts. In this phase of perceptual experience—again, primary pleasures of sense and secondary pleasures of the imagination—all individuals are bound together by uniform responses to stimuli that vary only in terms of intensity. It is only in the second order—the moment in which the reasoning faculty is engaged—that a more aristocratic vision emerges. Here Burke claims that analyses of uniform responses to stimuli are both alterable and unequal. Therefore "taste" in the

sense of judgment implies a limited community comprised of those who have improved their reasoning faculties through careful practice.

A consequence of this first rule—the uniformity of the human mind, at least in terms of immediate responses to stimuli—is the second: that aesthetic experience is involuntary. By this I simply mean that Burke claims that one cannot "wish" for a certain object or concept to be productive of the sublime or beautiful: it either is or isn't. Neal Wood:

> One of Burke's essential arguments is that the passions of self-preservation and of society are directly produced without the intervention of reason. Likewise reason has little to do with one's recognition of the sublime and the beautiful. Even the recognition of qualities of mind, virtuous behavior, is directly by means of the passions. Hence Burke seems to contend that the peculiar structure of the passions makes man what he is, and is a mark of God's infinite wisdom. (45)

Aesthetic experience, we might say, involves a kind of overpowering force—the appearance of a potent stimulus that activates a predictable response in the mind of the perceiver. For Burke, the aesthetic (or the felt experience which results from the mind being confronted with stimuli) is analogous to gravity: it is a constitutive aspect of reality, an unalterable part of the fabric of human existence. Fittingly, Burke will also claim that taste is much less contentious than matters which only require the use of the reasoning faculty, writing that "on the whole one may observe that there is rather less

difference upon matters of Taste among mankind, than upon most of those which depend upon…naked reason" (23).

The involuntary nature of aesthetic experience holds true for both beauty and sublimity, though it is much more apparent in the latter because "pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure," and it is ultimately the fear of pain that undergirds sublime experience: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible…is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). In its most potent form the sublime manifests as "astonishment," a state in which "all the motions [of the soul] are suspended, with some degree of horror…the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other…it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53).

Burke's conception of beauty, on the other hand, has been interpreted as the precise inverse of his conception of the sublime. In this reading the relationship between the sublime and beautiful is fundamentally oppositional or binary: strong/weak, masculine/feminine, infinite/limited, and so on. Burke himself, in fact, will insist on the difference, likening the sublime and beautiful to the colors black and white. Though these colors might blend, it does not follow that the two are the same (114). But though beauty is of a different nature than the sublime, it operates according to similar principles. Burke writes that because "beauty is a thing much too affecting not to depend upon some positive qualities" and "since it is no creature of our reason, since it strikes us without any reference to use…we must conclude that beauty is, for the greater part, some quality

in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses" (102). Therefore, though much is made of the power of the sublime, Burke nonetheless finds that beauty also has the power to compel predictable responses, "mechanically" acting on the perceiver. Beauty "strikes us" in such a way that a predictable response is activated, and, as Burke says, "there is no need of the concurrence of our will" (100).

The power which Burke ascribes to aesthetic experience is remarkable, so it is unsurprising that the political ramifications of the *Enquiry* remain a persistent topic of scholarship. Yet the relation among Burke's aesthetic, religious, and political views are difficult to track. Even when one brackets the aesthetic dimension of the question, attempts to make sense of Burke's conception of Natural Law and its relation to his politics are faced with challenges. Stephen White, for example, notes that some consider Burke's commentary on Natural Law to be both "rhetorical" and "platitudinous" (4). My primary aim is not to investigate Burke's views on Natural Law, but I do find that those views might be productively read in relation to his aesthetic theories. Belief in a divinely inspired order is always humming in the background of Burke's thought, and his understanding of aesthetics offers insight into how that order relates to social realities and political life.

Unlike contract theorists, Burke does not postulate a primitive "state of nature." As Peter Stanlis notes, "Burke always refused to consider the nature of man or origins of government in terms of any non-civil, pre-institutional, or prehistorical state of nature" (128). In fact, Burke satirizes the concept in his "Vindication of Natural Society" and, in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, reverses its accepted meaning:

> The state of civil society…is a state of nature; and much more truly so than a savage and incoherent mode of life. For man is by nature reasonable; and he is never perfectly in his natural state, but when he is placed where reason may be best cultivated, and most predominates. (108)

Like the state of nature, the appearance of a contract in Burke signals something different than a conscious agreement resulting in an exit from a primitive origin. Burke's "contract" signifies the relation of citizens to a kind of organic totality, the social order passed down through the generations and slowly developing over time. Consequently, the state—a particular manifestation the intergenerational social order—occupies an elevated position in Burke's political vision. He writes that "society is indeed a contract. Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure—but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee" (96). Rather than signal an overt political theory, the contract that Burke names is one of rhetorical emphasis: the state is "more than" an agreement in its prosaic sense. It exists beyond a simple use-function and is of a different order than the sorts of contracts which bind business arrangements.

But if in Burke's theory there is no primitive antecedent which produces a founding moment, how does the state legitimate and perpetuate itself? History and God quickly come to mind, and Burke certainly believes both are necessary, but these interpretations elide his suspicion of overconfident "reason" (a topic I will more thoroughly address in the fourth section of this chapter). Both theories, in other words, rest on the assumption of rational individuals concluding that the state is legitimate

because of heavenly inspiration or historical precedent. But Burke complicates this line of thought just as it appears he is supporting it:

> [F]rom the Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right, it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity…without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves an unity in so great a diversity of parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors. This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following Nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it. (33)

The first section of this quotation portrays the British government (its institutions and liberties) as the product of history or an entailed inheritance. But the last sentence contradicts or, alternatively, corrects itself. In the first half, Burke claims that the British constitution is the result of “profound reflection” and in the second he claims it is the result of “wisdom without reflection and above it.” It is in this tension between thought (profound reflection) and the God-given (“following Nature”) that the links among Burke’s understanding of Natural Law, aesthetics, and the political appear.

For Burke the properly functioning state is not only a rationally agreed upon distribution of power or the product of historical continuity but also the effect of

humanity's nature as created, feeling beings. It is an entity that needn't rely on overt force to subordinate and incorporate citizens but instead elicits obedience and forms communal bonds through the sentiments of citizens. My claim, put differently, is that for Burke the state is an entity that holds a particular physiological and psychological relationship with its subjects, an affective relationship that forms the connective tissue of the social order. If Natural Law provides the backbone of Burke's vision, the affective and aesthetic comprise the detailed explanation of how humans relate to and perpetuate the social order.

What ultimately emerges in Burke's writing, then, is what I will call an "affective sovereign," by which I mean a system of ordering, policing, and recruiting individuals in a coherent political body through the human mind's uniform response to stimuli. Affective sovereignty is a perpetual and "pre-rational" activity, existing prior to conscious thought, and its result is an intergenerational social order that citizens comprise and perpetuate. Its legitimacy, in other words, comes not only through mindful decision making, a monopoly on violence, or even historical processes, but also through that which precedes and shapes reason: natural feeling.

Since I am in part describing the acceptance of a preexisting social order, affective sovereignty perhaps sounds suspiciously similar to "ideology," and it will come as no surprise that Marxist theorists have suggested this view. Terry Eagleton, for example, argues that the aesthetic "marks the way in which structures of power became gradually transmuted into structures of feeling, ethical doctrine dissolved into the spontaneous texture of subjective life" (54). In this interpretation, the aesthetic is a

byproduct of power and time. Over the course of history, the brutality of the state slackens and eventually its dictates are no longer enforced through violence, instead taking the form of unconscious beliefs and "feelings." The aesthetic, in other words, functions as a kind of social background noise, the barely audible hum that comprises the "texture of subjective life." Thus Eagleton interprets Burke's sublime as a "suitably defused, aestheticized version of the values of the *Ancién Regime*" (57).

Though it is clear that Burke's account of the aesthetic function of the state and social order includes a softening effect in which brutality is mitigated (a topic I will shortly discuss), its fundamental operations are not primarily ideological, at least if we read Burke on his own terms. Again, Burke conceives of aesthetic experience as a predictable feature of human existence and finds that states—individual manifestations of what he will call "eternal society"—are humankind's natural habitat. Burke reads these units—the individual and the state—as expressions of the natural order. One might say that for Burke the relationship between citizen and social order is analogous to the relationship between a honeybee and flower. The two are made for each other and exist in a symbiotic relationship which transcends historical development or intentional, directed political action.

Still, Eagleton's reading helps us understand the power which Burke ascribes to aesthetic experience. He finds that the "aesthetic signals the birth of a new kind of spontaneous consensus among social subjects, one whose locus is neither the state (ultimately a coercive force) nor civil society (a place of atomised, competitive individuals) but the realm of 'culture' itself" (55). Jason Frank will note something

similar, writing that Burke's "vision of authority" functions as a "complex tapestry of social relations, sustained by aesthetic response:"

> For Burke, authority is not only dispersed vertically across generations but also horizontally across the richly textured practices of social interaction. Authority is not lodged in the state's formal legal institutions, but interwoven into the subjective experiences of daily life that produce and sustain those institutions. (12)

That authority, however, is derived not only from coercion or political history but from human nature, what Wood calls the "peculiar structure of the passions [that] makes man what he is" (45). In fact, Burke's aesthetic philosophy might be read as a fitting complement to (or even extension of) his belief in Natural Law. Peter Stanlis summarizes the general precepts of Natural Law (those agreed upon in both classical and Scholastic traditions) as follows:

> Natural Law was an emanation of God's reason and will, revealed to all mankind. Since fundamental moral laws were self-evident, all normal men were capable through unaided "right reason" of perceiving the moral difference between right and wrong. The Natural Law was an eternal, unchangeable universal ethical norm or standard, whose validity was independent of man's will; therefore, at all times, in all circumstances and everywhere it bound all individuals, races, nations and governments. (7)

The knowledge of right and wrong—shared by all "normal men"—finds its match in humanity's uniform responses stimuli, responses that operate "independent of man's

will," to use Stanlis's phrase. Burke's Christianity is essential here since what he ultimately works to delineate is the God-ordained order of the world. His politico-aesthetic vision might also be named a kind of political theology centered on an investigation of the nature of humans as created, social beings. Our moral sense, political sense, and aesthetic sense, comprise essential features of human existence and direct us toward particular arrangements. Rather than read the aesthetic as a byproduct of history or strategy for pacifying the masses, then, Burke offers an interpretation of what it means to be human in political communities, and he suggests that individuals are made citizens through their innate nature as feeling creatures. Aesthetic sensibility, in other words, is something like the pre-installed hardware with which humanity interfaces with its natural habitat (the state and social order).

Though much has been made of the way Burke theorizes the sublime and beautiful as separate phenomena, they function as a unit in a sociopolitical context. In fact, Burke depicts a system of aesthetic equilibrium in which the sublime and beautiful achieve a kind of symmetry, the gentleness of the latter balancing the intensity of the former. Luke Gibbons has argued along similar lines, writing that "the violence of 'the sublime' is required to restore order and instill awe and respect, but to maintain social harmony and tranquility it is necessary to utilize the ameliorating influence of 'the beautiful'" (30). Neal Wood, too, has noticed this dynamic, rendering Burke's vision as a kind (though stern) father who "must rely upon more than love and trust to keep his children in order" (56).

To be sure, the sublime is a violent force. In fact, Burke directly links it with fear, one of the most powerful emotions humans can experience. He writes in the *Enquiry* that "the power which arises from the institution of kings and commanders" comes from its "connection" with terror, a relationship that explains why "sovereigns are frequently addressed with the title of *dread majesty*" (62). But the sublime does not only produce abject trembling before power. It also produces feelings of reverence, admiration, and respect, what Burke calls the "inferior" manifestations of the sublime (53). Society, Burke claims, "is to be looked on with other reverence" because it is not of a "perishable nature" (96). The citizen-spectator, in other words, is not only required to tremble before the infinity of the social order but also marvel at it.

Ultimately, however, it is the beautiful that most effectively balances the terror Burke associates with the sublime. He notes that while those "qualities of the mind" which "cause admiration" produce "terror rather than love," the beautiful "engage[s] our hearts" and "impress[es] us with a sense of loveliness" through the "softer virtues" such as "easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality" (100). Although Burke privileges the sublime, the beautiful nonetheless fulfills an essential function by helping to "bind men together into a viable harmonious whole, a true community" (Wood 57). It will come as no surprise, then, that Burke claims in the *Reflections* that in order to "love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (78).

Burke concludes his comparison of the sublime and beautiful by recalling an anecdote from an "ingenious friend" (101). The two halves of aesthetic experience, he says, are analogous to a mother and father. The latter, a representative of the sublime, is a

source of law and thus elicits admiration and respect, but we are “hinder[ed]… from having that entire love for him” because of his position of authority (101). On the other hand, we are able to achieve a more perfect love for mothers because of their “fondness and indulgence” (101). But in this analogy the sublime father and beautiful mother do not comprise a strict binary. Rather, the attributes of the two are fused in a third character: We have “a great love for our grandfathers,” Burke writes, because [the father’s] “authority is removed a degree from us, and…the weakness of age mellows…into something of a feminine partiality” (101). Stephen White claims that “in the figure of the grandfather we find an object in which…two sorts of sentiments are entwined:”

> The fear-evoking power of the father…is now no longer an immediate threat; indeed, fear is replaced by a feeling of care for one in whom a debilitated condition functions similarly to the generalized ‘weakness and imperfection’ of the female. (517-518)

Yet the fear of the father is not entirely absent since “authority is removed a degree from us,” not removed entirely. That degree, however, proves essential to the production of affection alongside feelings of respect. Thus what I have called the affective sovereign, that system of feeling which Burke believes arises from God-ordained human nature and structures the political and social world, might also be called the “rule of the grandfather” when it takes its healthiest, most natural form.

Though rendering the affective sovereign as a grandfatherly figure implies a modest and restrained system, Burke’s regime of feeling nonetheless relates to an

enormous and mysterious order, an order in which the past, present and future as well as the spiritual and physical are linked:

> It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. (96-97)

A single generation, for Burke, is no match for the "eternal," intergenerational social order because it only represents a solitary link. This order, secured by a "fixed compact" and "inviolable oath," is willed by God and should be resistant to dissolution or division. Though Burke will suggest that necessity might spur a resort to anarchy, the "municipal corporations" of this "universal kingdom" are not at liberty to "separate and tear asunder the bands of their subordinate community" in the pursuit of a "contingent improvement" (97). Pierre Lurbe notes that Burke's vision is anachronistic, recalling medieval scholasticism: "an understanding of the cosmos as an ordered, hierarchical whole, made of a chain of beings" (17). Here we might also note that Burke's hierarchy—"eternal

society," individual states, and the citizenry that comprise them—takes on the character of language: the whole a sentence, the individual state a "subordinate clause."

Burke's eloquence, however, failed to convince Thomas Paine who remained unimpressed with Burke's defense of an intergenerational order—as well his view that society functions as an "entailed inheritance:"

> Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the age and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. (91-92)

Why, Paine asks, should the dead have authority over the living? Such a system is not "gentle" but rather (absurdly) despotic. For Burke, I suggest, the answer, at least in part, originates outside limited human reason. Burke's description of the "primaeval contract of eternal society," rather than simply constitute a direct argument, also functions as an evocation. It is not only the longevity of society (or its divine sanction) that subordinates and incorporates individuals. Instead, the activation of appropriate sentiment is needed to bind the intergenerational order together. Consequently, the reader must complete Burke's argument, not only with the head, but with the heart. Yet Burke is faced with a problem. Awe, respect, and love have been rejected. Indeed, as Burke would have it, an entire nation has become insensible.

III. Aesthetic Collapse

The French Revolution, for Burke, isn't just a catastrophic "political" event in the prosaic sense of the word. Instead, it poses a philosophical problem that relates to the order of the world and human nature. The *Reflections*, then, contains more than a repetition of the *Enquiry*'s themes. Though Burke returns to the concepts outlined in the *Enquiry* and often bolsters them, he nonetheless rethinks previous arguments by facing the problem of history: events colliding with theory. Burke's language, in fact, repeatedly frames the French Revolution as a monstrous, unsettling, and aberrational event, a startingly new phenomenon that posed significant interpretive challenges to those who wished to map its significance. As Ronald Paulson notes, many found the French Revolution to be "outside their experience and accustomed vocabulary—as Burke put it…'the most astonishing [thing] that has hitherto happened in the world'" (1-2).

William Musgrave reads Burke's language of monstrosity and unnaturalness as a response to the aesthetic vandalism of the revolutionaries:

> Edmund Burke declares the new Republic to have been born "out of nature" with a "monster of a constitution" embodying "that monstrous fiction," the promise of political and material equality for all citizens. One year later, in "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," he embellishes this judgment by proclaiming "[t]hat what was done in France was an attempt to methodize anarchy; to perpetuate and fix disorder. That it was a foul, impious, monstrous thing, wholly out of the course of moral Nature." (3)

Musgrave writes that Burke condemns the French Revolution primarily because of its "bad taste" and finds that the "monstrous figure haunting Burke's *Reflections*" is the "logical—if unnatural—offspring of his sensationist aesthetic theory" (3). More particularly, Musgrave will argue that Burke locates the threat posed by revolutionaries in their valorization of "subjective agency," a new relation to the social order which undermined the constraints of "custom and nature" (3). Here Musgrave draws on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu—and his concept of habitus in particular—ultimately finding that the term functions analogously to Burke's aesthetic and political outlook. The unwritten constitution, in other words, is "turned into nature," thereby disguising its status as a human construct (20). In a way, then, Musgrave revives or extends Eagleton's criticisms.

Burke, no doubt, locates human nature outside of historical processes, and it is also clear that he fears lasting damage is being done to the social and political order. For Burke, the problem is difficult. The revolution in France was not simply a mistake—even a monstrous one—but instead seemed to challenge those aspects of human nature that should be most secure. Here, again, I suggest that we would do well to take Burke on his own terms since he theorizes this disturbance in predictable patterns of feeling in the *Reflections.* In the end, Burke will make sense of the event, but he will do so with the assistance of figurative language, playing the unity of his own nation against the disintegrative vandalism of the revolutionaries.

Steven Blakemore similarly reads Burke's counterrevolutionary work in terms of language, finding that he frames the Revolution as a repetition of biblical catastrophe: "a

second Fall, a second Babel, a second Golgotha in which the cosmic ordering of the Logos, the sanctity and authority of the word is…assaulted" (52). In this interpretation, the struggle which Burke engages in is framed as a "linguistic" battle to "reestablish the context, the circumstances, the history, the meaning of words" (51). Burke's opponent, then, is an "unnatural" or distorted false language in which stable meaning has been annihilated, replaced by an incoherent "new Babel," a catastrophe which manifests as a split between "words and 'facts'" (49). Burke's aim, according to Blakemore, is to reconstitute the old, classical language in which the real world and the world of words are no longer separated but exist in harmony.

Reading the *Reflections* as an attempt to reestablish a secure relationship between words and meaning has much to recommend it. Burke is concerned that a kind of madness has gripped the world (a failure to properly perceive) and he also complains of sophistical thinking. Yet Burke himself was often accused of using language in misleading ways. After the publication of the *Reflections*, the flurry of rejoinders Burke received regularly included criticism of his stylistic choices. Moreover, Burke's most famous detractors worked to convince readers that their own arguments were expressed in an honest, transparent fashion. It was, in other words, Burke who was the dishonest trickster, hiding his sophistry behind a veneer of emotional, ornate prose.

For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Men* foregrounded criticism of Burke's language: "I have not yet learned to twist my periods, nor, in the equivocal idiom of politeness, to disguise my sentiments, and imply what I should be afraid to utter" (5). This attack frames Burke as an obfuscator, hiding behind a

veneer of high-flown prose, while simultaneously positioning Wollstonecraft as an authentic author who communicates hard truths unadorned by stylistic gymnastics. But Wollstonecraft's negative evaluation of Burke's language is supplemented by a critique his aesthetic theory. Ultimately, she reformulates his interpretation of the sublime and beautiful:

> If, therefore, in the course of this epistle, I chance to express contempt, and even indignation, with some emphasis, I beseech you to believe that it is not a flight of fancy; for truth, in morals, has ever appeared to me the essence of the sublime; and, in taste, simplicity the only criterion of the beautiful. (5)

If, for Wollstonecraft, Burke's declamations are little more than self-indulgent fantasies crafted in the service of illegitimate power, her own criticisms represent a more genuine sublime, a sublime she later defines in relationship to her belief in God. Wollstonecraft writes that she "bend[s] with awful reverence" when contemplating the Almighty, "whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good" (33). In the end, however, it is not the power of an arbitrary will which subordinates her. Instead, she submits to a God of "unerring reason," a submission that results in "enlightened self-love" and "self-respect" (33). For Wollstonecraft, then, sublimity does not only result in a reduction of the self, as it often does with Burke—he will claim that we are "annihilated" when contemplating God—but also involves an expansion of the mind, a recognition of the power of one's own reason. Burke, Wollstonecraft claims, refuses to appreciate the power of the human mind. Instead, he is blinded by a "mortal antipathy to reason" and

hobbled by the belief that "*feelings* should lead us to excuse…the venerable vestiges of ancient days" (8).

Thomas Paine, arguing in a similar vein, attacks Burke's "gay and flowery" prose as both irksome and intellectually hollow. "Burke's language," he writes, "continually recedes and presents itself at a distance before you; but when you have got as far as you can go, there is no point at all" (100). In the end, Paine claims that Burke is more sentimentalist than serious thinker:

> As to the tragic paintings by which Mr. Burke has outraged his own imagination, and seeks to work upon that of his readers, they are very well calculated for theatrical representation, where facts are manufactured for the sake of show, and accommodated to produce, through the weakness of sympathy, a weeping effect. But Mr. Burke should recollect that he is writing history, and not plays, and that his readers will expect truth, and not the…rant of high-toned exclamation. (100)

Paine's and Wollstonecraft's attack on what they see as the *Reflections'* overemotional, insubstantial, and fact-free prose highlights an important distinction between Burke's view of language and the view of many of his critics. For Burke, "high-toned exclamation," to use Paine's disapproving phrase, is not an extravagance or self-indulgent effusion but rather works to evoke emotional responses in readers, responses that Burke believes are both natural and healthy.

In fact, it isn't hard to imagine Burke, in some limited sense, agreeing with certain charges levelled against him. For example, Paine's criticism that Burke's language

"continually recedes and presents itself" is reasonably close to Burke's description of the sublime effect of obscure language. In the *Enquiry*, he notes that in obscure writing "all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (55). For Burke, then, language should not always be transparent. Often, in fact, it needs to hide something in order to reveal or evoke something else. Burke is a literary writer, does believe that "feelings" should make us love the "vestiges of ancient days," and finds that the properly functioning state necessarily involves a kind of theatricality in order to bind individuals into a coherent community.

Burke writes that the English "fear God" and "look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility" (86). Here five of Burke's terms relate to his understanding of aesthetics. God produces fear while subordinate authorities produce the sublime's "inferior" manifestations: kings (awe), priests (reverence), nobility (respect). Parliaments, on the other hand, produce affection—and so track more closely to the beautiful—while magistrates are associated with duty. For Burke, however, these emotional responses are not insubstantial or superfluous but the essential binding elements of political and social life:

> [W]hen such ideas [that is, ideas of authorities and institutions] are brought before our minds it is natural to have such feelings; because all other feelings are false and spurious and tend to corrupt our minds, to vitiate our primary morals, to make us unfit for rational liberty, and, by teaching us a servile, licentious, and abandoned insolence, to be our low

> sport for a few holidays, to make us perfectly fit for, and justly deserving of, slavery through the whole course of our lives. (86-87)

But though Burke believes that affective responses are both natural and necessary, he does not advocate unruly emotivism. In fact, he finds that the stimulation of emotion, if carried out improperly, poses dangers to the social and political order. For example, Burke accuses the revolutionaries of a kind of bad or corrupted theatre. Stephen White, in fact, will associate the revolutionaries' "production of marvels" with a "false sublime" (520-521). Ronald Paulson will also suggest that Burke reads the Revolution as a "false sublime"—he will associate it with the grotesque—but further claims that Burke wished, in his own writing, to push the revolutionary tumult into the realm of terror:

> [Burke] remembers his earlier words in the *Philosophical Enquiry* that "terror is a passion which always produces delight when it does not press too close," and now he wants it to press close. He does not want the Revolution to produce "delighted horror" because he intends for its "pain and terror to be so modified [by contact with reality] as to be actually noxious." He does not want his reader to feel safe. (71)

Though Burke undoubtedly seeks to impress upon readers the terrible aspects of the Revolution—to show that it is not safe—he also works to deflate revolutionary spectacle. Burke writes that he "takes no interest" in the new regime's "confederations," "spectacles," "civic feasts," or "enthusiasm," finding them all to be "mere tricks" (191). But as Burke would have it, the sublime he names is precisely what corrupted

"spectacles" are not: it is "real," natural, and right, a safeguard against debauchery, immorality, and chaos.

Revolutionary theatrics, on the other hand, lack the necessary "cement" to bind the nation together. French paper currency, Burke finds, is a substitute for such a binding element, but it is ultimately an unsatisfactory one:

> I cannot deny that the operation of the confiscation [of church property] and the paper currency—one depending on the other—may for some time compose some sort of cement, if their madness and folly in the management, and in the tempering of the parts together, does not produce a repulsion at the very outset. But allowing the scheme to have some coherence and some duration, it appears to me that if…the confiscation turns out not to be sufficient to support the paper coinage (as I am morally certain it will not), then, instead of cementing, it will add infinitely to the dissociation, distraction, and confusion of these confederate republics. (191)

For Burke, however, what cements the social order is not gaudy spectacle, currency, or "naked reason" but innate human feelings—chief among them the sublime and beautiful—which produce predictable and virtuous patterns of behavior. In short, Burke supports what might be called "God's theatre"—that is, the theatre of the real:

> Why do I feel so differently from the Reverend Dr. Price, and those of his lay flock who will choose to adopt the sentiments of his discourse?—For this plain reason: Because it is *natural* I should; because we are so made

> as to be affected at such spectacles with melancholy sentiments upon the unstable condition of mortal prosperity, and the tremendous uncertainty of human greatness; because in those natural feelings we learn great lessons; because in events like these our passions instruct our reason; because, when kings are hurled from their thrones by the Supreme Director of this great drama, and become the objects of insult to the base and of pity to the good, we behold such disasters in the moral as we should behold a miracle in the physical order of things. We are alarmed into reflection; our minds (as it has long since been observed) are purified by terror and pity; our weak, unthinking pride is humbled under the dispensations of a mysterious wisdom. (80)

Here Burke reiterates the view that phenomena should produce predictable responses, but he also reads the Revolution as a result of divine will—the "dispensations of a mysterious wisdom"—thereby foreclosing the possibility of complete understanding. The Revolution, indeed, is a spectacle, but it is a spectacle that might be traced back to the "Supreme Director" of reality itself. That said, Burke still finds that the Revolution comes as an interpretive challenge. It is alarming, a shock that stimulates thought, though thought tempered by humility (and purified by "terror" and "pity"). Ultimately, the *Reflections* is written in response to this disturbance, a disturbance that mirrors "a miracle in the physical order of things."

Price and his congregants—as well as the "base" who hurl "insults"—indicate a fundamental shift in affective response that requires explanation. As Burke would have it,

the French still "reason"—though they do so coldly and poorly—but no longer properly feel. The head and heart no longer operate in harmony, a discordancy that results in national butchery: "the present French power is the very first body of citizens who, having obtained full authority to do with their country what they pleased, have chosen to cut it up in this barbarous manner" (183). The division of France into "cantons, departments, and communes," then, is the result not of intellect guided by feelings but a "geometrical" and "mathematical" scheme which regards the nation as a "conquered country." Lack of proper sentiment ultimately results in unnatural dismemberment. Burke tells us that we "always see with a pity not unmixed with respect the errors of those who are timid and doubtful of themselves in matters concerning the happiness of mankind." However, France's new government suffers from both hubris and hardheartedness and so lacks "the tender, parental solicitude that fears to cut up the infant for the sake of an experiment" (167).

The *Reflections* stages this disturbance in predictable and proper feeling, a staging that could be read as an attempt to overcome the event and its consequences by recreating it in language. In fact, the most famous passage from the *Reflections* can be read as a dramatization of one of the text's fundamental complaints: the failure of citizens to properly feel. Positioning himself as a reverential spectator, Burke describes Marie Antoinette in glowing terms:

> It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above

> the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in, glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendor, and joy. (75)

Here Burke evokes elements of both the sublime and beautiful in his description of the queen. Antoinette, in Burke's rendering, is exceptionally feminine, so delicate and light that she "hardly [seems] to touch" the earth. Yet, at the same time, she is separated from the French people by an unbridgeable distance. The queen is not only delicate and lovely but also occupies an "elevated sphere." The metaphor Burke ultimately settles on—"morning-star, full of life"—indicates both sublimity and beauty: it is lovely, to be sure, but it is also "splendid" and powerful at the same time, a combination which should elicit both love and respect.

Yet just as Burke portrays Antoinette as a model representative of a healthy social order, he also stages the catastrophic intrusion of history:

> Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic, distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor, and of cavaliers. (75-76)

In these lines Burke admits defeat while simultaneously attempting to revive appropriate sentiment by explicitly naming those emotions which Antoinette once elicited—"distant,

respectful love"—as well as highlighting her current, vulnerable situation. This latter move is clearly an attempt to prompt sympathy, a feeling, according to Burke, which makes it impossible to be "indifferent spectators" to human suffering (41). Thus the *Reflections'* impassioned language, in part, can be read as an attempt to resuscitate the fading affective relationships that once bound the French social order together: an attempt, in other words, to stage a scene of distress and thereby reactive appropriate sentiment.

But after evoking the old order through his depiction of Antoinette, Burke's rendition ends in unsettling passivity. The French citizens remain unmoved by the queen's condition, or, even worse, threaten her with rape: "I should have thought," Burke writes, that "gallant" men would appropriately respond to a queen in danger, that "ten thousand swords must have leapt from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult" (76). Of course, this too is a strategy, an attempt to prick the conscience and spur action. But it also might be read as a recognition of an important sociopolitical shift. A fissure has appeared in the order of things. As Burke puts it, "the age of chivalry is gone" (76).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Paine was amused by Burke's lament for the passing of chivalry, comparing his nostalgia to Cervantes' comic hero: "In the rhapsody of his imagination he has discovered a world of windmills, and his sorrows are that there are no Quixotes to attack them" (100). In one sense, Paine has struck Burke where he is weakest. After all, the depiction of Antoinette and the failure of the French to appropriately respond to her perilous condition is, in a sense, the depiction of his own

failure to anticipate the possibility of an event like the French Revolution, a failure that Burke signals by repeating the phrase "I should have thought." But Burke does not assent to Paine's criticism, finding the world to be filled with pretend menaces that turn out to be nothing more than windmills. Instead, new dangers appear.

IV. Unendurable Void

Burke's motivation for writing the *Reflections* at first appears obvious: he wished to persuade hostile audiences and rouse sympathetic ones. However, F.P. Lock has noted a development in scholarship that interprets Burke's work as ahistorical and literary. He writes that "recent critics have given Paine's indictment a new gloss" and have "conced[ed] the essentially fictional nature of the *Reflections*" (18). Among this group of scholars, Lock names Peter Hughes, Tom Furniss, and Ronald Paulson, quoting the last asserting that "poetic language and images make little or no claim on the real world of what actually happened in the phenomenon called the French Revolution" (20).

For Paulson, the problem of representation—"how…to represent something…unprecedented" (1)—results in the deployment of figural language which, in part, is derived from what is familiar to the writer. But Paulson is also interested in the ways in which the unfamiliar shapes representations and how those representations, in turn, become referents. For example, Paulson will claim that Burke's *Reflections* would "itself become a referent, for which revolutionaries and counterrevolutionaries found their own signifiers and signifieds." Here "making" representations comes to overtake "matching" representations with historical events (5). My primary concern has not been to make claims about the historical veracity of Burke's remarks—to match what he says

to what the best historical accounts tell us what happened. Whatever the case, I am unequipped for such a project. I am, however, interested in his figural language as more than artistic expression (however innovative it might be) or persuasive strategy (however skillful). Paulson will emphasize that his study is not about "politics or even history but about art and representation" (5-6). Yet he will also claim that his work "incidentally [reveals]…what people thought the French Revolution was…how people came to understand, assimilate, or make bearable (or usable) so astonishing and agonizing an experience" (6). It is precisely this attempt to "understand" that I find most interesting in Burke's political writing, and I argue that his poetic language—a language which so often operates in relation to his aesthetic theories—helps us see how he came to decode the event. Burke's "fiction," in other words, is itself a mode of thought and means of analysis. In this section I work to show that Burke comes to map the consequences and causes of the Revolution by reference to unnatural social nudity, while framing the Revolution as a transitional event with world historical significance.

Burke's language of loss and separation is intimately tied to what I have named affective sovereignty. He articulates the old system, that chivalric mode of life, by naming a series of oppositions that recall the alliance of sublimity and beauty: "Never, never more, shall we behold a generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom" (76). Simultaneous servitude and freedom, dignity and obedience, are, for Burke, the results of a "mixed system of opinion and sentiment" that subordinates both kings and citizens "without confounding ranks,"

thereby creating an order of "noble equality" that "obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem" and "compelled stern authority to submit to elegance" (76-77). This fusion of opinion and sentiment, then, represents near ultimate sovereignty (second only to the creator, the "sovereign of sovereigns"), because it forces even kings to submit to its rule. Moreover, it is a fundamentally stable system. Rulers are kept in check while social ranks are maintained.

But the loss of chivalric sensibilities and the passing of the *Ancién Regime* does not only result in collapse and failure. Instead, it signals the emergence of a new entity created through a rejection of the natural. In *Letters on a Regicide Peace* Burke envisions the emergence of an "unformed spectre" that overpowers the imagination:

> Deprived of the old government, deprived in a manner of all government, France, fallen as a monarchy, to common speculators might have appeared more likely to be an object of pity or insult, according to the disposition of the circumjacent powers, than to be the scourge and terror of them all: but out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination and subdued the fortitude of man. Going straight forward to its end, unappalled by peril, unchecked by remorse, despising all common maxims and all common means, that hideous phantom overpowered those who could not believe it was possible she could at all exist, except on the principles which habit rather than

> Nature had persuaded them were necessary to their own particular welfare and to their own ordinary modes of action. (5)

The first two phrases in this passage—"deprived of the old government, deprived in a manner of all government"—move with extraordinary swiftness from political catastrophe to emptiness. Deprivation becomes void, and the empty space in turn produces a foreboding creature: an "unformed spectre" that subdues "the imagination." This description is reminiscent of Burke's commentary on Milton's depiction of Death, a point made by Ronald Paulson (72). Here the collapse of the grandfatherly order of the past unleashes a monstrous double which takes the (formless) form of horror. Terror remains, the softening influence of the beautiful disappears, and the tomb of murdered monarchy becomes a portal from which Death itself emerges.

Yet though this interpretation has its uses, Burke's phantom represents more than the annihilation of the old order and the emergence of an incomprehensible and threatening monster. It can also be analyzed in terms of what Wollstonecraft calls Burke's "mortal antipathy to reason" and what Burke might name the corruption of wisdom at the hands of meddling *philosophes:*

> On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom, as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their terrors, and by the concern, which each individual may find in them, from his own private speculations. (77)

Though in this passage there is nothing so striking as an "unformed spectre" emerging from the "tomb of…murdered monarchy," Burke nonetheless depicts something similar—in this case a death-birth: "barbarous philosophy," he says, is the "offspring of cold hearts," a new regime of the mind which, like its spectral cousin, subordinates through "terror." Here communal bonds are obliterated, private speculation taking the place of intergenerational wisdom. I suggest that it is in this attenuated birth-through-death that Burke marks the emergence of a postlapsarian world "destitute of all taste and elegance." As Burke would have it, a corrupted form of knowing is at the center of the catastrophe in France.

The *Reflections*, of course, cautions against radically altering society, preferring instead small, cautious changes. Burke writes that the faults of state should be approached as one would a wounded father, with "pious awe and trembling solicitude" (96). Here, again, the properly functioning state is figured as an injured or softened masculinity. Like the grandfather, the wounded father is at once vulnerable and powerful and therefore should elicit feelings of both awe and love. But Burke again finds that the revolutionaries enact unnatural dismemberment rather than follow the guidance of appropriate sentiment. In this rendition, however, butchery is coupled with unnatural reconstitution:

> By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous

> weeds and wild incantations they may regenerate the paternal constitution and renovate their father's life. (96)

The crime of the revolutionaries, then, is twofold. Their attempt to radically transform the state is the result of a lack of feeling (insufficient love and reverence) as well as a kind of hubris, a failure to recognize that individual generations comprise only a single link in the intergenerational compact. Because eternal society necessarily outpaces the capacity of the human mind, it should subordinate the individual contemplating it and discourage attempts to inaugurate a radically transformational politics (here conceived as patricide by way of dismemberment). The revolutionary, then, suffers from intellectual overconfidence. Confronted with the infinity of the intergenerational order, the "Jacobin" does not tremble but believes that the human mind is capable of cognizing that order in its entirety and formulating better social and political arrangements. Such hubris, though, is not simply mistaken or destructive but instead suggests unholy sacrilege and monstrous creation. The French are guilty of a form of witchcraft that seeks to reconstitute what they have "hacked" into pieces, thereby creating a new father—or body politic—from the dismembered remains of the old.

In opposition to unfeeling dismemberment and unnatural reconstitution, Burke repeatedly turns to the English, depicting their relation to the social and political order as uncomplicatedly sturdy and worthy of emulation. At times, in fact, Burke seems to go further than demanding caution and reverence, suggesting that the proper relationship of the individual to the social order involves a trusting acceptance of it and communion with it:

> Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field. (85)

Burke's English cattle recall his concept of "following Nature," that mode of existence directed by feeling rather than cold rationality. Burke will elsewhere claim that though the "the learned" are able to achieve an understanding of the social order others are required "to live on trust" (97). Though framed as a compliment, Burke's depiction seems to indicate the latter category. The English cattle, in fact, might be read in contrast to what Burke calls the "swinish multitude," those radicals who would trample the traditional education provided by the clergy and supported by the nobility (79). The suggestion here is that the proper relationship between the populace—or at least a large segment of it—and the social order is marked by faithful acceptance and obedience. The healthy citizen, in a sense, merges with the eternal, intergenerational compact without fully cognizing his or her relationship to it, and the English, in particular, exemplify this sturdy communion by rejecting the noisy grasshoppers, stand-ins for revolutionary troublemakers.

Ultimately, the *Reflections* finds that the predictable world of feeling is more fragile than it appears. Society is vulnerable to a kind of overthinking, a violent mental activity which renders sturdy affective relationships moot. That which "made power gentle and obedience liberal," Burke writes, is to be "dissolved by this conquering empire

of light and reason," a destructive intrusion of the intellect that ultimately threatens to result in unsettling exposure, a state of social nudity:

> The drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of her naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. (77)

The "drapery of life…rudely torn off" is an essential metaphor for Burke. Here the beneficent influence of the chivalric is replaced with disturbing variability. Life becomes unadorned life, existence mere existence. Paulson will associate the stripping of society's "decent drapery" with Burke's depiction of the queen's "almost naked" flight from "cruel ruffians" who stab her deserted bed:

> The imagery of clothing, activated earlier, reemerges with the cruelly penetrating power of the sunlight, and when Burke tells how "All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off," all those religious customs and illusions of the past stripped away, he is thinking of the queen: "On this scheme of things, a king is but a man; a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal; and an animal not of the highest order." In this scene at the very heart of the Reflections the metaphoric stripping of society has become the literal stripping of the queen. (60-61)

Importantly, we also find that a notion of defectiveness—even shame—enters Burke's language. Stripping life of its pleasant drapery exposes its "shivering nature," an

imperfect body rendered weak by the hostile eye of “barbaric” philosophy. What is left is nature as itself, not in Burke’s exalted sense of the word, but in the sense of primitive animality, the “incoherent” mode of life outside humanity’s natural habitat: eternal society.

If mere life—base animal existence—is exalted by the drapery provided by “moral imagination,” reason itself is solidified by its natural alliance with prejudice and weakened when stripped of it:

> Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom…in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason and an affection that will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in an emergency; it has the mind previously engaged in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision. (87)

By prejudice Burke means inherited ways of doing and seeing things, though he also associates these patterns with emotional responses and morality. “Naked reason,” on the other hand, leaves the individual in a state of incompetent waffling when faced with emergency situations. Prejudice, then, might be likened to the aesthetic in the sense that it provides an immediate response to political problems, much in the way sublime and

beautiful stimuli reliably activate emotional responses. Though reason is contained in the coat of prejudice—that is, the accrued wisdom of preceding generations—the wearer is nonetheless granted something like instinctual competence or sociopolitical muscle memory.

Burke supplements "naked reason" and naked life with yet another form of nudity. This time he turns to the concept in a religious context, depicting it as the result of an unnatural rejection of faith:

> We know…that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot, and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness, by throwing off that Christian religion…we are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it. (91)

Atheism, for Burke, is almost an impossibility because he defines it as a form of nothingness rather than a positive set of beliefs. The tomb of what was will always produce a new entity, and thus a state of non-religion must give way to another form religiosity. Where Christianity represents a natural state of belief, its replacement is corrupt, an "uncouth" and "degrading superstition." This model of transition bears resemblance to Burke's account of the political ramifications of the Revolution in France. If the old social and political order was a grandfather or wounded patriarch, the spectre is

its horrid double which only brings terror. The state of nakedness, then, is ultimately a state of vulnerability and momentary transition. Loss creates a horrifying sense of absence that demands substitution, and the social order that has been “exploded” by the “empire of reason” thus transitions to a new order founded on a corrupt intellect that has been disastrously severed from the controlling regime of feeling: “The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever” (76).

As I have suggested, Burke’s concerns about exposure and nakedness imply a distaste for hostile spectatorship. If the good citizen is one who senses the world according to predictable and natural feelings and acts from the ground of accrued intergenerational wisdom, the revolutionary refuses to feel properly, instead engaging in a violent mental process that defaces healthy social relationships. This is not to say that Burke rejects reason in his political vision, but rather that he distinguishes between a proper form reason that does not disturb affective sovereignty and an improper form of reason that does. Right reason, for Burke, operates in consonance with the natural order and with humanity’s God-given nature as feeling creatures. In his description of loss of faith, for example, Burke notes that both “reason and instinct” reject unnatural atheism, implying a harmony between the two. Recall, also, that society’s “decent drapery” is legitimated through a two-part process: It is “owned” by the heart and “ratified” by the “understanding.” Thus, contemplating the social order can be healthy, but only if that contemplation operates in consonance with what is prior to it: natural feelings.

Moreover, Burke's three-part theory of taste explicitly includes an argument for the proper application of reason. At the beginning of this chapter I noted that the first order of sensory experience—"perception of primary pleasures of sense" and "secondary pleasures of the imagination"—are uniform while the second (judgment) implies a limited community: those who have honed their minds through steady practice. The false reason of the revolutionaries, then, extends beyond its tendency to encourage a destructive gaze. Burke is also troubled by the way it rejects the importance of what I previously called "distance" in judgment. Modelling intellectual restraint in the *Reflections*, he writes that "we ought to suspend our judgments until the first effervescence is a little subsided…until we see something deeper than the agitation of the troubled and frothy surface" (8). Burke thus implies that the practiced viewer, unlike the Revolution's sympathizers, is capable of achieving healthy distance that allows for sensible analysis. His phrase "barbaric philosophy" implies brutality, to be sure, but also a kind of impetuosity that clashes with the self-discipline Burke supports. Paulson finds that "Burke offers a rationale for repression" and emphasizes "the youth and energy of the revolutionaries," depicting them as sexual threats (64). For Burke, the practiced viewer stands in opposition to such uncontrolled passion. One must feel, and feel deeply, but also be capable of resisting misleading emotions. Therefore, if the revolutionaries are unable to properly feel love for the intergenerational social order, they also feel too intensely about the wrong sorts of things, allowing themselves to be swept away by radicalism and falling victim to "drunken" riots.

In opposition to barbaric and impetuous reason, Burke advocates a form of thought that mirrors the hybridity of the proper aesthetic order of the state, writing:

> To make a government requires no great prudence. Settle the seat of power; teach obedience and the work is done. To give freedom is still more easy. It is not necessary to guide; it only requires to let go the rein. But to form a *free government;* that is, to temper together these opposite elements of liberty and restraint in one consistent work, requires much thought, deep reflection, a sagacious, powerful, and combining mind. (247)

Here Burke claims that extremes in government are easy (freedom requires nothing more than relinquishing control and order only requires strict instruction). But like the natural social order, the best form of government comes from a relation between opposites. Just as beauty balances the more terrible aspect of the sublime, both firm laws and liberty form a balanced polity. In a sense, then, the sagacious mind mirrors God's, though in an attenuated form. Where affective relationships are the result of the creator's design, the practical functions of the state are the product of aristocrats of the mind, those blessed with "powerful and combining" intellects.

It will come as no surprise, then, that Burke's theory of political reform closely tracks his understanding of taste. He writes that "reforming something while keeping it in existence is quite another thing" than abolishing a preexisting order. Instead, it involves preserving "the useful parts of an old establishment" and fitting additions "to what is retained." "Such a policy," Burke says, "requires a vigorous mind, steady, persevering

attention, various powers of comparison and combination, and the resources of an understanding fruitful in expedients." Rather than treat humans as automata without free will, mechanically following the dictates of an inborn sensory apparatus, Burke finds that human nature directs society toward a particular arrangement, an arrangement that might be carefully reformed through the application of reason.

V. Conclusion

I began this chapter by noting that it has become common to read the *Reflections* in relation to the concepts explored in the *Enquiry*. I am sympathetic to this view since Burke's aesthetic vision informs his political work, and, as I have attempted to show, was an essential asset in making sense of the Revolution. That said, I have also attempted to demonstrate that the *Enquiry* and *Reflections* are at times in tension with each other, the prior mapping predictable patterns of feeling, the latter working to decipher an aberration. It is fitting, then, that Burke discusses astonishment near the beginning of the *Reflections*:

> The French revolution is the most astonishing [event] that has hitherto happened in the world…Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed and sometimes mix with each other in the mind: alternate contempt and indignation, alternate laughter and tears, alternate scorn and horror. (10)

Where does this interpretation leave Burke's politics? Conservatives, particularly American, often proudly call themselves "Burkean," a trend championed by Russell Kirk

who was “convinced that Burke’s is the true school of conservative principle” (5). The adoption of Burke as an icon of American conservatism—and particularly its “traditionalist” variant—is understandable and helps explain why he is often associated with stability—the view that healthy “political systems,” when operating in accord with the “order of the world,” are able to achieve deathlessness, a polity “never old or middle-aged or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy” (33-34).

There is much to recommend this view. Even at his most pessimistic, he separates the English from the French, finding that his own nation is in possession of durable safeguards against revolutionary excesses. The Glorious Revolution, for Burke, stands in contrast to the barbarism of the French experiment. The English, too, are constitutionally predisposed to resist unnatural innovation, choosing the wisdom of their ancestors over the teachings of upstart radicals. Moreover, Burke, as I have attempted to demonstrate, repeatedly plays the unity of the English against the chaotic violence of the new French regime. In Burke’s writing his own nation achieves something approaching oneness: past, present, and future as well as the constitutive components of the body politic harmoniously meld, achieving ordered permanence. The French, on the other hand, enact disintegration: they split their nation, atomize the citizenry, and separate reason from sentiment. Burke’s figural language, then, might be read as a poetic defense of his own country—a poetry of harmony. Indeed, Burke likens the nation to a well-crafted poem in the *Reflections.*

Burke will ultimately reject both despair and the possibility of complete comprehension. The final cause of the rise and fall of states is not always apparent but

instead attributable to the "Great Disposer"—that mysterious wisdom which human mind cannot fully grasp (3). And though nations might be "plunged in unfathomable abysses" they also hold the potential to change course, laying the foundations of a "towering greatness" on the "very ruins of their country" (3). Yet, Burke also gives us a vision of loss and collapse—a model of historical transition that, as I have argued, emerges in his figural language. I therefore also find that Burke offers the view that the events of the 1790s initiated a disastrous trajectory in history. If the French Revolution marks a new era—the age of "economists" and "calculators"—Burke defines it with the language of separation: exile from a happier past.

Speech to Immortality, Writing to Ruin:
Godwin, Perfectibility, and the End of Endlessness

I. Introduction

To follow a chapter on Edmund Burke with William Godwin suggests a reading centered on difference. At first glance, it is difficult to imagine two writers more perfectly opposed. For Burke, the political past is a source of legitimacy and knowledge; for Godwin, it is a compendium of tyranny and crime: "one scene of barbarism and cruelty" (460). For Burke, feeling is central; for Godwin—at least the Godwin of 1793—reason takes precedence. For Burke, individual understanding is outstripped by ancestral wisdom; for Godwin, the opposite is the case: "private judgment" supersedes all social groups, from marriage to the state. Yet though these differences are roughly accurate I find that both are faced with a similar challenge. Each theorize a stabilizing force that comes under pressure. I have named this force "affective sovereignty" in Burke's writings, but for Godwin it is a consequence of what he will call "the progressive nature of mind" (35).

That said, my argument will not attempt to provide a definitive account of Godwin's philosophy since his intellectual development is too variable to fully capture in a single chapter. Most problematically, subsequent editions of *Political Justice* altered claims in the 1793 text. Godwin justified these changes in personal terms, asserting that the first edition's errors were the result of childhood conditioning:

> The Enquiry concerning Political Justice I apprehend to be blemished principally by three errors. 1. Stoicism, or an inattention to the principle, that pleasure and pain are the only bases upon which morality can exist. 2.

> Sandemanianism, or an inattention to the principle that feeling, and not judgment, is the source of human actions. 3. The unqualified condemnation of the private affections. It will easily be seen how strongly these errors are connected with the Calvinist system, which had been so deeply wrought into my mind in early life. (“Introduction” 26)

Despite Godwin’s reevaluation of his work, this chapter will exclusively focus on the first edition of *Political Justice.* I bracket subsequent editions since Godwin published the 1793 edition just three years after Burke’s *Reflections* inaugurated the pamphlet wars, making the two texts historical neighbors. Moreover, this chapter is particularly interested in the first edition’s speculations on immortality, a topic it takes to be intimately connected to Godwin’s understanding of humanity’s capacity for progress.

My argument centers on Godwin’s defense of perfectibility and is divided into two parts. The first half—comprised of sections II and III—traces Godwin’s account of human development from the emergence of speech to the potential for immortality. For Godwin, spoken language marks a fundamental process of mind: abstraction, what *Political Justice* depicts as an engine that drives humanity to perpetually improve. In section III, I argue that Godwin’s account of sovereignty mirrors his account of the progress of language. In short, large, cumbersome social arrangements are discarded in favor of a multitude of individual sovereigns, just as speech moves from simplicity to (individuated) complexity. I ultimately find that the relation between the text’s account of spoken language and political progress helps us understand Godwin’s view that humanity might one day achieve immortality.

The second half of this chapter—comprised of sections IV, V, and VI—returns to Godwin's account of language. In this second reading, however, I focus on *Political Justice's* depiction of the emergence of alphabetical writing rather than speech. Here I find that Godwin's description of the rebus—the intermediate stage between hieroglyphical and alphabetical writing—marks the introduction of the unknown: a mystery that sits at the center of human history. In section V, I claim that the problem of the unknown reappears in the novel *Caleb Williams.* Here Ferdinando Falkland, a character who resists easy definition, troubles the narrator's quest to find truth and enact justice. In the end, I suggest that the novel's double ending—one published, the other unpublished—indicates that *Caleb Williams* might be read as a transitional text in Godwin's thought, marking a growing interest in sentiment.

Part One: Speech to Immortality

II. Sublime Abstraction

Political Justice's argument for human perfectibility has led to accusations of naïve utopianism, a criticism that John P. Clark attributes to the "less scrupulous" of Godwin's interpreters. In this flawed reading, "perfectibility is taken to mean that there is a certainty of bringing human nature to perfection, and furthermore, that this condition can be achieved without great effort" (77). Clark ultimately claims that a misreading of *Political Justice*'s suggestion that humans might one day achieve immortality is largely to blame. After noting that Godwin's argument for immortality was speculative (not an overconfident prediction), Clark makes the case for interpretive restraint:

> There is no doubt that [Godwin's] suggestions are utopian, to say the least. But the mistake should not be made of assuming that belief in the possibility of this perfect society is entailed in the doctrine of perfectibility. Godwin hopes that such an ideal can be achieved at some time in the distant future, but he never claims that it will quickly result from the acceptance of his theories. Nor does he even express any certainty that it will ever occur. (78)

These are reasonable points, and I do not mean to resuscitate a caricature. That said, I do find that Godwin's utopianism —and his writing on immortality in particular—come as natural outgrowths of *Political Justice*'s logic. To make this case I focus on an essential aspect of Godwin's argument for what he calls the "progressive nature of mind," utilizing terminology found in "accelerationist" thought. In book one, chapter VI of *Political Justice*—"Human Inventions Capable of Perpetual Improvement"—Godwin works to demonstrate that the "perfectibility of man" is first "instanced" in the development of language (33). I claim this section—and its account of speech in particular—helps clarify the significance of *Political Justice*'s view that humankind might one day abolish war, sickness, and ultimately death itself.

Godwin's account of the emergence of language begins with primitive vocalizations: "involuntary cries, which infants, for example are found to utter in the earliest stages of their existence, and which, previously to the idea of exciting pity or procuring assistance, spontaneously arise from the operation of pain upon our animal frame" (34). Eventually, these unconscious, instinctual, and reactive sounds resulted in

the birth of a new mental process—comparison—which Godwin defines as "the coupling together of two ideas and the perception of their resemblances and differences" (34). This journey from unconscious vocalization to conscious comparison is essential for Godwin because it signals the birth of abstraction in the species, an event that *Political Justice* figures as the defining moment in human development, the moment in which the nature of mind revealed itself and set into motion all subsequent progress:

> Comparison immediately leads to imperfect abstraction. The sensation of today is classed…with the sensation of yesterday, and an inference is made respecting the conduct to be adopted. Without this degree of abstraction the faint dawnings of language already described could never have existed. Abstraction, which was necessary to the first existence of language, is again assisted in its operations by language. That generalisation, which is implied in the very notion of thought, being thus embodied and rendered palpable, makes the mind acquainted with its own powers and creates a restless desire after farther progress. (34)

Here Godwin's definition of abstraction is twofold. First, he means the generation of categories through the classification of examples (for instance, the organization of similar sensations under a single heading). Godwin's *Thoughts on Man* offers a similar definition, though with slightly more detail. In this later rendition, Godwin notes that humans "set off" from the same point as "beasts," but when "the faculty of articulate speech comes in…crude elements of reason" are "formed into a code" (243). This development, in turn, allows humankind to "detach" itself from "immediate impressions

of sense"—that is, the base, instinctual relationship with the world—and "proceed to generalities" (244). Consequently, humanity is able to "arrive at science" and ultimately placed "in a distinct order of being," what Godwin figures as an "immeasurable distance" above the animals (244).

Implied in this first definition of abstraction—i.e., the movement from example to generalization—is the second. Recall that Godwin tells us that abstraction precedes language—it was "necessary to the first existence of language"—but that language, once birthed, comes to "assist" abstraction. Put differently, language and abstraction exist in a positive feedback loop: abstraction makes language possible, and language, in turn, intensifies abstraction. What emerges, then, isn't simply increasing levels of abstraction (though that does occur). Instead, it would be more accurate to say that abstraction moves cyclically, though, as Godwin would have it, its cyclicality ultimately travels along an upward or "progressive" trajectory. Abstraction, in other words, functions as a self-reinforcing engine or perpetual-motion machine that resides at the center of human consciousness. Ultimately, this mental machine is what urges humanity forward by creating a "restless desire" for progress (as well as creating the ability to achieve that progress through the generation of higher levels of intelligence and ever-more acute forms of self-consciousness).

Moreover, Godwin's understanding of progress indicates more than simple linear movement from "worse" to "better," "ignorance" to "knowledge," and so on. To be more precise, Godwin's progress-machine (the abstraction/language loop) is both fissional and departure-oriented. Godwinian progress, in other words, marks increasing distance every

bit as much as it indicates simple betterment, schismatic growth every bit as much as linear development. The story of human progress, then, is the story of departure from an original, crude form, a process of infinite division and replication. Nowhere is this feature of Godwin's work more evident than in his depiction of the development of spoken language:

> The very steps [of language's development], were we to pursue them, would appear like an endless labyrinth. The distance is immeasurable between the three or four vague and inarticulate sounds uttered by animals, and the copiousness of lexicography or the regularity of grammar. The general and special names by which things are at first complicated and afterwards divided, the names by which properties are separated from their substances and powers from both, the comprehensive distribution of parts of speech, verbs, adjectives and particles, the inflexions of words by which the change of their terminations changes their meaning through a variety of shadings, their concords and their governments, all of them present us with such a boundless catalogue of science, that he, who on the one hand did not know that the boundless task had been actually performed, or who on the other was not intimately acquainted with the progressive nature of mind, would pronounce the accomplishment of them impossible. (35)

Here speech's past is presented as simple and unvaried ("three or four vague sounds"), whereas the present is marked by an overwhelming array of possibilities—verbs,

adjectives, inflexions, and so on. Language's development—accomplished through "complication," "division," and "separation"—thus indicates a seemingly improbable journey: one which Godwin claims is "endless" and like a "labyrinth." Moreover, this process of development is the defining feature of mind itself, for mind and abstraction essentially name the same thing: "Abstraction indeed, though as it is commonly understood it be one of the sublimest operations of mind, is in some sort coeval with and inseparable from the existence of mind" (34). In fact, "perfectibility," "mind," "progress," and "abstraction" are all roughly synonymous in Godwin's framework: each indicate a process, or, perhaps better, a complex algorithm unfolding itself through human consciousness and tending toward ever more sophisticated and intelligent states of being and perceiving.

F.E.L. Priestley has argued that scholars focused on Godwin's more obvious influences—Hartley, Helvetius, and Locke—too quickly place him in a strictly empiricist tradition. Priestley bolsters his case by noting Godwin's repeated references to concepts such as "abstract, immutable truth" and "immortal or ever-present truth" (63). He finds that Godwin's "scheme of progress" hinges on a belief in "enlightenment," an achievement (or, better, series of achievements) enacted through the "immediate and unavoidable operation of an improved intellect" (65). My primary aim is not to defend a Platonist account of Godwin, but I do find that his vision of ever-increasing levels of intelligence (and self-knowledge) indicates an involvement with a persistent theme in Western thought: enlightenment.

In fact, *Political Justice*'s account of human history could be said to unfold like Plato's account of the prisoner "dragged" from the shadow-world of the cave to the (initially blinding) reality of the sunlit surface. In Plato's telling, the process of enlightenment is violent and painful since it is only through habituation that the prisoner is able to look directly at the sun. Humanity, for Godwin, likewise finds itself being pulled from a confused, shadowy past, moving toward what *Political Justice* (as we shall see in the next section) repeatedly names "truth." Still, though *Political Justice* in large part assumes perpetual improvement, its account is not without its difficulties. Perfectibility, to be sure, is the defining feature of humankind, but perfection itself is elusive. The gulf between the cave and sun is wide. *Political Justice*'s central question is therefore one of distance: How far can mind travel?

III. Sovereign Mind(s)

Godwin's progressive theory of mind interprets the development of language as a starting point: the ever-present origin from which ever-more sophisticated mental processes emerge. As the previous section of this chapter outlined, abstraction's birth is inseparable from the emergence of language which, in turn, functions as the ground floor of an enormous structure that mind is perpetually building and improving. However, though foundational (which is to say a precondition for all subsequent advancement), it only represents one level of human development. After the advent of language, mind begins its work in the social and political realms. Yet though the focus has changed, underlying processes remain the same. Put directly, Godwin's depiction of political development unfolds in the same manner as his depiction of the progress of language.

First, *Political Justice* contends that the perception of truth and the expansion of liberty, like abstraction and language, operate in a feedback loop, one which promises to spur humanity away from its tyrannical and primitive political origins toward progressively better (and freer) social arrangements:

> The discovery of truth is a pursuit of such vast extent, that it is scarcely possible to prescribe bounds to it. Those great lines, which seem at present to mark the limits of human understanding, will, like the mists that rise from a lake, retire farther and farther the more closely we approach them. A certain quantity of truth will be sufficient for the subversion of tyranny and usurpation; and this subversion, by a reflected force, will assist our understandings in the discovery of truth. (22)

For Godwin, "the discovery of truth" (which increases both knowledge and liberty) accomplishes more than fleeting enlightenment. Instead, like language, it drives history forward: indeed, in a sense, it is history. Moreover, this grand cycle—the perception of the truth followed by the overthrow of tyrannical systems which, in turn, leads to an even greater perception of truth, and so on—is universal, a constitutive aspect of humankind as a whole. For instance, in his rebuttal of the view that some nations are incapable of liberty because of climate or geography, Godwin blames the condition of the oppressed on "the watchful and intolerant jealousy of despotic sovereigns," not on an innate defect or servile "national character" (44).

These despots, however, stand little long-term chance of success since they would require a system of almost complete control to halt the perception of truth. In his section on property, Godwin writes:

> Can we suppress truth? Can we arrest the progress of the enquiring mind? If we can, it will only be done by the most unmitigated despotism. Mind has a perpetual tendency to rise. It cannot be held down but by a power that counteracts its genuine tendency through every moment of its existence. (461)

Later Godwin notes that "to fight against truth…is like endeavoring with the human hand to stop the inroad of the ocean" (465). But oceanic truth, though enormous, is nonetheless unitary and therefore works upon all human beings in precisely the same fashion. Consequently, there is no danger of a multiplicity of opinions resulting since the perception of truth necessarily blows political winds in the same direction. *Political Justice* thus reasons that "there must be…one best form of government, which all intellects, sufficiently roused from the slumber of savage ignorance, will be irresistibly incited to approve" (102-103).

Godwin's invocation of irresistibility is not hyperbolic. Indeed, a central feature of mind is that it invariably will choose truth over falsity when presented with both in an open, clear manner:

> If there be any force in the arguments of this work, this much at least we are authorized to deduce from them, that truth is irresistible. If man be endowed with a rational nature, then whatever is clearly demonstrated to

> his understanding to have the most powerful recommendations, so long as that clearness is present to his mind, will inevitably engage his choice. (466)

Political Justice therefore favors “candor”—what Pamela Clemit names Godwin’s “dissenting ideal”—in all matters, political and personal (27). The freedom to openly communicate, share ideas, debate, and so on, is the mechanism through which mind is developed. Consequently, Godwin’s final political prescription is uncomplicated and direct: “The road to the improvement of mankind is in the utmost degree simple, to speak and act the truth…To tell the truth in all cases without reserve” (263).

That said, Godwin’s depiction of “irresistible” political progress, as in the case of language, isn’t simply one of linear movement from worse to better, oppression to freedom, and so on. There is, again, a fissional process at work, one which splits accumulated power into ever-smaller units. Though Godwin ultimately rejects all forms of government—including democracy since it threatens the individual with the tyranny of the majority—monarchy (even “benevolent monarchy”) is depicted as the most oppressive because it limits sovereign decision-making to a single, unaccountable individual (or small retinue), an arrangement that unavoidably slows the diffusion of truth:

> Monarchy, instead of referring every question to the persons concerned or their neighbors, refers it to a single individual placed at the greatest distance possible from the ordinary members of the society. Instead of distributing the causes to be judged into as many parcels as they would

> conveniently admit for the sake of providing leisure and opportunities of examination, it draws them to a single center, and renders enquiry and examination impossible. (220)

Though kingship is flawed for many reasons, the most fatal is that the solitary monarch lacks the cognitive power necessary to intelligently carry out executive functions. Against this system, Godwin suggests that what is needed is a distributed network of minds—a "group" that is at once unconnected (after all, even the bonds of marriage are oppressive in Godwin's view) and profoundly joined in a collective project to uncover truth. Godwin states his position directly, writing that "the most natural and obvious of all proceedings is for each man to be the sovereign arbiter of his own concerns" (220).

The individual, then, is the irreducible unit of authority (the political equivalent of the phoneme). Monarchy, aristocracy, and even democracy are the mere primitive origins of humankind's political evolution, their undifferentiated vastness the evidence of their lumbering inadequacy. Remove these systems of government, *Political Justice* instructs, and (individuated) mind will be loosed from its constraints, free to pursue truth without the interference of cumbersome despotism. As Godwin writes, "Error is principally indebted for its permanence to social institution. Did we leave individuals to the progress of their own minds, without endeavoring to regulate them by any species of public foundation, mankind would in no very long period convert to the obedience of truth" (264). Thus Godwin envisions in place of the state something like a swarm or flock of micro-sovereigns, each unit in possession of mind and each (separately and together, as

"individual" and as "mankind") submitting to truth, the ultimate sovereign, which, like a grand conductor, harmonizes the music of individual instrumentalists.

To be clear, the emergence of Godwin's multitude of sovereigns does not mark a fundamental shift in the trajectory of history. Instead, it represents the refinement of already-present processes. Humankind, put directly, becomes better at uncovering truth. Thus history, rather than deviate from its course, accelerates—progress becomes a blur. This sense of historical quickening is a point that Godwin repeats in various contexts throughout *Political Justice*. For instance, when discussing the consequences of poverty, he imagines that a more equitable economic arrangement would hasten the advancement of mind:

> How rapid and sublime would be the advances of intellect, if all men were admitted into the field of knowledge? At present ninety-nine persons in a hundred are no more excited to any regular exertions of general and curious thought, than the brutes themselves. What would be the state of public mind in a nation, where all were wise…all adopted with fearless confidence the suggestions of truth, and the lethargy of the soul was dismissed forever? (424)

Godwin answers his own questions. Unimpeded "public mind" (what I take to mean the collective intelligence of individual sovereigns) would lead to "an age [that] would far surpass the grandest exertions of intellect that are at present known" (424). Still, though grand, these happy predictions do not indicate finality. Godwin finds that even when mind is freed from state and social control, ample room remains for further progress.

Endlessness, as I have previously noted, is essential for Godwin. Another of *Political Justice's* oceanic metaphors—his work is filled with water imagery—underlines this view: "all human intellects," he writes, "are at sea upon the great ocean of infinite truth, and their voyage though attended with hourly advantage will never be at an end" (123). Though human progress is directed (or at least directional, which is to say, moving toward something), there is never a final resting place, a harbor in which the ship of mind "arrives." But if this is the case, what else is left for mind to accomplish once it has overcome repressive social and political systems?

Here we come to Godwin's utopian speculations and the question of immortality. As I said at the outset of this chapter, these sections should be taken seriously, not just as odd additions but as essential outgrowths of the text's logic. The first thing to note is that Godwin's account of mind's journey centers on world-changing events: the emergence of speech, the abolition of the state, and so on. Godwin positions his commentary on immortality as just another such event, claiming that mind, having already freed itself from the prison of institutions, next frees itself from the prison of the body—or, perhaps more precisely, brings about a condition in which the body is completely subordinated to the mind:

> Let us here return to the sublime conjecture of [Benjamin] Franklin, that "mind will one day become omnipotent over matter." If over all other matter, why not over the matter of our own bodies? If over matter at ever so great a distance, why not over matter which, however ignorant we may be of the tie that connects it with the thinking principle, we always carry

> about with us, and which is in all cases the medium of communication between that principle and the external universe? In a word, why may not man be one day immortal? (453)

For Godwin, perfectibility is another term for a prison-break and progress maps an escape route. The journey from primitive vocalization to speech, from speech to the recognition of truth, from the recognition of truth to the abolition of tyranny, all point toward an "exit," a way for mind to break from the tyranny of its flesh-bound (and limited, mortal) home. The triumph of mind over body, then, is the final victory of humankind's struggle. Yet, of course, such a narrative indicates an end, an arrival, and as I have just noted, "arrival" is something that Godwin believes is impossible.

What we are left with, then, is a kind of riddle or puzzle, a problem reminiscent of Zeno's paradoxes, in fact. Maureen McLane, in her analysis of Malthus's dispute with Godwin on the grounds of population, writes that "immortality is the figure of the limit of conjecture itself. Immortality appears, as it were, at the limits of an episteme, at the edge of the knowable and the thinkable" (169). The limit of thought, then, is the thought of limitlessness, and the progressive view of mind finds its strange "end" precisely when "ends" themselves are most obviously impossible. Thus, immortality is the last "event" that Godwin is capable of imagining.

It is, in other words, just when mind escapes body and achieves immortality that history both begins in its purest form (humanity now free to rush forward unimpeded) and "ends" in the sense that there can no longer be grand events after the final thinkable event of immortality. Godwin, attempting to imagine this future state, writes:

> Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have in a certain degree to recommence her career at the end of every thirty years. There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice as it is called, and no government...there will be no disease, no anguish, no melancholy and no resentment…Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed. Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage itself was a necessary part of that progress. (458)

Here Godwin's picture of upward cyclicality becomes a straight line. Since there is nothing else for mind to "conquer," no tyranny to slow the progress of mind (apart from occasional upset "hopes"), there can exist no "reflected force," the driver of progressive history. Instead, mind, having escaped the body, speeds directly toward its final goal—"omnipotent truth"—but without the possibility of arriving at a final destination. Plato's prisoner, in Godwin's telling, is forever turning his head toward the sun, but somehow never seeing it in its "dazzling" fullness, its essential entirety.

Part Two: Writing to Ruin

IV. Godwin's Rebus

The first section of this chapter has been primarily devoted to Godwin's claims about human perfectibility and its relation to spoken language, political progress, and immortality. I now turn to *Political Justice*'s account of alphabetical writing. Godwin frames the emergence of the alphabet as a repetition of his account of speech, though a repetition attended by difficulties:

> A second invention, well calculated to impress us with a sense of the progressive nature of man, is that of alphabetical writing. Hieroglyphical or picture writing appears at some time to have been universal, and the difficulty of conceiving the gradation from this to alphabetical is so great, as to have induced [David] Hartley, one of the most acute of all philosophical writers, to have recourse to miraculous interposition as the only adequate solution. (35)

Here Godwin hopes to show that it is possible that human mind was responsible for the move from hieroglyphical to alphabetical writing. (By "hieroglyphical or picture writing" Godwin indicates logography). And, indeed, the broad strokes of Godwin's account appear to remain the same. He first hypothesizes an origin point: in the case of speech, it is the involuntary cries in humankind's past; in the case of alphabetical writing, it is the hieroglyph. Next, Godwin attempts to demonstrate that a slow process was responsible for alphabetical writing emerging from hieroglyphical writing, a process which mirrors the movement from primitive vocalization to the multiplicity of modern speech-possibilities.

That said, Godwin's account of the emergence of alphabetical writing deviates from his account of the emergence of complex speech in important ways. The first difficulty appears when he attempts to explain the relationship between spoken and written language. Godwin does not claim that writing is the logical, predictable outgrowth of speech (speech evolving from vocalization to the page, and so on). Instead,

he claims that the relationship between speech and writing is entirely accidental (though still essential to the emergence of the alphabet):

> Hieroglyphical writing and speech may indeed be considered in the first instance as two languages, running parallel to each other, but with no necessary connection. The picture and the word each of them represent the idea, one as immediately as the other. But, though independent, they will become accidentally associated; the picture at first imperfectly, and afterwards more constantly suggesting the idea of its correspondent sound. (35-36)

Instead of being developmentally linked, then, speech and hieroglyphical writing are two analogous systems for representing things, and their convergence merely the result of happenstance or habit. But though the relationship between speech and hieroglyphical writing is accidental, it is nonetheless the necessary starting point for the development of alphabetical writing, for without the association between images and sounds it would be impossible to imagine the emergence of alphabetical characters. Therefore, where the spoken word was the product of abstraction—or the initial mental activity of "comparison" resulting in the capacity for the conscious use of language—alphabetical writing is depicted as the product of an accident: "sound" and "image" somehow become associated, though not for any particularly important reason.

Godwin's test case for his theory—Chinese writing—frames the emergence of the alphabet as an adulteration of hieroglyphics. He notes that the Chinese "have…two kinds of writing, one for the learned, and another for the vulgar. The learned adhere closely to

their hieroglyphical writing, representing every word by its corresponding picture; but the vulgar are frequent in their deviations from it" (36). However, alphabetical writing was only possible because of these deviations from elite, hieroglyphical writing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the alphabet, in Godwin's telling, was at least partly the result of ignorance and failure. Born of necessity, its origins ultimately mark it as a makeshift structure, a haphazard technology created to compensate for lack of expertise and knowledge:

> It is in this manner that the mercantile classes of China began to corrupt, as it is styled, their hieroglyphical writing. They had a word suppose of two syllables to write. The character appropriate to that word they were not acquainted with, or it failed to suggest itself to their memory. Each of the syllables however was a distinct word in the language, and the characters belonging to them perfectly familiar. The expedient that suggested itself was to write these two characters with a mark signifying their union, though in reality the characters had hitherto been appropriated to ideas of a different sort, wholly unconnected with that now intended to be conveyed. Thus a sort of rebus or charade was produced. (36)

In Godwin's account, merchants who had not fully mastered their hieroglyphical language were forced to construct meaning through the (creative) misuse of preexisting symbols, thus "furnish[ing]" the "first stone to the edifice" of alphabetical writing. Taking those hieroglyphs which (by chance) corresponded to sounds, they made a "rebus or charade," which is to say a puzzle—something to be deciphered. Though meaning is

readily and equally apparent in both speech and hieroglyphical writing—recall that Godwin claims that both "picture and word…represent the idea, one as immediately as the other"—in alphabetical writing meaning is obscured or mystified. Indeed, no matter how far alphabetical writing develops away from its origins, it still must, in a sense, contain the traces of the rebus, for a central feature of alphabetical writing is the inclusion of an additional interpretive layer: Hieroglyph/Spoken Word → Meaning/Idea versus Alphabetical Characters/Rebus → Word → Meaning/Idea.

What emerges when comparing Godwin's second account of language's development to his first, then, is a series of divergences that raise questions rather than provide direct answers. Placing Godwin's account of speech and writing side by side reveals these differences:

Primitive to Advanced Speech	**Hieroglyphical to Alphabetical Writing**
Directed by abstraction (the result of "comparison.")	Accidental or the result of luck.
Simplicity to complexity.	Hieroglyphical writing contains many more characters, though alphabetical writing has greater combinatorial power. (I infer this distinction).
Advances in speech are accompanied by (or coterminous with) advances in knowledge.	Alphabetical writing is—at least in part—the result of ignorance (lack of knowledge).
The meaning of words is immediately apparent.	Meaning is apparent only after solving the "rebus or charade."

I do not wish to claim Godwin's account of the emergence of alphabetical writing merely negates the narrative of progress or perfectibility that *Political Justice* depicts. Instead, the disunity depicted in the above chart indicates the presence of the unknown, the introduction of nagging problems that resist easy solution. To be sure, the emergence of the rebus (and thus the alphabet) does indicate obscurity and lack of knowledge (the

precise opposite of Godwin's account of speech), but it also indicates a new sort of knowledge, an unexpected application of intelligence.

Godwin concedes that his attempt to explain the emergence of the alphabet is incomplete and unsatisfactory, writing that though his account "may perhaps present us with a faint view of the manner in which an alphabet was produced…the actual production of a complete alphabet is perhaps of all human discoveries, that which required the most persevering reflection, the luckiest concurrence of circumstances, and the most patient and gradual progress" (36). Still, just as soon as Godwin admits the incomplete nature of his work, the text regains its optimism. Godwin, mirroring the enthusiasm found in his depiction of the emergence of speech, reaches a second crescendo. This time, however, the discussion of language is pushed to the side; history, instead, becomes the focal point:

> Let us however suppose man to have gained the two first elements of knowledge, speaking and writing; let us trace him through all his subsequent improvements, through whatever constitutes the inequality between Newton and the ploughman, and indeed much more than this, since the most ignorant ploughman in civilized society is infinitely different from what he would have been, when stripped of all the benefits he has derived from literature and the arts… Such was man in his original state, and such is man as we at present behold him. Is it possible for us to contemplate what he has already done, without being impressed with a strong presentiment of the improvements he has yet to accomplish? (36)

By yoking the development of speech and writing to humanity's political and social progress Godwin suggests that a mystery resides at the center of human history. As Godwin would have it, however, this mystery is a happy one since it indicates future (and even perpetual) improvement. It is not surprising, then, that both accounts of language's development—speech and writing—briefly introduce the possibility of divine intervention. Either human mind itself is capable of such improvements—Godwin hopes to demonstrate this—or a beneficent deity works on our behalf. In either case the unknown spurs a sense of awe. The mysterious, or, more precisely, the question of how one gets from A to B—cries to speech, hieroglyphs to alphabetical characters—is finally put in the service of an argument for humankind's elevated destiny.

I will here suggest that the problem of the unknown returns in Godwin's work—particularly in the novel *Caleb Williams.* In this variation, however, the mysterious takes another shape. Again we will find an effort to interpret, but now it is not the origins of language that provokes thought but a fictional character—Ferdinando Falkand—whose ultimate meaning eludes easy definition.

V. Authorial Tottering

The publication of *Caleb Williams* was an event. Writing in the Edinburgh Review, Hazlitt noted that "few books have made a greater impression than *Caleb Williams* on its first appearance," adding that the text was met with "singularity and surprise" because "it was a new and startling event in literary history for a meta-physician to write a popular romance" (144). Moreover, the politically charged novel received

broad praise, an unexpected response for an author whose writings produced intense disagreement:

> [Godwin's] enemies, or those who looked with a mixture of dislike and fear at the system of ethics advanced in the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, were disposed to forgive the author's paradoxes for the truth of imitation with which he had depicted prevailing passions, and were glad to have something in which they could sympathize with a man of no mean capacity or attainments. (145)

For admirers of Godwin, on the other hand, the text served as a rebuttal to a favored line of attack: that the arguments contained in *Political Justice* were the products of an unfeeling mind. Thus the novel was "a proof that the stoicism of the doctrines [Godwin] inculcated did not arise from any defect of warmth or enthusiasm of feeling, and that his abstract speculations were grounded in, and sanctioned by, an intimate knowledge of, and rare felicity in, developing the actual vicissitudes of human life" (145). *Caleb Williams*, then, was interpreted as a vindication of its author.

Contrarily, the novel's introduction, initially unpublished for fear of political backlash, framed the text in utilitarian terms:

> The following narrative is intended to answer a purpose more general and important than immediately appears upon the face of it. The question now afloat in the world respecting THINGS AS THEY ARE is the most interesting that can be presented to the human mind. While one party pleads for reformation and change, the other extols in the warmest terms the existing

> constitution of society…It is now known to philosophers that the spirit and character of the Government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth highly worthy to be communicated to persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach. Accordingly, [*Caleb Williams* was written as] a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man. (55)

Godwin thus positioned *Caleb Williams* as an unproblematic repetition of *Political Justice*. The book, as Godwin elsewhere noted, was written in the same "temper of mind" as his philosophical treatise, and, as his introduction indicated, was meant to do precisely what *Political Justice* did: demonstrate the consequences of despotism—reveal "things as they are"—and thereby lead readers to the perception of truth. The new feature of the novel, in this telling, was its access to mass-culture, those "persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach." In fact, Godwin, in a response to a critic, explicitly echoed the language of *Political Justice* in his defense of *Caleb Williams*, claiming that the novel was intended to "expose the evils which arise out of the present system of civilized society…[and] to disengage the minds of men from prepossession, and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry" (451). Readers of *Political Justice* would, of course, be aware of the rhyme: Godwin's "ocean of infinite truth" was to be made accessible to the masses.

Yet despite the suggestion that *Caleb Williams* replicated the themes of *Political Justice*, later accounts indicate that Godwin came to believe that novels in general were not as malleable as he initially thought—that, in fact, they threaten to overcome their

authors. His 1797 essay—"Of History and Romance"—argued that novels were doomed to fail because of the enormous mental exertion their composition demands:

> To write a romance is a task too great for the powers of man, and under which he must be expected to totter. No man can hold the rod so even, but that it will tremble and vary from its course. To sketch a few bold outlines of character is no desperate undertaking; but to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine. (466-467)

Though the historian ultimately fails to understand the "character he exhibits"—Godwin, in fact, claims that "we never know a man's character"—he nonetheless has the advantage of recounting known events (467). The writer of romance, on the other hand, is "continually straining at foresight to which his faculties are incompetent" (467). The challenge of romance, then, is the challenge of predicting the actions of characters in complex situations, a challenge which no mind is capable of flawlessly surmounting.

Caleb Williams, I suggest, might be read as a staging of the difficulty of novel writing—and particularly the difficulty of achieving knowledge of character—through its depiction of Williams' authorial role. More specifically, the novel's subject—a tenacious truth-seeker driven to uncover hidden despotism—is challenged by the ambiguity of Ferdinando Falkland, a character who stubbornly resists Williams' interpretive efforts. The attempt to define Falkland thus becomes a lesson on the limits of humankind's capacity for knowledge as well as a meditation on those aspects of human psychology, social institution, and language which block knowledge or distort vision. Part of the

"truth" that *Caleb Williams* works to reveal, then, is the truth of truth's difficulty. "Things as they are," in this sense, indicates not only overt despotism—or even hidden criminality—but patterns of reading (or prepossession) that result in a world in which, to use Godwin's phrase, man becomes destroyer of man.

VI. Falkland's Chest

Scholarship focused on *Caleb Williams* has unsurprisingly approached Falkland as an authority figure—even a divine or semi-divine authority—while Williams has been read as a hunted subordinate. Yet it has also been argued that the novel's characters resist neat categorization. Monika Fludernik, for example, claims that *Caleb Williams*' language "problematize[s] easy evaluations of the characters as oppressors or victims" (859). According to Fludernik, Godwin's work holds "generally negative associations [with] the divine" (881). Thus "Falkland's quasi-sublime divinity is experienced [by Williams] as the revenge of the Almighty" (881). But it is not only Falkland who plays the role of godlike persecutor; Williams does as well: "the despotism of God is…arrogated by Caleb when at moments of supreme indignation…he employs the intimate *thee* and *thou*," a language that recalls "the Biblical God confronting man the worm with His omnipotence" (883).

Similarly, Gary Handwerk finds that Williams, rather than simply oppose Falkland, seems to trade places with his antagonist, arguing that at the end of the novel "Caleb virtually *becomes* Falkland" and inherits "his role as a ruthless oppressor" while depicting his enemy as an "innocent victim" (949). Moreover, Caleb's language reveals an interest in power as well as a personal stake in the struggle that extends beyond a

desire to locate or communicate truth: “It is neither truth nor impartiality, but Caleb’s person and reputation that triumph over Falkland, an opposition that Caleb can try to reverse in writing his text, but cannot hope to dissolve” (953). As Handwerk would have it, Caleb’s “affective obsession with the truth” is itself the “mechanism through which political ideology works.” His guilt, in turn, functions as the means of absolving himself “from further self-examination and from applying to himself the historicizing analysis he has applied to Falkland” (953).

The troubled relationship between Falkland and Williams has also produced scholarship focused on character psychology. Ronald Paulson, for instance, suggests that Williams’ guilt stems from his attempt to uncover Falkland’s secret. In this reading Williams exhibits something close to “sexual curiosity” in his quest to reveal the truth, thereby unleashing “the darker potentialities of Falkland’s inner self” and becoming victim “to both inhuman pursuit…and the corruption of his own nature” (231). In the end, mimetic desire sits at the center of the text. Thus Falkland (master/father/model) and Williams (servant/son/imitator) are locked in a Girardian conflict:

> In his treatment of the servant’s revolt against his master, Godwin reveals beneath the apparent fiction of the oedipal conflict a more basic one of sheer repetitive confrontation between a pair that at its most elemental (even more primal than father and son) is model and imitator or disciple—between the model’s desire and the disciple’s desire. The latter, Caleb, is faced with double injunctions to imitate and not to imitate. (235)

For Paulson, then, Falkland's chest functions as a "sacred object," one which disguises "the actual object of [Williams'] curiosity and desire…Falkland—his father/master/tyrant" (232). Godwin himself, in fact, framed the novel in terms of secrecy, desire, and traumatic revelation. In the commentary on the composition of the text, he described the squire as "my Bluebeard," the wealthy wife-murdering villain from folklore (449). Williams, then, plays the role the inquisitive wife who uncovers her husband's terrible secret.

Most important to this chapter, however, is the reading that frames Falkland as a Burkean figure, a view defended by James T. Boulton, Marilyn Butler, and David McCracken, among others. Boulton, in fact, directly claims that Falkland functions as a stand-in for Burke:

> In Falkland Godwin was not only presenting the ideal of honor, of the *ancién regime*, or of the aristocratic type at its best; he was providing an imaginative assessment of the supreme advocate of these ideals, Edmund Burke, and demonstrating—according to principles in *Political Justice*—how this man (to use Godwin's words about Falkland) "originally endowed with a mighty store of amiable dispositions and virtues" could be contaminated by his own convictions. (226)

As Boulton would have it, the "central irony of [*Caleb Williams*]" is that Fakland's best qualities, the very aspects of his character which make him an object of respect in the novel, are ultimately what destroy him. (In short, Falkland's Burkean sense of honor leads him to act barbarically).

Reading Falkland as a Burkean figure has much to recommend it. For example, the second chapter of the novel describes the squire's disposition and tastes as follows:

> Among the favorite authors of his early years were the heroic poets of Italy. From them he imbibed the love of chivalry and romance. He had too much good sense to regret the times of Charlemagne and Arthur. But, while his imagination was purged by a certain infusion of philosophy, he conceived that there was in the manners depicted by these celebrated poets something to imitate, as well as something to avoid. He believed that nothing was so well calculated to make men delicate, gallant, and humane, as a temper perpetually alive to the sentiments of birth and honor. The opinions he entertained upon these topics were illustrated in his conduct, which was assiduously conformed to the model of heroism that his fancy suggested. (67)

Falkland, then, is presented as a kind of conundrum. He is at once enamored with chivalry (or at least its poetic representation) and, at the same time, is not quite reactionary enough to desire a complete return to the past. His mind has been "purged by a certain infusion of philosophy," though not to such an extent as to completely divest him from the "sentiments of birth and honor." (Of course, for Godwin, philosophical knowledge and the abolition of hereditary pride are synonymous). Falkland, then, does not neatly fit the mold of reactionary or reformer. Instead, he sits somewhere in the unstable middle, a representative of both forward-looking suavity (his social and literary sophistication is a repeated theme throughout the novel) and half-serious nostalgia for the manners of the past.

However, Falkland's sense of honor and chivalric sensibilities, though essential to understanding his character, only partially reveal his relationship to Burke. More important, in my view, is the way the novel's characterization of Falkland echoes the themes of both the *Enquiry* and the *Reflections.* Beyond Falkland's overt tastes and disposition, his body and mannerisms are reminiscent of Burke's aesthetic categories. Caleb Williams describes his master as "a man of small stature, with an extreme delicacy of form and appearance…every muscle and petty line of his countenance…in an inconceivable degree pregnant with meaning" (61). Williams' description of Falkland marks him as both feminine and (indecipherably) textual. Though his neighbors find him to be "elegant without effeminacy," we also learn that his "polished manners" are "peculiarly in harmony with feminine delicacy" (77). Indeed, Falkland seems to achieve a kind of healthy balance, a sort of Burkean ideal made manifest. He is learned (though not ostentatious), refined (though not foppish). In fact, Falkland appears as a work of "art," and the community he inhabits judges him to be infinitely superior to the "rude[r] exhibition[s]" it had previously encountered (79).

That said, Falkland's sociability and delicacy are counterbalanced by both a commanding presence and violent substratum, a deadly region hidden beneath a veneer of elegant manners. It is unsurprising, then, that Falkland evokes more than love—which he certainly does—but also "admiration." We learn, for instance, that Williams, when first meeting Falkland, feels "no small uneasiness and awe" in the squire's presence (61). However, in moments of rage Falkland generates terror rather than respect, a capability that rhymes with Burke's account of the effect of danger pressing "too nearly." After

Williams, recently employed by Falkland, happens to spot his master kneeling over a mysterious chest—later hypothesized to contain a confession of murder—Falkland's response is vicious:

> "Villain!" cried he, "what has brought you here?" I hesitated a confused and irresolute answer. "Wretch!" interrupted Mr. Falkland, with uncontrollable impatience, "you want to ruin me. You set yourself as a spy upon my actions; but bitterly shall you repent your insolence. Do you think you shall watch my privacies with impunity?" I attempted to defend myself. "Begone, devil!" rejoined he. "Quit the room, or I will trample you into atoms." Saying this, he advanced towards me. But I was already sufficiently terrified, and vanished in a moment. (64)

Thus Falkland, capable of generating terror yet inspiring love and admiration, exemplifies key themes in Burke's aesthetic philosophy. But in Godwin's rendering these features come to indicate not only a character worthy of emulation but also unsettling instability. The oppositions which comprise Falkland clash rather than harmoniously meld. He is "peculiar," and, even more troublingly, resists interpretation, his expressions indicating disorienting complexity—a surfeit of meaning—and consequent unreadability.

Yet Falkland's character does not only emerge as a set of oppositional traits; it is also a product of his torn position between two adjacent characters: Barnabas Tyrell and the poet Mr. Clare. Each might be approached as a distilled pole of Falkland's potentialities—the former violent and regressive (in an undisguised way); the latter sophisticated and forward-thinking (in an idealized way). But more than this, both are

defined in terms of their use of language, what Godwin figures as a central feature of their antipodal roles.

To begin, Tyrrel is a miniature-tyrant, spoiled, self-centered, and obsessed with forcing others to submit to his will. Godwin writes, "Everything must give way to his accommodation and advantage; everyone must yield the most servile obedience to his commands. He must not be teased or restricted by any forms of instruction; and of consequence his proficiency, even in the arts of writing and reading, was extremely slender" (74). Tyrrel's association with primitive, unsophisticated language is not incidental, but an essential feature his character as well as a central aspect of his struggle with Falkland:

> The advantages Mr. Falkland possessed in the comparison are palpable; and had it been otherwise, the subjects of his rural neighborhood were sufficiently disposed to revolt against [Tyrrel's] merciless dominion. They had hitherto submitted from fear, and not from love; and, if they had not rebelled, it was only for want of a leader…The sallies of [Falkland's] wit were far beyond those of Mr. Tyrrell in variety and vigor; in addition to which they had the advantage of having their spontaneous exuberance guided and restrained by the sagacity of a cultivated mind. (77)

Ultimately, then, Tyrrel's attempts to undermine his rival's authority stem from anxiety over Falkland's verbal sophistication which he construes as a sign of deceitfulness and trickery. When Falkland attempts to check this growing conflict, Tyrrel refuses the olive branch, demanding that Falkland leave the area entirely:

> I am determined to hate you. Now, sir, if you will only go out of the county or the kingdom, to the devil if you please, so as I may never hear of you any more, I will promise never to quarrel with you as long as I live. Your rhymes and your rebusses, your quirks and your conundrums, may then be everything that is grand for what I care. (89)

Here Tyrell is responding to Falkland's argument for reconciliation as well as his enthusiastically received poem—"An Ode to the Genius of Chivalry"—publicly recited earlier in the novel. Both, in Tyrrel's view, might be "grand," but, due to their complexity, do not deserve interpretive energy. All that really matters is that Falkland's presence represents a challenge to Tyrrel's authority. Thus, rather than interpret, the tyrant merely wishes to banish. This refusal to engage with language—to accept Godwin's ideal of open dialogue—is Tyrrel's defining feature, the aspect of his personality which shapes all his actions.

Yet Tyrrel's refusal to engage in open, ethical dialogue is not merely the result of ignorance or stupidity. Rather, it indicates a kind of corrupt perspicuity. His primitivism, in other words, is coupled with a capacity for base shrewdness. For instance, Tyrrel's brutal treatment of Emily Melville, his cousin and ward, is structured by a strategic refusal to listen and engage. Furious to learn that Emily has fallen in love with Falkland, he punishes her by arranging an unwanted marriage with Grimes: an "uncouth and half-civilized animal" (110). This move is not the result of ignorance or misunderstanding. Instead, Tyrrel recognizes the precise dimensions of the situation and hopes to maximize psychological damage: "[Tyrrel] found in Grimes an instrument sufficiently adapted to

his purpose. This fellow, without an atom of intentional malice, was fitted, by the mere coarseness of his perceptions, for the perpetration of the greatest injuries" (110). Thus, by attempting to force Emily into a relationship with Falkland's perceived opposite—and later pretending to not understand her protestations—Tyrrel corrupts what Godwin depicts as the most important aspect of language: its ability to reveal the truth and thereby function as an engine for social progress.

But if Tyrrel epitomizes primitive tyranny and deceitful, corrupt language, Godwin counteracts his negative presence with Clare. His poetry is the result of the "sublimest efforts of genius," productions nearly matched by his skill as a conversationalist (82). Monika Fludernik, in fact, will claim that "Clare is an idealized picture of Edmund Burke, without Burke's characteristic rage—a feature given to Falkland in the novel" (870). Directly opposed to the stifling despotism of Tyrell, Clare's position in the community is fatherly and altruistic, a wise patriarch whose depth of knowledge grants him the ability to correct his neighbors' shortcomings:

> He pointed out to men their mistakes with frankness and unreserve, his remonstrances produced astonishment and conviction, but without uneasiness, in the party to whom they were addressed: they felt the instrument that was employed to correct their irregularities, but it never mangled what it was intended to heal. (83)

Where Tyrell is unable (or unwilling) to interpret people and events or, even worse, uses his understanding and cunning to wound, Clare is gifted with near-mystical insight coupled with a benevolent temperament. He is capable of noting the errors in others—and

openly correcting them—but doing so in a way that does not rankle. (Falkland, of course, fails in this regard). More than this, though, Clare possesses the uncanny ability to immediately see to the center of things, piercing artifice and revealing the truth that lies beneath:

> To so penetrating a genius there was no need of long experience and patient observation to discover the merits and defects of any character that presented itself. The materials of his judgment had long since been accumulated; and, at the close of so illustrious a life, he might almost be said to see through nature at a glance. (83)

Ultimately, then, Clare opens a new potential: the possibility for Falkland to avoid receding into the darkness of despotism and corrupt language and to move forward toward enlightenment—which is to say, toward language at its most revelatory and social relations at their most benign. Clare, ever perceptive, recognizes this dynamic, and therefore instructs Falkland to guard against his weaknesses: “impetuosity and…impatience of imagined dishonor.” On his deathbed, he issues Falkland a final warning:

> Beware of Mr. Tyrrel…Petty causes may produce great mischiefs. Mr. Tyrrel is boisterous, rugged, and unfeeling; and you are too passionate, too acutely sensible of injury. It would be truly to be lamented, if a man so inferior, so utterly unworthy to be compared with you, should be capable of changing your whole history into misery and guilt. I have a painful presentiment upon my heart, as if something dreadful would reach you

> from that quarter. Think of this. I exact no promise from you. I would not shackle you with the fetters of superstition; I would have you governed by justice and reason. (94)

Of course, this warning does not end the feud. And though "something more than mortal," Clare ultimately dies, an event that signals certain disaster since it "[removed] the person who could most effectually have moderated the animosities of the contending parties and [took] away the great operative check upon the excesses of Mr. Tyrrel" (96). Clare's end therefore signals the loss of Falkland's better nature as well as Tyrrel's only moderating influence. Tyrrel's death, in turn, sets the stage for Godwin to enact a narrative that mirrors the themes of *Political Justice*.

With the recognition of Falkland's guilt, Caleb Williams begins his quest as a persecuted truth-seeker, battling against the overwhelming power of Falkland. When in prison, for example, Williams marvels at the power of mind to sustain itself and even progress in the face of unrelenting oppression. Like *Political Justice*, in fact, the contemplation of mind becomes a liberatory act:

> My mind whispered to me the propriety of showing, in this forlorn condition, that I was superior to all my persecutors. Blessed state of innocence and self-approbation! The sunshine of conscious integrity pierced through all the barriers of my cell, and spoke ten thousand times more joy to my heart, than the accumulated splendors of nature and art can communicate to the slaves of vice. (271)

This revelatory "whispering" and simultaneous consciousness of integrity (and thus "self-approbation") leads Williams to a series of solitary intellectual pursuits that revivify his spirit and harden his resolve. Cognition, then, becomes a means to escape physical misery. Though his body is imprisoned, Williams finds that he is still able to study mathematics, poetry, and national affairs. Moreover, it is in confinement that Williams discovers his definitive role: not just a truth-seeker, but an author. In fact, his account of mental self-discovery recalls Godwin's account of novel-writing, though in the strangely optimistic context of the prison there seems to be little danger of failure:

> By degrees I quitted my own story, and employed myself in imaginary adventures. I figured to myself every situation in which I could be placed, and conceived the conduct to be observed in each. Thus scenes of insult and danger, of tenderness and oppression, became familiar to me…In some of my reveries I boiled with impetuous indignation, and in others patiently collected the whole force of my mind for some fearful encounter…I improved more in eloquence in the solitude of my dungeon, than perhaps I should have done in the busiest and most crowded scenes. (272)

Williams' authorial awakening indicates more than personal improvement. Instead, his self-conception as an exposer of hidden tyranny is explicitly tied to authorship, a point repeated throughout the text. Ultimately, Williams finds in storytelling the means to challenge despotism. At the conclusion of the novel, in fact, his authorial role becomes a kind of battle cry—truthful authorship figured as the antidote to Falkland's elegant lies:

"I will tell a tale! The justice of the country shall hear me! The elements of nature in universal uproar shall not interrupt me! I will speak with a voice more fearful than thunder!" (421).

But despite Williams' attempt to position himself as a truth-telling author, his sense of self collapses at the novel's close. In the published ending, he does manage to bring Falkland to court and secure a public admission of guilt, but rather than celebrate his victory he finds himself despondent: "I have been [Falkland's] murderer...I wantonly inflicted on him an anguish a thousand times worse than death…I thought that, if the guilt of Falkland were established, fortune and the world would smile upon my efforts. Both these events are accomplished; and it is now only that I am truly miserable" (433). Likewise, Falkland loses his determination to outlast his opponent. After embracing Williams he concedes that his enemy's tale was "artless and manly" and that his own behavior was the result of jealousy and a desire for social respect. In the end, Falkland declares that his own name "will be consecrated to infamy" while Williams' patience, virtue, and heroism "will be forever admired" (432).

Yet this admission does not result in uncomplicated closure. Up to the end, in fact, Williams struggles to comprehend his antagonists' meaning, a struggle revealed by conflicting passages at the novel's conclusion. Prior to the courtroom scene, he depicts Falkland as a despot in the mold of past emperors:

> What – dark, mysterious, unfeeling, unrelenting tyrant! – is it come to this? When Nero and Caligula swayed the Roman sceptre, it was a fearful

> thing to offend these bloody rulers…Falkland! art thou the offspring, in whom the lineaments of these tyrants are faithfully preserved? (421)

Here Falkland's chivalric respectability is stripped away—no longer a gentle aristocrat, he stands for Roman imperialism and despotism at its decadent worst: Nero and Caligula. This interpretation, however, is later discarded. After Falkland's admission of guilt, Williams declares that "a nobler spirit lived not among the sons of men" and attempts to excuse his enemy's crimes:

> Thy intellectual powers were truly sublime, and thy bosom burned with a god-like ambition. But of what use are talents and sentiments in the corrupt wilderness of human society? It is a rank and rotten soil, from which every finer shrub draws poison as it grows. All that, in a happier field and a purer air, would expand into virtue and germinate into usefulness, is thus concerted into henbane and deadly nightshade. (434)

Falkland, then, is both victim and perpetrator, noble spirit and heartless tyrant. Williams, vacillating between these oppositional readings, eventually relieves his uncertainty by explaining Falkland's character in terms of the pernicious influence of society and the "poison of chivalry," thereby demonstrating the corrupt and degraded state of "things as they are" (434). However, Williams is also unable to fully enact Godwinian progress—the exposure of truth leading to greater knowledge, freedom, and so on. The reader, then, is required to make this leap, but the text itself offers little hope for future improvement. In fact, Williams' final justification for recounting the events is unenthusiastic: "I will finish [the memoir] that thy story may be fully understood; and that, if those errors of thy

life be known which thou so ardently desired to conceal, the world may at least not hear and repeat a half-told and mangled tale" (434).

In part, the novel's troubled ending might be read in relation to its difficult depiction of both truth and language—a depiction that deviates from the buoyant optimism of *Political Justice*. In *Caleb Williams* Godwin finds that knowledge and words, rather than spur progress, also bewilder and wound. Moreover, the whole truth remains unrevealed despite Falkland's claim that he has been "completely detected" (432). Instead, Godwin decides to leave the chest unopened, an interesting move considering its importance. Indeed, Williams' account of nearly revealing its contents is one of the most fraught passages in the novel:

> My mind was already raised to its utmost pitch…I know not what infatuation instantaneously seized me. The idea was too powerful to be resisted…After two or three efforts, in which the energy of uncontrollable passion was added to my bodily strength, the fastenings gave way, the trunk opened, and all that I sought was at once within my reach…I was in the act of lifting up the lid, when Mr. Falkland entered, wild, breathless, distracted in his looks…At the moment of his appearance the lid dropped down from my hand. (210)

It is here that we return, in an odd and unhappy way, to what I have read as Godwin's rendition of the prisoner's relation to Plato's sun. The final truth is there, Williams is certain of it, but somehow (barely, though inevitably) it eludes him. At the end of the

novel Williams again discusses the chest, though he here attempts to minimize its importance:

> The pen lingers in my trembling fingers! Is there anything I have left unsaid? The contents of the fatal trunk, from which all my misfortunes originated, I have never been able to ascertain…I am now persuaded that the secret it encloses, is a faithful narrative of [the murder]…written by Mr. Falkland…But the truth or the falsehood of this conjecture is of little moment. (423)

Although it is claimed that the "truth or falsehood" of Williams' hypothesis no longer matters, the chest is still identified as the origin of misfortune, and the reference to it accompanied by a pen held in trembling fingers, a rhyme, perhaps, with Godwin's later discussion of authorial "tottering." Here Williams' anxiety concerning the unsaid—a moment of writerly housekeeping—is accompanied by reference to the unknown, a contrast with his earlier assertion that the memoir was written in order to prevent the proliferation of a "half-told" tale. But though the chest's contents remain unrevealed, its function is nonetheless revelatory, incriminating both Williams and Falkland. The prior, we learn, is motivated by a kind of untoward curiosity. He is "seized" with infatuation and acts under the influence of "uncontrollable passion," thereby failing to meet Godwin's standard of disinterested enquiry. Falkland, we assume, is motivated by a desire to protect a terrible secret and preserve social standing, but here the chest is also revelatory, uncovering hidden rage.

In the end, Williams' quest to expose the truth—to open the chest and decipher Falkland's inconceivable face—results in self-loss: "I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character. I have now no character that I wish to vindicate" (434). Truth-seeking, once the engine of progress and the ruination of tyrants, issues into pervasive guilt and haunting irresolution. After the death of Falkland, the squire troublingly lingers as a ghostly presence: "his figure is ever in imagination before me. Waking or sleeping, I still behold him. He seems mildly to expostulate with me for my unfeeling behavior" (433).

However, this conclusion (taken from the published ending) is softened by reconciliation and a mutual recognition of wrongs. The unpublished ending, on the other hand, depicts Williams' descent into madness, a collapse that manifests as a loss of narrational coherence. In this variation justice is not served; Williams is silenced by the court and Falkland, rather than die, becomes strangely healthy, a turn of events that lead to the startling claim that "persecution and tyranny can never die" (440). Here Williams' account devolves into a series of frantic declarations interrupted by dashes:

> I have dreams – they are strange dreams – I never know what they are about – No, not while I am dreaming – they are about nothing at all – and yet there is one thing first, and then another thing, and there is much of them, and it is all nothing – when I am awake it is just the same! (442)

In this conclusion, narrative and causative reasoning disintegrate while consciousness itself comes under attack as the dream world and the waking world fold together. The final lines from the unpublished ending are blunt, replacing *Political Justice*'s juggernaut

of mind with despairing immobility and death: “True happiness lies in being like a stone...all day long I do nothing am a stone – A GRAVESTONE! – an obelisk to tell you, HERE LIES WHAT WAS ONCE A MAN” (443).

VII. Conclusion

Where *Political Justice* offers a vision of progress—an “ocean of infinite truth”—*Caleb Williams* explores “waters of bitterness” (74). Yet the novel is not only a complaint. It was written, as Godwin reminds us, in order to “disengage the minds of men from prepossession and launch them upon the sea of moral and political enquiry” (451). In part, *Caleb Williams* might be read as a cautionary tale which warns readers that the good can be turned into its opposite: “deadly nightshade.” Williams’ truth-seeking issues into obsession and madness, Tyrrel’s intelligence only serves despotic ends, and Falkland’s “amiable dispositions and virtues” result in woe. The novel thus suggests that “waters of bitterness” must be crossed before the “ocean of infinite truth” comes into view. Rather than provide direct answers, then, it challenges readers to imagine a way out—a means of escaping “things as they are.”

Of course, the novel also has practical political concerns in mind—the treatment of prisoners and tenants, the behavior of corrupt authorities—but it ties these concerns to mental revolution: the defeat of “prepossession.” Part of what is missing in *Caleb Williams*—and thus a part of the reason why everything goes wrong—is the community of enlightened truth-seekers Godwin imagines in *Political Justice*: unimpeded “public mind.” If there is hope in the novel, it might be found in its moments of mutual recognition. I began this chapter by noting Godwin’s declaration of errors, among them

inattentiveness to the importance of feeling as well as the dismissal of private affections. It is significant, then, that the desperation of *Caleb Williams*' published conclusion is moderated by an unexpected embrace between antagonist and protagonist. Two of the possibilities Godwin's double ending holds out—death and forgiveness—raise questions not only related to truth but also to the capacity for fellow feeling. Such a position is not as optimistic as the view outlined in the first edition of *Political Justice*, but it suggests a recognition that the perception of truth is only a partial solution to a more complex problem, a problem that involves both head and heart.

Faithful Shelley:
Secular Worship in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"

I. Introduction

Shelley scholarship tends to fall into two camps. We are offered, on the one hand, the Platonic and Neoplatonic Shelley, a very old view defended by James Notopolous (*The Platonism of Shelley*), Carl Grabo (*The Magic Plant*), Neville Rogers (*Shelley at Work*), and, more recently, Tracy Ware ("Shelley's Platonism in 'A Defence of Poetry'"). On the other hand, Shelley the skeptic, atheist, empiricist, and necessitarian appears in books such as C.E. Pulos' *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Skepticism*, Lloyd Abbey's *Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's Poetic Skepticism*, Kenneth Neill Cameron's *The Young Shelley*, and Cian Duffy's *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime.* That said, most writing on Shelley (including the texts I've just named) does not limit itself to a single view but instead attempts to make sense of the poet's clashing influences, foregrounding one thinker or school or explaining away another.

Perhaps the longest standing technique for making sense of Shelley has been to frame him as a poet in process. The general picture that emerges is a movement from early empiricism, skepticism, and necessitarianism to something else: a "feelings" based poetry (advocacy for revolutionary sympathy or love, for instance), a Neoplatonic belief in oneness, a Kantian view of the mind's relation to phenomena (usually natural), or a unique brand of aestheticism or species of "apolitical idealism," to use Duffy's phrase (6). Carl Grabo offers an early example of this view, writing:

> Plato…[and] the neo-Platonists had a great influence on Shelley's thought, especially that of his last four years…The development of his mind was

> away from materialism and necessitarianism towards mysticism; or, if the term mysticism is too vague, his development may be defined as marked by a weakening faith in the sole adequacy of reason and an increased reliance upon intuition. In determining this change the dialogues of Plato are clearly one of the most important forces. (237)

Scholarship that advocates an evolutionary view of Shelley has also discerned a movement toward an aesthetic vision. For instance, Angela Leighton's *Shelley and the Sublime* argues that Shelley's commitment to empiricism clashed with his poetic sensibilities. Deploying the "arguments of empiricism in the cause of eradicating Christianity" thus leads to a regret that those arguments "are so effective," a regret that stems from the view that "support for the existence of God derives, not only from a willingness to feel, but also from the poeticizing imagination, and those devices of rhetoric which Locke condemned as a 'perfect cheat'" (32). Though Shelley continues to stumble "against [Locke's] arguments," he nonetheless finds that the "enchantment" of the natural world "challenges...rigid empiricism" (34). These tensions will spur Shelley toward the sublime.

Frances Ferguson likewise detects an aesthetic vision in Shelley's work, though her reading occurs in the context of a single poem. In "'Mont Blanc:' What the Mountain Said," she finds that the poet adopts a (partly) Kantian view in which mind emerges triumphant over its material antagonists:

> If the apparent threat involved in any landscape that might be provocative of a sublime experience is that man (and mind) might be reduced to mere

> matter, the correspondent activity that occurs is that the poet's sublime account of Mont Blanc and the entire scene around it never allows matter to remain material but rather co-ops it or transmogrifies it by continually mistaking the activity of the material world for agency…Shelley insists virtually throughout the poem upon this confusion between activity and agency. (53)

The threatening "thingliness" of the natural, then, is transformed by the poet who turns objects into "found objects," a move which allows "man to domesticate the world for the purposes of aesthetics" (54). Shelley therefore "discovers the same assertion of human power that Kant did:" namely that the sublime is located "in ourselves and in our attitude of thought" (54). More than this, though, the poet deploys love language in relation to the natural. By "not merely adapting the material to the purposes of the human and the supersensible" but by discovering "the human in nature," Shelley is able to address Mont Blanc "as if it had purposes in relation to humans," thereby collapsing Kant's account of the "purposiveness without purpose" found in aesthetic objects (54). Consequently, the poem asks epistemological questions—questions relating to the "poet's understanding"—while also using the language of love: a language in which "all the questions are of [the poet's] being understood" (54).

Developmental models, then, are supplemented by attempts to show that Shelley's poetry and philosophical writing harmonizes disparate or seemingly incompatible elements. M.H. Abrams, for example, claims that Shelley draws on Platonism "seen through a vista of Neoplatonic and Renaissance commentators," while also building on

the work of contemporary poets—Wordsworth in particular—the “English sensational psychologists,” and the “benevolistic ethics” of Godwin (126). What emerges are “two planes” of “imperfectly assimilated” thought: the first “Platonic and mimetic,” the second “psychological and expressive” (126).

Likewise, Michael O’Neill suggests that Shelley harmonizes the contradictory, finding that the poet’s empiricism forms a natural bridge to Platonism:

> [T]he ‘intellectual philosophy’ frees the imagination; if no belief system can claim irrefutable knowledge of reality since reality is by its very nature unknowable, the poet’s imaginings have as much validity as any other account of reality. Here the supposed chasm between Shelley’s empiricism and his Platonism is bridged since the mind, freed from the dogmatic certainties of materialism or idealism, is at liberty to employ Platonic notions as surmises, hypothetical solutions to the impasse to which empiricism had led. (119)

Cian Duffy, too, works to offer a coherent Shelley. Drawing on Peter de Bolla and C.E. Pulos, he finds that the Shelleyan sublime emerges from the skeptical tradition—not the Kantian analytic—arguing that Shelley’s project should be read as an attempt to resist the view that frames the natural sublime as a means to achieve an understanding of the divine. According to Duffy, the “pious or theistic configuration of the eighteenth-century British discourse on the natural sublime prioritizes the imagination as the only faculty capable of intuiting the divine presence supposedly immanent in ‘awful’ nature” (8). Where once the natural sublime was put in the service of maintaining illegitimate priestly

power, the Shelleyan sublime opens the possibility for the mind to escape the constraints of religious interpretations. Therefore, what ultimately emerges in Shelley's poetry is a defense of "an *educated* imagination, an imagination acting in concert with a rational / scientific understanding of the 'awful' in natural phenomena" (9).

Lastly, there have been attempts to view Shelley's ambivalences, cascading metaphors, oppositions, and so on, as a laudable feature of his work, though not evidence of an intellectual progression or esoteric body of thought that clandestinely functions as a unity. Jerrold Hogle's *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* is an example of such scholarship. Instead of searching for unity, Hogle suggests that we take Shelley's repeated metaphor of veils as a means of understanding his work, asking: "Is there an initial center that is whole within its own being, or is the poet's 'inmost naked beauty' suggested by the mere depth of several veilings? Is there perhaps a multiple and continual veiling, then a sense of what the veils might recall, in a process that keeps decentering and revealing itself, even at its beginning" (10)? Hogle answers in the affirmative, challenging readings which suggest that Shelley's work is structured by Platonic/Plotinian notions of oneness, belief in an absolute reality behind appearances, or any other stable, unified center undergirding the poet's language. What we are left with when these theses are discarded is perpetual transference, a "centerless displacement of figural counterparts by one another" (10).

This chapter, like so much writing on Shelley, is interested in exploring the poet's oppositions. In particular, it is interested in the relationship between his Platonism and related appropriation of religious language, on the one hand, and his skepticism on the

other. I focus on the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and work to demonstrate that the poet’s disparate influences function as complementary features of his thought. For Shelley, mind is at once a source of creativity and a godlike other, both inspiring and dejecting the poet. What emerges is a binary dynamic or movement between two variously defined poles—knowledge and ignorance, hubris and humility, desire and fulfillment—that operate in relation to what the poet frames as mysterious divinities: “intellectual beauty,” the “unseen Power,” and the “one mind,” in particular. Though Shelley does not find the means to reveal the occult power he worships, he nonetheless finds in skepticism the means to approach (and praise) his mental divine. Here I argue that the poet transforms the skeptical philosophy into apophatic theology. In the end, Shelley is able to live with his oppositions through faithful worship of what he calls the “spirit of good within.”

II. The Unseen Power

The “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” opens with a description of a dual entity: an unseen Power and the unseen shadow it casts:

> The awful shadow of some unseen Power
>
> Floats though unseen among us; visiting
>
> This various world with as inconstant wing
>
> As summer winds that creep from flower to flower;
>
> Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower (1-5)

Cian Duffy notes that the poem’s terminology has been “problematic for Shelley’s critics, specifically the relationship between the ‘Power’ of the opening line, the ‘spirit of

beauty' addressed at the beginning of the second stanza, and the 'Intellectual Beauty' of the title" (100). In an attempt to clarify the poem's terms and demonstrate its coherence, he argues that the Power named in the first line is not intellectual beauty but "unquestionably Necessity" (100). Intellectual beauty, on the other hand, is "effectively synonymous" with the "spirit of beauty" which represents…the 'awful' apprehension of the 'various' manifestations of Necessity in natural phenomena or works of art" (100-101). As Duffy would have it, however, the poem's title ultimately designates a double meaning: mind's capacity to apprehend the "truth / of nature" as well as its ability to "embody that truth" (101). Consequently, Intellectual Beauty also "functions as a synonym for the 'cultivated imagination': the faculty by which the mind makes the experientially potent apprehension of the immanent presence of Necessity in natural phenomena" (101).

Earl Wasserman, on the other hand, argues that Intellectual Beauty is a "divinity of mind only and has no bearing on the realm governed by the immanent 'Spirit of Nature' of *Queen Mab* or by the 'Power' of *Mont Blanc*" (191). Instead, it is the "governing deity of the 'intellectual philosophy,' which identifies existence with mind and rejects all distinction between world and thought" (191). Neither personification nor abstraction, Intellectual Beauty is a "self-subsisting reality:"

> [A]ll that is essential in human existence derives from and returns to this transcendent source…in the *Hymn* only agent, or reflection, of the divine Intellectual Beauty, only the unseen shadow of the "unseen Power," visits the realm of mutability…[the poem] describe[s] the visitation of the agent

> as a religious experience of the nature of revelation and conversion, an ecstasy preceded and followed by "deep calm." (192)

Angela Leighton will quote Kenneth Cameron's definition of Shelleyan Intellectual Beauty—it is the "the beauty of the mind and its creations"—and note that by the time of the poem's composition "Shelley no longer distinguishes thoughts of the mind from external things" (51). This chapter starts from Shelley's claim that "nothing exists but as it is perceived" and treats the poem as an engagement with a mental divine and its emissary (635). It will place the poem in relation to theological and philosophical writing, particularly Platonic, in order to explore its mode of worship. By doing so I do not mean to deny the Power's relation to necessity, still less to minimize Shelley's skepticism (and particularly his view that mind is perceptive, not creative), as will become clear in the next section of this chapter. Instead, I approach the "Hymn" as an exploration of mind's relation to itself—particularly that aspect of mind which the poem frames as a godlike other.

Immediately, however, we see that such an exploration is attended by difficulties. The poem begins, as I have already noted, by claiming that both Power and shadow are "unseen" and further suggests that the fundamental half of this pair—the Power—resists direct accessibility. That said, the shadow it casts "floats…among us" (2). Thus the "spirit" (synonymous with the shadow) is accessible since its absence can be felt—the second stanza makes this clear—and it will eventually visit the poem's speaker. However, the "Hymn" is not only interested in uncomplicated celebration of the shadow since its presence is tenuous, capriciously visiting "this various world" with "inconstant

wing" (3). Unexpectedly, then, it is in the midst of this awful description that we come to something like the beautiful: "summer winds that creep from flower to flower." The line is remarkable since the awful shadow's proximity, for a moment, has made the flower, that perennial symbol of the beautiful, seem sublime—a lovely thing, to be sure, but a loveliness in communication with the awful which, strangely, seems to be intellectual beauty itself.

Since the object of the poem can only be sensed through the shadow it capriciously casts (an "inconstant glance"), the "Hymn" finds that humanity is threatened with the possibility of desolation. Shelley's second stanza is dedicated to this hypothesis, proceeding in a register of despair. Here the poet pleads with a divinity that appears to be callously disinterested in (though absolutely essential to) human flourishing:

> Spirit of beauty that dost consecrate
> With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon
> Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?
> Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,
> This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate? (13-17)

Though the spirit is approached in reverential and religious terms—it is an entity that "consecrates" that which it "shine[s] upon"—the adulatory aspect of the stanza is complicated by placing humankind in a powerless position: incapable of all that is good without the capricious spirit's presence. Of course, the constancy of inconstancy is a repeated theme in Shelley's work, his "On Mutability" offering a direct example—

"naught may endure but mutability" (16)—but the theme of inconstancy in the "Hymn" also bears resemblance to Shelley's account of artistic production in the "Defence:"

> The mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within…Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline; and the most glorious poetry that has been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. (696)

Angela Leighton notes that for Shelley "the act of writing always relinquishes something that went before…inspiration…is a Power which declines, decays, vanishes" (47). In the "Defence" we find that a power internal to the mind (a power that "arises…within") spurs the creative act, but composition proves to be an endeavor marked by loss or impurity since Shelley (echoing the *Phaedrus*) suggests that writing and forgetting are linked. Given the "Hymn's" interest in artistic creation, we might consequently read its Power and shadow in relation to poetic inspiration—that is, the inaccessible Power casts a shadow which inconstantly inspires the poet to compose, and the poet's composition, in turn, becomes a shadow of that shadow.

The influence of the *Ion* can be felt here (that Shelley translated it is no surprise), but the Neoplatonic tradition is also an important influence. Shelley was first exposed to Plato during his time at Oxford, and, as Thomas Jefferson Hogg recounts in his biography of Shelley, read Thomas Taylor whose translations of Plato made little distinction

between Platonism proper and the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus (192). That said, I will primarily focus on later British variants of Platonism—namely the Cambridge Platonists and Shaftesbury—finding that they offer particularly useful points of reference for approaching Shelley's religious language. What we will find is that Shelley uses Platonic and Neoplatonic modes of describing the world to map the operations of mind, not an external realm or supra-human sphere since his skeptical commitments cast doubt on the knowability of mind-independent reality. Tracy Ware, in fact, will claim that Shelley "performs an act of internalization by which the noumenal realm becomes the imagination's world" (552). Most important for this section is Shelley's depiction of the mind as a god (or *nous*), a view that imperfectly (though productively) rhymes with the work of Shaftesbury and the Cambridge Platonists.

The salient point to take from the Cambridge Platonists, then, is the belief in an infinite mind which grants limited mind its capacity to reason. As Ralph Cudworth writes in his *Treatise Concerning Immutable Morality*, "all particular created minds [are] but derivative participations of one Infinite Eternal Mind, which is antecedent to all corporeal things" (292). Here the Platonic eternal and Plotinian oneness are adapted to the sensibilities of British Christianity. The human capacity to reason, the argument runs, is due to our secondary nature as a created beings—our immaterial "inner light" is revealed to be the reflected light of the ultimate, the divine logos and uncaused cause: God.

Shaftesbury's work, on the other hand, foregrounds aesthetic concerns in a way the Cambridge Platonists did not. What emerges is a view of the world as an ordered chain of artistic creation. "Sovereign beauty," for Shaftesbury, turns out to be the mind of

God, since the beauty one appreciates (in art or in nature) is not the matter itself (the materiality of a statue or mountain) but the mind which formed it: “the beautifying, not the beautified is really the beautiful” (79). God, therefore, is the ultimate artist, the only being capable of creating not only art but other subordinate artists, not just “forms” but “forming forms,” i.e., humans (79). Yet though the divine imprint might be discerned in all created things (including human minds), God’s nature is not, for Shaftesbury, immediately apparent. Instead, “sovereign Beauty” is bound up with the dreadful and obscure. Speaking of wild, open scenes in nature, he writes:

> Here space astonishes. Silence itself seems pregnant: whilst an unknown force works on the mind…Even we ourselves, who in plain characters may read *divinity* from so many bright parts of earth, choose rather these obscurer places to spell out that mysterious being, which to our weak eyes appears at best under a veil of cloud. (77)

For Shaftesbury, it is possible to “read” God in the “bright parts of the world,” a location which seems to present “plain characters” for easy interpretation, yet such a reading of divinity proves insufficient or unsatisfactory since obscure locations are chosen in order to “[spell] out” God’s “mysterious being.” But “spelling out” in obscurity opposed to “reading” in the “bright parts of the earth” does not entirely clarify God’s nature. Instead, it reveals the relation between God and man: a mysterious, veiled being, on the one hand, and a weak-eyed perceiver on the other.

Where the “sovereign genius” of Shaftesbury and the “Infinite Eternal Mind” of Cudworth both basically mean God, Shelley’s “unseen Power” cannot be understood as a

traditional divinity. He is an atheist, and the "Hymn's" third stanza is careful to disallow supernatural interpretations. But though Shelley rejects traditional understandings of God, he nonetheless finds it necessary to use a distinctly religious discourse. The "Hymn's" mode of describing Intellectual Beauty (and the unseen Power) frames it as a godlike other—originary though unfathomable. However, since Shelley's world is a godless one, the invocation of the unseen Power and its spirit (as well as the form of the Hymn) appears inconsistent with his beliefs. Richard Cronin solves this problem by reading the poem as a secular alternative to Christian theology: "What Shelley is trying to accomplish [in the "Hymn"] is reasonably clear. The poem is an address to a deity who is designed to be consistent with Shelley's skepticism, and who is related antagonistically to the Christian God" (229). Earl Wasserman suggests a similar explanation, claiming that Shelley is "offering a sincere prayer to divinity as he understands it…tranfer[ring]…conventional Christian terminology to what Shelley would propose as the true religion" (192).

Yet though intellectual beauty functions as a secular deity (which is to say that Shelley's God inhabits our heads) we are not only left with a glowing affirmation of the power of mind. The dreadfulness and obscurity which accompanies Shelley's divinity is partially explained by his philosophy of cognition which functions as a kind of secular theology throughout his work. From "On Life:"

> The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of

> thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. (635)

Shelley's rejection of the distinction between mind and objects takes the form of mental monism, but a monism that allows for "different modifications" of a unitary structure. These modifications, however, are entirely illusory, though it seems they are necessary for communication and self-inspection since oneness cannot look at itself. Wasserman will find that Shelley's rejection of the "doctrine of a Creator" and acceptance of a view of the "universe as eternal" inclined the poet "toward a belief that all individual minds are subsumed in a universal mind…[Shelley's] impulse at all times appears to have been to dissolve individual identity in an all-encompassing unity" (146). Still, the poet "recognized that the very existence of the individual human mind, illusory though it is, is contingent upon experience of separateness and diversity" (148).

Because Shelley's world is both mental and monistic the divinity he worships is ultimately something inside of mind (or, better, something inside the "one mind") that works upon itself: again, something that that "arises…within." But here we come to the crux of the matter. In the "Hymn," the mystery of the divine that one finds in religious language is compounded or intensified in Shelley's secular replacement which finds that

human mind—or at least its "divine" aspect—might go missing. Where Shaftesbury and the Cambridge Platonists both offer a fundamentally optimistic system (the second a divine mind that contains limited mind and grants it the capacity to reason, the first a divine mind which grants limited mind the capacity to create), Shelley's work keeps alive the potential for desolation: the collapse of meaning and the horror of "vacancy." Since there exists no traditional divinity to hold the mental world together or secure meaning—Berkeley's "some other Spirit," for instance—a new sense of dread enters the language of devotion (275). Indeed, as Shelley will claim in his "View of Philosophical Reform," man's divinity might very well be "extinguished" if institutional tyranny goes unchecked, a contradiction of the traditional understanding of the *Imago Dei.*

But though the "Hymn's" assessment of human cognition initially appears bleak, it is nonetheless counterbalanced by a view of the poet as a prophetic figure who staves off the dangers of vacancy through a special receptive capacity or "delicate sensibility," as the "Defence" puts it. The "Hymn" stages the emergence of this poet-figure as a meeting between a particular modification of the one mind (Shelley as a child) and intellectual beauty's emissary. While "yet a boy," stanza five tells us, Shelley "sought for ghosts" in "listening chamber, cave, and ruin" in the hope of communicating with the "departed dead" (49-52). But employing the "poisonous names with which youth is fed" (likely a reference to traditional religious language) results in failure: "I was not heard; I saw them not" (54). After Shelley's attempted necromancy, however, the unseen Power's emissary miraculously arrives: "Sudden, thy shadow fell on me; I shriek'd and clasp'd my hands in ecstasy" (59-60)! Like Saul on the road to Damascus, Shelley's abrupt

confrontation with a divine ambassador leads to a perceptual shift (the uninitiated made neophyte). Stanza six thus begins: “I vow’d that I would dedicate my powers / To thee and thine” (61).

This shift from frustration to ecstasy, ecstasy to allegiance is important since it is here that we find the first indication of “power” that in some way seems distinct from the awful object of the poem. Yet the poet’s dedication of his own “powers” is nonetheless followed by a recognition of the shadow’s primacy. The speaker consequently hopes that the divine ambassador “wouldst’ free / This world from its dark slavery” while praying that “That thou, O awful LOVELINESS, / Wouldst give whate’er these words cannot express” (69-72). In the end, the “awful LOVELINESS” that Shelley glimpses by way of the shadow is not only liberatory. Its paradoxical structure, now made explicit, both frees and binds:

> Thus let thy power, which like the truth
>
> Of nature on my passive youth
>
> Descended, to my onward life supply
>
> Its calm, to one who worships thee,
>
> And every form containing thee,
>
> Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind
>
> To fear himself, and love all human kind. (78-84)

We have here reached two difficulties. First, my reading suggests that “intellectual beauty” is fundamentally related to poetic production (or artistic creation more generally). I thus broadly agree with Donald Reiman’s claim that the poem is about the

"power of the human imagination." He finds that Shelley believes it is humanity's "creative force" that frees us from "blind necessity:"

> Creative force is man's one hope of shaping and directing the blind power of the immanent will which, remorseless as a potter's wheel, crushes and shapes the universe of things. Shelley believed that without human participation, the potter's wheel lacked a potter; only an upsurging of the creative force in self-aware human imagination and human love could provide the necessary moral direction to the cycle of blind necessity. (45-46)

Shelley's doctrine of necessity, however, asserts that humans do not possess agency but instead are motivated creatures: "Every human being is irresistibly impelled to act as he does act: in the eternity which preceded his birth a chain of causes was generated, which, operating under the name of motives, make it impossible that any thought of his mind, or any action of his life, should be otherwise than it is." Moreover, Shelley's philosophical commitments complicate the view of mind as a creative power: "mind…cannot create, it can only perceive" (636). The question, then, is an old one: how can a passive perceiver be an active creator?

The second difficulty is the poet's repeated subordination to intellectual beauty and its emissary. If we read intellectual beauty in relation to creativity and artistic production, why is it represented, at least in part, as a capricious divinity that threatens to abandon humanity? Thus far I have suggested that Shelley is proposing a secular theology of the mind which shares and reworks features of Platonism and its variants

(albeit loosely), but he also draws on a skeptical/empiricist tradition that places the notion of "power" under intense scrutiny. What I will argue is that Shelley's response to these problems emerge from the relations among his skepticism, Platonism, and appropriation of religious language.

III. Shelleyan Skepticism and Productive Absence

William Drummond, a skeptical influence on Shelley, claims in his *Academical Questions* that a belief in distinct faculties (or "powers" of the mind) is untenable since any hypothesized mental power leads to an infinite regress, each faculty requiring a preceding faculty to explain itself. Of the concept of power in general he writes that to "suppose the existence of power at all, may, perhaps, be nothing but the *hypothesis* of men, who admit the occult operation of something, which is no object of the understanding, for the purpose of accounting for events" (180). Earlier in *Academical Questions*, Drummond makes his case in terms of celestial bodies, again claiming that power is necessarily hidden: "I suppose the earth to be carried round the sun by the power of gravitation; and I do not thence pretend that I have an idea, or notion, of the power of gravitation. I am acquainted with the effect; I may suppose, though I do not perceive the occult cause" (11).

Shelley echoes Drummond's argument in a footnote in the "Defence," invoking the gravitational force of celestial bodies, but the poet's account focuses on the function of the imagination rather than the movement of physical objects. He writes that imagination can be conceived of

> as mind combining the elements of thought itself. It has been termed the power of association; and on an accurate anatomy of the functions of the mind, it would be difficult to assign any other origin to the mass of what we perceive and know than this power. Association is, however, rather a law according to which this power is exerted than the power itself: in the same manner as gravitation is the passive expression of the reciprocal tendency of heavy bodies toward their respective centres. Were these bodies conscious of such a tendency, the name which they would assign to that consciousness would express the cause of gravitation; and it were a vain enquiry as to what might be the cause of that cause. (674)

As this and other accounts indicate, Shelley's view of the imagination and poetic creation, though drawing on Platonic traditions, is not opposed to skepticism. But though Shelley reproduces a skeptical epistemology and associationist account of mental creation, his views do not terminate in simple modesty (or skeptical caution) about the creative capacity of the mind. Rather, Shelley puts skepticism's suspicion of power in the service of his new religion, interpreting the unknowable or absent aspect of mind as an invitation for rhapsody and worship as well as a motive for faith in an internal divinity which, though a part of human mind, lies beyond perception.

Shelley's invocation of skeptical accounts of mind's power employ an ecstatic register that conflicts with the staid tradition he draws on. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine the poet fully assenting to Hume's deflationary account of association. Though mind seems "to possess…unbounded liberty," Hume writes in *An Enquiry Concerning*

Human Understanding, "we shall find…that it is really confined within very narrow limits:"

> [A]ll this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience. When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, gold and mountain, with which we were formerly acquainted. (11)

On one level, Shelley agrees with Hume and makes a similar point in his "Speculations on Metaphysics:"

> It is an axiom in mental philosophy, that we can think of nothing which we have not perceived…The most astonishing combinations of poetry, the subtlest deductions of logic and mathematics, are no other than combinations which the intellect makes of sensations according to its own laws. A catalogue of all the thoughts of the mind, and of all their possible modifications, is a cyclopedic history of the universe. (186)

Though the general associationist position is replicated, Shelly's account introduces a mystical or, at least, ecstatic dimension to Hume's disinterested exposition. Certainly our thoughts are but the results of impressions (and the imagination is but the conjoining or comparing of ideas derived from impressions). However, such a view also implies that human thought constitutes and therefore, in a sense, creates the universe, or, perhaps better, that mind perceives the universe into existence. Thus, for Shelley, the operations of mind are essentially analogous with the features of a deity. Hume's golden mountain,

in other words, isn't simply an example of a prosaic mental operation. Instead, it signals the presence of an unseen God inside our heads and, perhaps more radically, suggests that such a fictional construct could hold every bit as much validity as a "real" mountain—both, after all, being equally "present" to the human mind in their ideated/perceived form. According to Wasserman, however, such a "creation" of world occurs not only during moments of intense inspiration. Instead, the imagination's "synthesizing power" is "innate" and naturally tends "to organize the mind's data" (214). Thus, though "poetic conception…occurs only in the extraordinary moments when some invisible and inexplicable influence from within enflames the 'fading coal' of the mind, the coal [nonetheless] smolders continually" (214).

To be sure, this God is ultimately unknowable (or unseen/occult), but Shelley tracks the force it exerts through an analysis of its effects on mental life. In particular, Shelley's treatment of two terms related to the associative function of the imagination are especially important to his secular theology of mind: poetry and love. I will begin with the latter which, according to Mark J. Bruhn, "designate[s] the motive force driving all the scaffolded forms of analogy, from innate pattern recognition to the self/other identification that underlies theory of mind and morality" (414). Moreover, Shelleyan love marks a "'universal thirst' or irreducible intentionality: it is 'for a communion not merely of the senses, but of our whole nature, intellectual, imaginative, and sensitive'" (415). Yet, "no existing object or social other can perfectly answer the functional demand, and so the 'communion' is always incomplete [and] partial" (415).

The view of love as a “motivating force” or “universal thirst” relates to what the poet frames as a rankling sense of absence—a perceived gap or disconnect that lies between the self and the other:

> *Thou* demandest what is Love. It is that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience within ourselves. If we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own…This is Love. This is the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with every thing which exists. (631-632)

Shelley’s claim that a perceived mental void spurs desire and leads to a recognition of the “bond and…sanction” that connects the world rhymes with skeptical accounts of reasoning and knowledge production. Drummond’s *Academical Questions,* for instance, also offers a view of productive voids, though here the focus is on memory: “If in recollecting any train of ideas, I receive a broken link in the chain, which I desire to fill up, my volition is not employed about the absent idea itself, but about the removal of a want, of which I am perceptive” (12). Both Drummond and Shelley focus on the productive power of voids, each finding that they stimulate desire. For Drummond, importantly, memory’s missing link need not be created, only recalled. Likewise, the Shelleyan void might be understood as a pseudo-void since love’s/desire’s aim—mental

unity with a perceived other, sympathetic vibration—already exists. As "Love's Philosophy" suggests (and as "On Life" makes explicit), the mental universe is unitary. Consequently, the existence of actual voids is foreclosed: "Nothing in the world is single / All things by a law divine / In one spirit meet and mingle / Why not I with thine" (5-8)?

In fact, moments of perceived oneness—moments Shelley will associate with childhood—come closest to the truth of actual existence, whereas the modes of perception that that typify adult life obscure mental unity:

> Let us recollect our sensations as children…We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. (635)

In one sense, then, the Shelleyan void does not primarily mark a separation so much as a perceived separation—a false mode of seeing the world that conceals the reality of its interconnectedness. Indeed, Shelley suggests that something like false consciousness plagues mind by blocking it from perceiving the truth of oneness. He notes that the "power" of dissolving into the universe or absorbing it in the "I" fades as "men grow up" and become "habitual and mechanical agents" (635). Such a mechanistic relation to the

world and perceived others, however, is not a sign of maturity or knowledge but a sign of misperception that disguises the actual nature of mental existence.

Shelley's view that mind is motivated by desire and love relates to his understanding of poetry and, more particularly, to his paradoxical description of the poet as a passive creator. Ross Woodman, exploring the implicit consequences of Earl Wasserman's study of Shelley, writes:

> Since for Shelley Existence itself is the universe of things residing as thoughts in the mind, the infinite combinations of those thoughts in and by the mind constitute the various forms that Existence takes. Its ultimate or true form in the One Mind (of which individual minds are portions) cannot be imaged because all images as images partake of those illusory conditions of space and time of which the One Mind is free. (248)

According to Wasserman, Shelley "can conceive of the poetic act indifferently as either a creation of ideal order by a human portion of the One or as a kind of discovery of the order created by the One in 'the world'" (217). Since "the order created by the human portion of the One is the same as the order that truly subsists in reality beneath the veil of appearance and mutability, creation and discovery are only different ways of describing the same creative—not mimetic—act of the mind" (217). Shelley, no doubt, will use both the language of mimesis and creation/creativity, and, as Wasserman notes, does not locate the "Hymn's" divine "in the *external* world" (192). But, in one sense at least, Wasserman's second description of the "poetic act"—discovery—might be read as primary. The poet, in other words, is unable to capture the totality of the one mind—or

reveal the occult power which fuses it—but is able to record (mirror, imitate, "catalogue") portions of it, portions which reveal themselves through the sporadic visitations of the divinity in man. (Such a recording, of course, faces the problem of writing's incapacity to capture the "original purity" named in the "Defence"). The "creative faculty" and "poetical faculty" that Shelley names in the "Defence" might therefore be understood not as an inventive capacity but as mental cartography—a mapping of that which already exists or exists *in potentia*—thought's "possible modifications." Shelley tells us that the role of the poet is to uncover the "permanent analogy of things" and claims that poetic "language is vitally metaphorical," by which he means that "it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension" (676).

Uncovering "permanent" analogies and discovering what the poet will call "similitudes," however, is not a trivial responsibility. Bruhn, in fact, will claim that Shelley "installs [the concept of analogy] at the root of human epistemology and therefore of human sociality and morality" (382). As I see it, the "power" of the poet named in the "Hymn" is to partially and sporadically perceive not the occult force behind the gravitational pull among all things—that would be impossible—but to perceive the subtle and persistent effect of that force: that is, to note some aspect of the one mind's mingled, sympathetic nature and communicate that nature to the world. Poetry, Shelley writes, "is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds," a record that freezes the "evanescent visitations of thought and feeling" which arise "unforeseen" and depart "unbidden," much like the "Hymn's" capricious spirit

("Defence" 699). Putting his point differently, Shelley writes that poetry "arrests the vanishing apparitions" which appear out of the darkness of temporal intervals—what the "Defence" calls the "interlunations of life"—and ultimately "sends [those apparitions] forth among mankind," thereby "redeeming from decay the visitations of the divinity in man" (698). Arresting "vanishing apparitions" and "evanescent visitations," then, is the Shelleyan method of accomplishing the Delphic maxim to "know thyself," though the self here is larger than a limited individual.

Shelley's view that poetry functions as self-mapping counterbalances his fear that humanity is in danger of desolation and vacancy. Here we return to the issue of desire/love. The visitations of the "divinity in man" function as an engine of progress through the production of an endless series of pseudo-voids: "Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thought of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void forever craves fresh food" ("Defence" 682). The expansion of the mental horizon gained through poetic cartography opens new lacunae in humanity's mental map. The poetic act of recording the visitations of the mental divine (or its emissary) both expands knowledge and creates further voids which, in turn, cause further productive cravings: a virtuous cycle which promises mental expansion.

Ultimately, history moves toward better arrangements through a dual driver: fear of absence and desire for contiguity with the ultimate unity of all things. It is, then, unsurprising that the "Hymn" is initially structured by a failure to perceive coupled with

agonizing desire. Recall that Shelley calls out to the names of the departed dead but is answered with exasperating silence. The encounter with the spirit of beauty occurs after this irksome absence. But the poet/child, importantly, does not produce or conjure the visitation of the shadow. Instead, the shadow—suddenly and unexpectedly—falls on the desiring (and initially frustrated) perceiver. Here too we can see why Shelley's first communication with the spirit both binds and frees, offering hope while subordinating the poet. The reason that Shelley's vision has given him "hope" is that the appearance of the spirit has shown him that the universe is bound by love—or, perhaps, that mind is fundamentally loving—and that he, as a portion of the one mind, is able to perceive some aspect of mind's sympathetic nature. He thus "fears himself" (since "he" in a sense is God—or at least a particle of the mind of God) and also comes to love "all humankind" because he is comingled with all other beings, even if the totality of that comingling remains unperceived. In short, the poet's optimism (humanity exists in a unitary mental world structured by the power of love) and pessimism (human perception is unable to capture the totality of its own existence) leads him to be both inspired and dejected by the force he worships, a force which appears in the shape of an external divinity but can only be an aspect of the human.

As Reiman notes, however, "man has no cause to boast" of the "creative imagination," for it is a "gift lent momentarily by an unknown Power" (45). Ultimately, Shelley is able to ascribe to the poet a godlike or exalted status while simultaneously recognizing his subordinate position. Though the poet pleads with the unseen Power's

shadow, he also claims for himself (and his fellow poets) a position co-equal with the traditionally-conceived creator:

> And whether [poetry] spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being…It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies the bold and true words of Tasso—"Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta" [none but God and the poet deserve the name of Creator]. (698)

The creation of a "being within our being," again, is not creation *per se*: it is, rather, an unveiling of what already exists or a veiling that functions as an unveiling: a figuration that colors some aspect of the mental universe that has become imperceptible due to reiteration, thereby making the invisible visible. (Here we might think of those false modes of thought that typify adult perception). In Shelley we find two orders of existence: the first the "common universe," which is the universe already made apparent by previous poetic cartography, what the "Hymn" names "this various world," and the universe of Demogorgon's "deep truth," the imageless realm behind appearances.

In a sense, the deep structure that Shelley proposes functions as a kind of ground from which perceptions in the mental world emanate. This view is in tension with empiricism. Hume:

> When we gradually follow an object in its successive changes, the smooth progress of the thought makes us ascribe an identity to the succession…When we compare its situation after a considerable change the progress of the thought is broken; and consequently we are presented with the idea of diversity: In order to reconcile which contradictions, the imagination is apt to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a *substance, or original and first matter*. (*A Treatise* 220)

Attempts to explain the many, in Hume's view, leads to a kind of illusion: substance (meaning that which holds something up, as Locke reminds us) is merely a hypothetical and unsatisfactory explanation for successive change, much like "cause" is an insufficient explanation for constant conjunction. But rather than demand that we accept a world of appearances and nothing more, Shelley's *oeuvre* rhymes with Platonism and Christian mystics, claiming not only that such a ground exists but that it is the source of progress, meaning, and life itself. This various world—the world of the many—is the result of a generative substrate—a substrate that recalls (but does not neatly reproduce) the "Infinite Eternal Mind" we find in traditional religious writing. It is, then, the many which are illusory and the eternal one which is permanent.

But if mind is motivated by love and existence is marked by unity, why does Shelley at times operate in a register of despair? In part, the answer comes from the dual potential of perceived absence. Pseudo-voids produce cravings but also foster indolence, ignorance, and denial. "Love's Philosophy," for instance, unfolds as a wooing text, which is to say that it functions as an argument and therefore contains the possibility of rejection (the addressee might decline the wooer's advances). Likewise, Shelley's essay "On Love" begins with precisely this problem. The poet notices a resemblance between himself and his fellow creatures but finds that he is "misunderstood, like one in a savage and distant land" (631). But how could such distance and such rejection occur since the "deep truth" is the truth of oneness—the truth of the sympathetic pull that exists among all ideated things? Another way to put this point is that Shelley's views lead to a problem that bears resemblance to theological questions concerning the problem of evil. Why is there war and tyranny, an Othman for every Cythna, a Jupiter for every Prometheus?

Carlos Baker finds that Shelley's treatment of this problem relates to what he calls a "defect of spiritual vision:"

> In describing Shelley's view of the problem of evil, Mary asserted that he thought it necessary only for mankind to will "that there should be no evil, and that there would be none." With certain qualifications this is true, although the qualifications must be explicitly stated. For Shelley, in his increasingly strong conviction that matter is a function of mind, evil is largely, though by no means entirely, a remediable defect of spiritual vision, an inability to break through the clouds into the sunlight of moral

> truth. As such, evil is a daemon which can be exorcised, or a gloomy veil which can be dispelled, by a vigorous act of the virtuous will. (114-115)

As I see it, Shelley's answer to the problem of evil relates to perception and poetry. The cause of woe, for Shelley, is misperception and (more fundamentally) lack of perception. In "Speculations on Metaphysics," for instance, the poet offers a developmental model of individuals that mirrors broader political development. Where the infant, beast, and savage are only interested in self-preservation and are therefore "incapable of receiving an accurate intimation of the nature of pain as existing in beings [apart from themselves]," the mature and civilized individual escapes the prison of self-interest through a recognition of others—their broader empathic circle the result of access to poetry and philosophy: "He who shall have cultivated his intellectual powers by familiarity with the highest specimens of poetry and philosophy, will usually sympathize more than one engaged in the less refined functions of manual labour" (308). Here Shelley's class-based ethics echo associationist accounts of morality, finding that proper treatment of others ultimately derives from the imagination. (Adam Smith's account of sympathy—essentially the capacity to put oneself in another's shoes—is close to what Shelley advocates).

But the poet's account of individual morality also operates on a grand historical scale. In his "View of Political Reform," Shelley depicts the tyranny of the *ancién regime* as a consequence of an absence of poetry and its attendant insights:

> The French were what their literature is…weak, superficial, vain, with little imagination, and with passions as well as judgements cleaving

> to the external forms of things…Their institutions made them what they were. Slavery and superstition, contumely and the tame endurance of contumely, and the habits engendered from generation to generation out of this transmitted inheritance of wrong, created the thing which has extinguished what has been called the likeness of God in man. (17-18)

"Cleaving to external forms" rather than accessing the deep truth through poetic revelation results in both stultification (mental cartography ceases) and tyranny since lack of poetry—and the mechanistic or habitual mode of existence that attends such a lack—leads to savagery and selfishness. It is no surprise, then, that Shelley's Prometheus, his archetypal anti-tyrant, rejects hatred for the enemy who torments him and declares he cannot wish pain on "any living thing" (305). In other words, the Shelleyan Prometheus is a creature of such intense sympathies that he learns to love his enemy because both still share a likeness—a comingled existence in the same perceptual universe.

IV. Approaching Secular Divinity

The "Hymn" is interested in how poetry happens and how poets are made, but it does not explore these questions in a didactic or direct manner. Instead, it presents the reader with paradoxes—an "awful loveliness" that frees and binds—as well as failures of vision or perception: an unseen Power and capricious shadow. Wasserman will note that the "Hymn's" "god, or at least its shadow, is both present and absent; for poetry…is both divine inspiration and the human artifice to preserve the experience after the moment of illumination passes" (194). Leighton, in the context of *Prometheus Unbound*, will also discuss presence and absence, though here the focus is on Demogorgon:

> As in ‘Mont Blanc’, Shelley’s presentation of the unknown Power shifts brilliantly between something and nothing. At first the obscure form seems to be clarified with the lifting of the veil, but what Panthea then sees is contradictory. Although she claims to ‘see’, she then admits that the form is “Ungazed upon’…For all its Miltonic echoes, this description of Demogorgon is typical of Shelley’s methods. He describes a presence which is very nearly an absence. (94)

Here I will suggest that this representational strategy relates to Shelley’s appropriation of religious language, skepticism, and, more particularly, deployment of simile. Rather than simply praise a shadowy deity, the poem enacts the proper mode of engagement with the occult object of worship—a mode of engagement which disallows a direct representation of the divine. Instead, the poet marks out the divine by mirroring the effects of its occult power. Shelley’s cascades of likes do not simply point from one thing to some other thing (as one immediately assumes) but instead are partial instantiations of the very thing the poet works to describe. The answer to the fundamental question the poem raises—“What is intellectual beauty?”—cannot be directly answered since it can only be sensed through the shadow it casts: referentiality, analogy, association, and love, not things in themselves but the sympathetic energy among things.

Shelley’s difficult relationship with representation can, in part, be understood through the “vitally metaphoric” nature of poetry and more specifically through the logic of simile. Shelley is a poet who repeatedly returns to cascading similes—each drawing together made visible by a “like.” The first stanza of the “Hymn” follows this pattern:

> It visits with inconstant glance
>
> Each human heart and countenance;
>
> Like hues and harmonies of evening,
>
> Like clouds in starlight widely spread,
>
> Like memory of music fled,
>
> Like aught that for its grace may be
>
> Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery. (6-12)

Here the spirit makes its appearance through the multiplicity of metaphor—or, rather, the multiplicity of metaphor calls attention to the spirit's troubled status as a non-present presence (itself the emanation of an eternally present non-presence). For Shelley, poetic language proves to be both necessary and insufficient since it offers the only means of approaching the unseen Power but is never able to fully capture the divinity in man. The poem is therefore staging its own failure: language's incapability of becoming coextensive with that which it describes. Since intellectual beauty can never be apprehended directly (as the first line of the poem indicates), it must instead be approached through a cascade of "likes"—"hues and harmonies of evening," "clouds in starlight," and "memory of music fled"—that themselves issue from a more fundamental likeness: the shadow and the inapprehensible causative thing behind the shadow. Each successive line, therefore, emphasizes the incapability of language to describe its object. The poet must rather approach it with simile, a figure which contains an act of distancing just as it appears to uncover its object.

The first simile—"like hues and harmonies of evening"—resonates with Shelley's repeated assertions of a deep order beyond the mutability of the readily-perceptible world as well as his view that the poet functions as a wind harp, passively creating harmonies. However, this line leads us to a tertiary "like," itself speeding the reader toward other associations gleaned from Shelley's body of work. Second, we are given a firm image, though the content of the image is one of diffusion: starlight filtered through "clouds widely spread." Here we find a description of perception, though imperfect and inconstant. The third simile, though again lacking firm imagery, replicates the poem's central problem, invoking the concept of present non-presence: there was a song, it is now gone, but it still echoes in the mind.

Though these similes do not reveal the unseen Power, they should not be approached as simple failures but as the means of exposing the difficulty of representation. The reader hopes for a look at "Intellectual Beauty" and its emissary only to find that neither can be directly described. The third simile—memory and music—is of particular importance. Though it does not entirely clarify the poem's object it replicates its problem (that mind, and the creative capacities in particular, appear to be both proximate and distant, present and absent). Soon after this musical reference, however, Shelley shifts to a value judgement: present non-presence, indeed, incomprehensibility, is precisely why intellectual beauty is precious: "Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery." Here the language of worship emerges—but why?

Though opposed to traditional religious understandings of God, Shelley is not opposed to worship. In one sense, in fact, Shelley repurposes the skeptical tradition,

putting it in the service of his new religion of mind. This appropriation of skepticism, rather than simply veer from traditional theology, rhymes with it in unexpected ways. For instance, in an attempt to disprove belief in supernatural deities—that is, deities external to the mental universe—the poet draws on the Jewish conception of God, writing that

> the Jews held God to be something eternal and supreme, neither subject to change nor to decay; therefore, they permit no statues in their cities or their temples. The universal Being can only be described or defined by negatives which deny his subjection to the laws of all inferior existences. Where indefiniteness ends, idolatry and anthropomorphism begin. ("Essay on Christianity" 345)

Accounts of mind or creator which purport to name the unnamable power—God, Demon, Ghost, Heaven—are coterminous with idolatry, but the skeptical tradition, though often associated with atheism, is especially attuned to this problem, for at its core is the admission that "power" is occult. Skepticism, in the Shelleyan sense, might in fact be thought of as a form of negative theology. It marks out an absence and thereby, counterintuitively, exposes an object of worship. What emerges, in fact, is something similar to the approach found in Pseudo-Dionysius. Gregory Rocca:

> As to God's incomprehensibility, for Pseudo-Dionysius…God is not one of the beings…the essence-surpassing God is also thereby the God removed from our knowledge, inaccessible to mind and speech and sight; God is the unnamable…The scriptures call "the much-praised and many-named 'One' ineffable and nameless, and the One present to all and found

> by all they call incomprehensible and unsearchable." But this presents a problem for Dionysius: if God is the unnamed One, based on the…(I am who I am) of Sinai, and yet we sing his praises with all sorts of names, how can we sing and name the praises of the unnamable One? He tries to overcome the dilemma by exactly balancing positives and negatives, theses and denials, so that he may be true both to the scriptural praises and to the ultimate unknowability of the Nameless One. (16-17)

Shelley, like Moses speaking to the burning bush, has learned of the unnameability of God since God is that which is equal to itself: "I am that I am." Likewise, Demogorgon tells us that the "deep truth is imageless," which is to say that God is not a copy and cannot be copied. (Here Shelley perhaps suggests a secularized variant of Kant's claim that the injunction against making "graven images" is the most sublime passage in scripture). Contrarily, the inhabitable and perceivable universe—"this various world"—can only accommodate an X=Y pattern of apprehension. Likes can circle around the unseen Power, but they cannot name it, for the X=X pattern (the point at which referentiality ends and ultimate being begins, the point of precise self-coextensivity) is impossible capture or understand. All one can capture is the moment in which the inaccessible X=X projects forth some aspect of its own being into the perceivable universe. Shelley's God, the occult force that binds the "cyclopedic history of the universe" together, remains forever dark.

Shelley's method of approaching the mental divine through simile—a method that at once discerns a likeness and resists direct representation—partly explains why his

work contains resonances with thinkers in Neoplatonic and mystical traditions. The apophatic approach found in Pseudo-Dionysus's *Mystical Theology* and the anonymously-authored "Cloud of Unknowing" as well as a variety of Platonic and Neoplatonic sources all tend to articulate the impossibility of fully seeing God—an impossibility, which, in Shelleyan terms, still holds even after one does away with a traditional divinity and instead worships a mental divine. What we are left with, then, is a persistent movement between ignorance and knowledge, desire and fulfillment: a void is mapped, and the map produces a void. The poet is granted a discovery but then is left in a state of yearning, a prayerful position in which the perceiver hopes for illumination to issue from the imageless (X=X) "divinity in man."

Since it is impossible to directly apprehend mind's divinity, the best one can achieve is a proper position in relation to it. Given Shelley's repeated appropriation of religious language, it is perhaps unsurprising that he suggests Jesus as an exemplar of the perfectly positioned poet:

> God, it has been asserted, was contemplated by Jesus Christ as every poet and every philosopher must have contemplated that mysterious principle. He considered that venerable word to express the overruling Spirit of the collective energy of the moral and material world. He affirms, therefore, no more than that a simple, sincere mind is the indispensable requisite of true science and true happiness. He affirms that a being of pure and gentle habits will not fail, in every thought, in every object of every thought, to

> be aware of benignant visitings from the invisible energies by which he is surrounded. ("Essay on Christianity" 342).

Though Shelley demotes Jesus from the position of creator, he reinterprets him as a model perceiver who contemplates God not as an anthropomorphic figure but as a "mysterious principle." In the context of the "Hymn," Shelley's divine comes as an aspect of the human, and the role of the poet as a receptor. The aim of poetry, in the end, is to find a way to praise and approach this divinity, while working to record its sporadic visitations. Though the mystery is never fully revealed, Shelley nonetheless finds hope for humanity's progress in those glimpses of insight that arise "unforeseen" and depart "unbidden."

V. Conclusion

For Shelley, the world is paradoxical, not linear, its shape binary and its movement a vacillation between two poles, not a gentle upward curve. History is the passive creation of the poet, though such a creation can be reversed if mind departs from itself. Yet, of course, Shelley is on the side of progress and so often seems sure a new, better world is possible, no matter how often he invokes the possibility of collapse and vacancy. But why should he be confident? If skeptical insights challenge the most basic assumptions we hold, how does the poet justify belief? How does his unseen God cause the visitation of the spirit which causes the poet to compose, which, in turn, causes social progress?

Shelley's answer—"dear, and yet dearer for its mystery"—signals another religious attribute: faithfulness. Recall that Shelley does not have knowledge that the

"unseen Power's" shadow will "free" the world, but a "hope" that it would, a word he repeats in a letter to Maria Gisborne: "Let us believe in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods…it is best that we should think all this for the best even though it be not, because Hope, as Coleridge says, is a solemn duty which we owe like to ourselves and to the world—a worship to the spirit of good within" (134). Shelley's belief in the unseen Power—and his "vow" to remain faithful to it—might therefore be read as a form of duty that derives not from certainty but from a conviction that it is right to believe.

Rather than adopt the iron law of reason, Shelley offers a prayer that the side of Cythna and Prometheus will emerge triumphant and that "blunted" perception will give way to the insights of poetry, the means of communicating with the awful loveliness that constitutes the world. Though Shelley vacillates between his dual reading of voids—threatening vacancy and productive pseudo-absence—his movements seem to be weighted to one side by a determination to keep his youthful "vow." For Shelley, the skeptical tradition has not shaken our foundations; it has revealed a new object of worship, an occult power which is omnipresent and inaccessible at once. What matters, in the end, is that the poet keep perceiving, since it is in the midst of the void that the voice of God speaks—a speaking that, for Shelley, must sound both familiar and distant.

Smiling Amidst the Ruins:
Ends and Beginnings in *The Last Man*

I. Introduction

Initial reviews of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* were largely negative, finding the novel both macabre and unoriginal. Critics hastily lumped it in with Byron's "Darkness," Thomas Hood's and Thomas Campbell's poems (both titled "The Last Man"), as well as the long prose poem *Le Dernier Homme* by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville. *The Monthly Review* directly attacked Shelley's character, writing that *The Last Man* was the "offspring of a diseased imagination" (335), while *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* referred to the novel as an "abortion" and claimed that Shelley had inflicted "stupid cruelties" on her readership (54). *The Literary Magnet* simply dismissed it as "another raw-head-and-bloody-bones" (56).

Recent scholarship, however, has found that *The Last Man* is notable not for its conformity but for the way it rewrites the traditions it occupies. J. Jennifer Jones, for example, has taken as her starting point the view that the novel demonstrates an acute awareness of its position as an iteration of the lastness theme, an awareness that allows Shelley to complicate the boundary between reality and fiction. For instance, Jones finds that Shelley revises Edmund Burke's view that staged tragedy is no match for a public execution. Though Verney, in Burkean fashion, initially treats theatre as a weak mirror of the real, his safely distanced experience as a spectator is disrupted when a scene from *Macbeth* provokes "a degree of terror that up to that point he associated only with reality itself, specifically the realities of the plague and impending Lastness" (38).

But even if one were to stick to the level of plot, it is clear that *The Last Man* does not neatly replicate its cousins. For example, de Grainville's *Le Denier Homme* ends with the dead rising from their graves and gives its readers the promise of eternal life. In contrast, Shelley's novel concludes with the last man setting off to sea under the "eye of the Supreme," a non-intervening spectator. Byron's poem, on the other hand, is not a last man narrative at all. The closest it comes to the model is in its depiction of the last two men of an "enormous city," mortal enemies who meet in darkness. After making a flame from "feeble ashes" with their "feeble breath," they see "each other's aspects" and simultaneously die, a consequence of "their mutual hideousness" (56-67). Where Byron's poem offers the reader a final moment of fraught intersubjectivity (followed by the speaker's depiction of an unpeopled world), Shelley's novel meditates on the psychological effects of lastness, recounting Verney's attempts to forge a life without human contact.

Such an end has proven difficult to grasp, producing a wide range of interpretations of the plague as well as Verney's final position in the novel. A popular reading classes *The Last Man* as a *roman à cléf*. Briefly: Verney is Mary Shelley, Adrian is Percy, and Raymond is Byron. Consequently, the novel has been approached as a personal attempt to cope with the deaths of loved ones or as a portrayal of trauma on a large scale. Mary Shelley's journal, in fact, provides strong evidence for this reading: "The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me" (193).

Yet the view that *The Last Man* primarily functions as a grand stage for the expression of personal trauma has left some dissatisfied. Barbara Johnson, for instance, argues that Shelley "does more than give a universal vision of her mourning; she mourns for a certain type of universal vision" (9). According to Johnson, the last man—a representative of Western humanism, particularly its Romantic variant—"seeks to live the death of all humanity" but ultimately reveals that "Western culture…can no longer take itself for the voice of humanity in its entirety" (10). In fact, the plague functions as an "inverted image" of the vision Shelley eulogizes, its "lethal universality," in Johnson's view, "a nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse, to spread equality and fraternity throughout the world" (11). In the end, *The Last Man* is "torn between mourning and deconstruction," its "pitiless demystification" of Romanticism's universalizing vision "narrated as a series of privations and unendurable sorrows" (12).

The plague has also been interpreted as the collapse of meaning. Robert Snyder, writing in this vein, calls it a "grotesque enigma mocking all assumptions of order, meaning, and purpose." What emerges out of this crisis is "the fearful marginality of man in a disjointed and alien universe" (438). For Snyder, the plague reveals the "fictive nature of all consciousness" and ultimately leads Verney to make a prototypically Romantic move. By writing an account of his life and the plague, he "becomes the artist who, recognizing the inherent nullity of time apart from man, is compelled to recreate his experience and give imaginative conception to his own historicity" (450). Similarly, Steve Vine associates the plague with "the abject collapse of meanings," but his argument follows feminist readings of the novel. Building on the work of Jane Aaron, Sandra

Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, Vine finds that the plague functions as a "female repressed that has not been able to enter into discourse or history and which can therefore only become visible as a non-signifying disruption, a scandal, a monstrosity" (153). Ultimately, the plague is the "unpresentable," a "catastrophically obliterative sublime" that "renders all differences, all distinctions, all hierarchies, all boundaries effaced." Its violence—in Jean-François Lyotard's terminology—signals the coming of a world for which we have no language, a world that is "waiting to be phrased" (154).

Vine is not alone in reading the novel as a return of the repressed. Kevin Hutchings makes a similar argument, but he focuses on Shelley's depiction of bodily repression. For Hutchings, *The Last Man*'s pastoralism echoes Michel Foucault's "pastoral technology:" the process by which Christian cultures internalize the watchful eye of the omnipotent shepherd-God in order to police "those aspects of identity traditionally associated with animality, including all bodily instincts, appetites, and desires" (230). Verney's early development—and with it his suppression of "animal wants"—results in a violent return of the repressed. The plague, then, is the manifestation of Verney's internal pathologies in the external world of the novel (241).

Betty T. Bennett, on the other hand, argues that *The Last Man* enacts a distinctly Romantic vision through a fabular series of destabilizations that echo the philosophical work of Shelley's intellectual circle:

> *The Last Man* is in keeping with these Shelleyan, Godwinian, and Wollstonecraftian politics in its efforts to alter ordinary perspectives. It destructs expected values--genuine love of wife and children, traditional

> religion and traditional government--in order to compel readers to reconsider those values--by analogy, to meditate a world view that above all else permits possibility, a very Shelleyan idea. (150)

Bennett, in my view, is right to locate a positive potential in *The Last Man*, and her position that the novel allows readers to "meditate a world view that…permits possibility" will become important to my argument. It remains important, however, to account for the plague's violence. Barbara Johnson notes that the plague treats the political aspirations of the novel's characters like a thoughtless child shaking up an Etch A Sketch: "each time we are about to draw a lesson from the narrative of political events, the Plague arrives to erase the question" (10). Lee Sterrenburg has gone so far as to argue that *The Last Man* is an "anti-political" novel that outlines the failure of attempts to "enact various reforming and revolutionary solutions" (328). In this reading, the novel "cancels out" both "the utopian rationality of Godwin" and the "conservative organicism of Edmund Burke" (335).

Here it would help to remember that the title Shelley chose is not Camus'—the novel is named *The Last Man*, not *La Peste*. Rather than emphasize the plague, then, it would be useful to focus on what the plague ultimately accomplishes: Verney's position at a limit, the last man looking out at an unpeopled world. This chapter argues that the novel is concerned with the productive power of lastness and reads Verney's final position as an attempt to think the prerequisites for new thought. To make this case I follow three lines of argument. First, I read the novel's prophetic structure as a prison in which beginnings and ends are tied together. However, I find that Shelley's frame is

complicated by her literary and biblical allusions which suggest a double potential: entrapment and escape, obliteration and new life. Next, I argue that the narrative itself is structured by dual possibilities. Here I read Verney's journey from savage shepherd to elevated author-god as a meditation on the bifurcated character of the human of humanism. Finally, I find that though the plague does violence to this narrative of assent, Shelley nonetheless offers a vision of humanity's potential at the novel's close. By treating the world as a text—by becoming a reader—Verney is able to face the threats posed by hostile nature and the plague. Moreover, his readerly openness to the world anticipates the receptive capacity of the Sybil, signaling humankind's capacity to reimagine itself.

II. The Flood and the Sybil

Barbara Johnson claims that if man is the creature with a *telo*s his beginnings must contain his ends. She asks: "Isn't every narrative in fact constructed beginning with the denouement, as every project is constructed beginning with its goal?" Perhaps, then, the end is "that which never ceases to be repeated" and man the creature that is "never finished with ending" (3). Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* not only places the end in its beginnings but puts the two halves in conversation. The novel is framed as a prophetic text, its contents the deciphered writings of the Cumaean Sybil, but the ancient prophecy comes in the form of a future autobiography which recounts its author's past. This frame puts ends and origins in an intimate relation. Writing the end of man, in Shelley's rendering, involves time travel: Verney's autobiography is transmitted backwards to ancient Italy—or does the Sybil project herself forwards, as prophecy implies?—and that

message, in turn, works its way into Shelley's present when the Sybil's account of the last man's narrative is discovered by tourists.

Even the narrative proper—when considered separately from the novel's introduction—has been interpreted cyclically. William Lomax writes that the novel "shatters the deterministic flow of linear time, which must have a stop in Christian teleology, and replaces it with a spiraling, indeterminate sequence that turns back upon itself and never ends" (8). For Lomax, this structure accomplishes a reversed rendering of the biblical account of creation. The last man becomes the first man, but in this rendition Genesis marks both the terminus of a process and the return to an origin: "Verney, once he reaches the godlike peak of his evolution, discovers he has merely come in a circle and has returned to that state where he began: a wild savage and a pariah from society" (10). Yet Lomax will also claim that Shelley's novel offers a "seed of hope" (15). The "repetitive spiral of time in which Verney finds himself" opens the possibility of "new myths" as well as a "different sort of salvation" from the one found in Christianity: the salvation offered by Adrian, "the apostle of love" and "humanitarian" (14).

As Shelley's frame makes clear, the novel's structure functions as a trap. The end has been placed in the beginnings and all that remains is to walk toward doom. But I suggest it would help think about how Shelley constructs her trap, specifically in regards to the biblical-Miltonian and classical references she deploys: the Cumaean Sybil and Genesis' flood, in particular. Both contain a double potential—entrapment and crossing, regeneration and obliteration—possibilities that the novel repeatedly explores. Two aspects of the Cumaean Sybil are here relevant. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the Sybil, like

the novel's characters, is trapped. Apollo, after granting her a wish to live a long life, withholds perpetual youthfulness when she refuses his sexual advances. The Sybil is thus cursed with unnatural longevity coupled with natural aging, and so progressively shrinks as time goes by. In the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio claims to have seen the Sybil in her miserable state. She is kept "hanging in a bottle" in Cumae where she hopes for a death that will not come (35). But reading the Sybil as a figure of entrapment is counterbalanced by other accounts. In Virgil's *Aeneid*—and this the account Shelley references in her introduction—the Sybil appears as a helper, providing Aeneas the means to visit his father in Elysium, where he learns of reincarnation. Here the Sybil functions as a conduit or middle figure—a point of contact between the world of the living and the world of the dead—and so indicates the possibility of a "beyond," or, at least, a new kind of life.

Shelley's epigraph is similarly double. At the beginning of each of the novel's three books, she includes a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost:* "Let no man henceforth seek to be foretold what shall befall Him or his children." For Morton Paley, these lines—spoken by Adam who has been given "a vision of futurity up to the Flood"—are unambiguously negative. Adam's knowledge "can only torment him" since he sees "disasters he cannot prevent." Admittedly, it would be difficult to apply a direct biblical interpretation to Shelley's depiction of global catastrophe and Paley's claim that Verney fails to fulfill the role of Noah is difficult to deny, but the novel's reference at least suggests a positive potential. The flood, after all, divides the world in two:

antediluvian and postdiluvian, the former a world of sin, the latter a world in which a new covenant between God and man has been obtained.

The critical question is the extent to which Shelley chooses between the double options her allusions suggest: destruction and new life. I will argue that these options remain open throughout much of the novel, but that its final pages push toward the possibility of something like regeneration. For now, though, I hold out these references as a means of framing my chapter, not as evidence of a definitive reading. In order to make sense of Shelley's choices, I turn to the narrative proper and Verney's development in particular.

III. Verney's Rise and Fall

The Last Man is concerned with Romantic humanism, but it also engages Western humanism more broadly, its references and resonances stretching from classical antiquity to the novel's Romantic precursors: William Godwin and Percy Shelley, in particular. The novel's treatment of humanism primarily unfolds through Verney's three-part journey: savage shepherd, godlike author, and last man. As noted in my introduction, Kevin Hutchings has read Verney as an "everyman" who represents Western bodily repression. There is much truth in the view that the novel is interested in repression—and my argument often overlaps with Hutchings' concerns—but Verney might also be read as a stand-in for something more broad: the human of humanism. His journey, put differently, functions as a meditation on definition (what is the human?), capacity (what can the human do?), and purpose (toward what end is the human directed?).

This questioning of man's place and purpose begins almost immediately. At the novel's beginning, Verney appears as the possessor of a double potential: debased animality and godlike heights. Though Verney's desire for social life is clear—and his isolation at the close of the novel is not of his own making—his development and self-conception throughout much of *The Last Man* relates to these two poles. Of his early life, he writes: "I was rough as the elements and unlearned as the animals I tended. I often compared myself to them, and finding that my chief superiority consisted in power, I soon persuaded myself that it was in power only that I was inferior to the chiefest potentates of the earth" (11). Though not yet seeing himself in godlike terms, his analogy—I am to animals as kings are to humans—allows him to imagine himself in the role of sovereign despite his humble condition.

Verney's first step away from his early mode of existence is accomplished by breaking from this view of power. In *The Last Man* we find the introduction of a dividing line that revises Verney's early theory of sovereign power while framing the animality in man as a kind of latent threat. The novel depicts a contest between animality and human mind, the former emerging as something that threatens to inhibit the proper development of the latter: "My life was like that of an animal, and my mind was in danger of degenerating into that which informs brute nature" (14). As Verney would have it, it is Adrian's tutelage (and society) that rescues him from this danger and allows him to be "admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual and moral nature of man from that which characterizes animals" (22). But if the animal in Verney was predominant in his youth, those aspects associated with exalted nobility were dormant

potentialities which only required a conducive social environment to emerge: under Verney's "ruggedness there glimmered forth an elevation of spirit, which could be distinguished from mere animal courage" (23).

This focus on distinguishing and separation—on drawing lines in order to locate a stable nature—functions both as internal repression and extraction: pushing the animal down and coaxing the spirit out. It is during this process of suppression and extraction that an inverted replication the theory of power Verney held during his rough existence as a shepherd and aspiring potentate emerges. After meeting Adrian—a man that is "all mind"—Verney becomes a worshipful acolyte, his spirit laid "prostrate before" his newfound tutor-shepherd (20). Here Verney's crossing into civilization functions as an enclosing. From the vantage point of his "wild jungle," Verney initially thinks the "trim and paled demesne of civilization" is barred from him, but its "wicket" is opened by his benevolent teacher (21). Fittingly, Adrian's library is the space in which Verney's domestication and humanization takes place. Inside its walls—adorned with the busts of philosophers—Adrian expostulates on "the old Greek sages and…the power which they had acquired over the minds of men, through the force of love and wisdom only" (20). If Verney held to a theory of power in which there is only physical strength, Adrian teaches an inverted doctrine: power without mind becomes power without body.

But Verney—once savage, now sheep—does not remain in his subordinate position and soon begins to pursue power again, though he now holds the intellectual tools gifted by Adrian. Hutchings notes that Verney, when "he throws his Crook aside," ultimately trades a "real flock of sheep for a figurative one"—namely, a "new-born flock

of ideas" (231). But the position Verney ultimately reaches is not only that of idea-shepherd but Adamic originator:

> [S]ince Adrian had first withdrawn me from my selvatic wilderness to his own paradise of order and beauty, I had been wedded to literature. I felt convinced that…no man's faculties could be developed, no man's moral principle be enlarged and liberal, without an extensive acquaintance with books…I turned author myself… [and] acquired new sympathies and pleasures. I found another and a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures; my point of sight was extended, and the inclinations and capacities of all human beings became deeply interesting to me. Kings have been called the fathers of their people. Suddenly I became as it were the father of all mankind. (120)

The association between Verney's authorship and power is a crucial theme, appearing repeatedly in the novel. Here we find Verney in the role of king but also in the role of creator. Richard Albright, in fact, has productively read the first two words of Shelley's first paragraph—"I AM"—as an invocation of the "Hebrew name for God" as well as a reference to Coleridge's understanding of the imagination (both primary and secondary). He finds that

> Verney has created this history, his own as well as his country's, and in fact has created this entire world, symbolically dividing the waters from the land. His view of space is vast enough that England is a mere speck to

> him (when it presents itself to his mind) and his perspective of time is comparably vast.

But if England appears as a mere speck in Verney's mind—though a speck that that possesses greater mental power than "countries of larger extent and more numerous population"—it immediately enlarges through another metaphor. The nation as speck becomes a "vast and well-manned ship" that masters the waves (7). However, these initial metaphors will be replicated in an altered form in the final paragraph of the novel. Verney, at the end, becomes a speck under the "eye of the Supreme" as he sets off in his "tiny bark," substituting heights "in favor of sea level and a future he comprehends not at all," as Albright puts it (367).

What we see, in other words, is a repeated interest in expansion and contraction, Verney's position shifting from elevated viewer to insignificant speck, humble shepherd to author-god. This play of substitutions between the large and small, high and low, powerful and impotent, is replicated in the novel's depiction of humanity as a whole. Of particular importance are passages that relate to free will and necessitarianism. Verney initially appears as a defender of free will, arguing that "nature always presents to our eyes the appearance of a patient: while there is an active principle in man which is capable of ruling fortune, and at least of tacking against the gale, till it in some mode conquers it" (51). But personified Death—"girt with power"—becomes a "conqueror" in turn. Verney eventually finds that mankind can "no longer say, this we will do, and this we will leave undone. A mightier power than the human was at hand to destroy our plans" (244). We again find a seafaring metaphor: "the vessel of society is wrecked" and

"man, the queller of the elements, the lord of created nature, the peer of demi-gods, existed no longer" (253).

What the plague first destroys is not merely man as a kind of biological reality, but a particular conception of man, both humanist and biblical. The plague also does violence to Godwinian perfectibility as well as the free-will doctrines of Verney. History's trajectory, one of infinite betterment, is undermined alongside faith in humanity's capacity to direct itself or resist forces external to it. In some sense we might say that Shelley inverts Godwin's vision. Where *Political Justice*'s last men end in endlessness—they are brought to eternal life, the escape of the mind from the prison of the body—Mary Shelley's last man is brought to the edge of annihilation.

IV. "Dread Blank"

Though the plague primarily brings death, *The Last Man* concludes with the pain of isolation, a pain that Verney feels acutely. As he travels through the post-apocalyptic world, he first mourns the loss of loved ones and later finds himself confronted with the loss of all human connection, a realization which leaves him in a state of "utter, irremediable loneliness" (352). But Verney is not merely excluded from society. He is the last man, a unique position. It is, then, unsurprising that though the novel was criticized as derivative, such criticisms often betrayed anxiety about the concept of lastness and its representation's effect on the human mind. Morton Paley:

> By 1826 the subject of the Last Man had come to seem not apocalyptic but ridiculous. Behind the ridicule, however, there is a suggestion that the imagination resists the idea of Lastness, an idea that presupposes a

> recipient or reader whose very existence negates the Lastness of the narrating subject. (2)

More than this, though, the last man stands on the edge of earthly nothingness—the end of human mind—and thereby beckons the reader to imagine the world after the last man: the "void that must follow lastness," as Paley puts it. In order to think through the implications of this difficult position, I turn to Jean-François Lyotard's "Can Thought go on without a Body" which explores three features of thought that will serve as suggestive guideposts for making sense of Verney's position at the limit: blankness as prerequisite for new thought, suffering as a constitutive aspect of thought, and thought's reliance on openness to what Lyotard calls the givable.

"Can Thought go on without a Body" is structured as a conversation between a "He" and "She," the former associated with a techno-scientific view, the latter with philosophy. Lyotard's He notes that "the sun is getting older. It will explode in 4.5 billion years," taking all life with it. Such an end poses a challenge to the perpetuation of thought:

> It's impossible to think an end, pure and simple, of anything at all, since the end's a limit and to think it you have to be on both sides of that limit. So what's finished or finite has to be perpetuated in our thought if it's to be thought of as finished. Now this is true of limits belonging to thought but after the sun's death there won't be a thought to know its death took place. (9)

Since all "insoluble" philosophical questions—indeed, all thought—will be terminated by this world-annihilating event, the obliteration of "life" (and with it "death") is the "sole serious question facing humanity today" (9). The scientist, however, has a response to this catastrophe. Because man's "software" (language) is dependent on material "hardware" (body), the solution to the problem posed by solar explosion is to find a way to "make thought without a body possible" (13).

But as Lyotard's She notes, the construction of bodyless thought—here conceived as the digitization of mind—is not without its problems. First, thought is not merely a selection or tabulation of data since "data aren't given, but givable, and selection isn't choice. Thinking, like writing or painting, is almost no more than letting a givable come towards you" (18). Thought, then, involves "soliciting emptiness" rather than "overweening [selection]" (18). Lyotard's She is clear that emptying is nothing like the Cartesian *tabula rasa* which "(vainly) wanted to be a starting from scratch on the part of knowing thought." Instead, an emptying—or evacuation—requires not conscious direction but a state of suspension. You don't "give [mind] rules"—you "teach it to receive" (19).

But this evacuation of thought—making mind empty in order to open it up to the givable—"does not take place without some suffering" (18). Since "we think in the already-thought"—in culture or "a world of inscriptions already there"— it is difficult to achieve new thought:

> And if we think, this is because there's still something missing in this plenitude and room has to be made for this lack by making the mind a

> blank, which allows the something else remaining to be thought to happen…The unthought hurts because we're comfortable with what's already thought. (20)

Since the unthought is the discomforting fuel of thought any imagined thinking machine must in some way be able to suffer. As Lyotard's "She" asks, why would such imagined bodyless thinking machines even "start thinking" without the pain of absence? In order for such machines to think the "unthought would have to make [them] uncomfortable, the uninscribed that remains to be inscribed would have to make their memory suffer" (20). Here I will suggest that Mary Shelley's novel is also interested in thought: both representing it in Verney's struggle to come to terms with his position as the last man and eliciting it in readers who are encouraged to grapple with the "insoluble" problems that the limit suggests.

Having taken Verney from animal to man, man to godlike author, Shelley eventually gives us a new view. Verney's place in history begins to take on a vertiginous aspect when he compares the peopled past with the unoccupied present: "The generations I had conjured up to my fancy, contrasted more strongly with the end of all—the single point in which, as a pyramid, the mighty fabric of society had ended, while I, on the giddy height, saw vacant space around me" (361). Emptiness, then, takes the place of invisible contagion. As Verney imagines his future, he feels he can only "look forward to a dread blank" (353). Here the past is visible, but it does not offer a regenerative potential. However, the future—the destiny of man after the violence of the plague—

appears as an emptiness in Verney's mind. The last man, at the end of human history, is thus faced with the challenge of making sense of his place in the unpeopled world.

Situated between a visible past and blank future, he first seeks to reestablish contact with the human—to defeat death by resuscitating the past. It is with this aim in mind that he journeys to "eternal Rome:"

> No, no, I will not live among the wild scenes of nature, the enemy of all that lives. I will seek the towns--Rome, the capital of the world, the crown of man's achievements. Among its storied streets, hallowed ruins, and stupendous remains of human exertion, I shall not, as here, find every thing forgetful of man; trampling on his memory, defacing his works, proclaiming from hill to hill, and vale to vale,--by the torrents freed from the boundaries which he imposed--by the vegetation liberated from the laws which he enforced--by his habitation abandoned to mildew and weeds, that his power is lost, his race annihilated for ever. (358)

Here Verney attempts to find a way of securing the human at the end of history, ultimately settling on an exclusionary model in which non-human life becomes the "enemy of all that lives." Of course, "all that lives," in this passage, can only mean Verney himself and the memories he carries. Unhampered nature—vegetation liberated from human constraints and so on—becomes, in this view, something like a dead virus that threatens, through its proliferation, to annihilate the last remnants of true life, the life of the human. But Verney's journey to Rome (and flight from the wild), rather than secure humanity's position or reestablish a link between past and present, only

accentuates the impossibility of revivifying the corpse. Walking through the city's vacant streets, the last man is confronted by unresponsive sculptures:

> Each stone deity was possessed by sacred gladness, and the eternal fruition of love. They looked on me with unsympathizing complacency, and often in wild accents I reproached them for their supreme indifference--for they were human shapes, the human form divine was manifest in each fairest limb and lineament. (363)

Here, again, we see an attempt to lay claim to life, but now it is not nature but the gods themselves. The image of god in man becomes man's image in the gods, the "human form" the source of their divinity. Yet addressing the statues only underlines their lifelessness: "I clasped their icy proportions, and, coming between Cupid and his Psyche's lips, pressed the unconceiving marble" (363). Here Verney wishes to take on the role of Cupid, but his love—the past in which humanity seemed secure—now sleeps. Unlike the original myth, however, he is unable to reawaken Psyche from her slumber.

But this inability to resuscitate the past is counterbalanced by a second possibility offered earlier in the novel:

> But the game is up! We must all die; nor leave survivor nor heir to the wide inheritance of earth. We must all die! The species of man must perish; his frame of exquisite workmanship; the wondrous mechanism of his senses; the noble proportion of his godlike limbs; his mind, the throned king of these; must perish. Will the earth still keep her place among the planets; will she still journey with unmarked regularity round the sun; will

> the seasons change, the trees adorn themselves with leaves, and flowers shed their fragrance, in solitude?...O, what mockery is this! Surely death is not death, and humanity is not extinct; but merely passed into other shapes, unsubjected to our perceptions. Death is a vast portal, an high road to life: let us hasten to pass; let us exist no more in this living death, but die that we may live! (322-323)

Where Lyotard's scientists seek to abolish death, Shelley instead attempts to imagine it as a portal—a "road to life." Death is not to be feared but embraced, reincarnation or rebirth offering the solution. But what emerges on the other side of the portal remains obscure. The new human, after the death of humanity, is "unsubjected to our perceptions," creatures that elude apprehension. Approaching this possibility of newness, I will claim, comes not only through active striving but a special kind of receptivity, an openness to the world which supplants attempts to control history or resuscitate the past. This position is indicated at the end of the novel, but it is also prefigured by a blind organist who, unaware of the ongoing destruction of the human race, listens to his daughter play Haydn's "New-Created World." Shelley writes that "his whole soul was ear; and as he sat in the attitude of attentive listening, a bright glow of pleasure was diffused over his countenance" (328).

V. Smiling Amidst the Ruins

The Last Man is framed as a translated prophecy, yet it also marks the limits of the foreseeable. What comes after the last man is conjecture. But as Verney approaches the end of human existence he nevertheless ascribes to himself a particular sort of insight:

> The coming time was as a mighty river, down which a charmed boat is driven, whose mortal steersman knows, that the obvious peril is not the one he needs fear, yet that danger is nigh; and who floats awe-struck under beetling precipices, through the dark and turbid waters--seeing in the distance yet stranger and ruder shapes, towards which he is irresistibly impelled. What would become of us? O for some Delphic oracle, or Pythian maid, to utter the secrets of futurity! O for some Oedipus to solve the riddle of the cruel Sphynx! Such Oedipus was I to be--not divining a word's juggle, but whose agonizing pangs, and sorrow-tainted life were to be the engines, wherewith to lay bare the secrets of destiny, and reveal the meaning of the enigma, whose explanation closed the history of the human race (333).

We might briefly note a few things about this passage—that the danger the survivors face is not the obvious one, that sight, in this rendering, is not blank but imperfect, and that the will is subordinated to a greater power: the boat is "driven" by a "mighty river" (though there still exists a "mortal steersman"). Each of these points resonates with my argument, but for the moment I will focus on Verney's self-positioning as a second Oedipus. A savior is needed but such a figure will not appear, so Verney will fill the role in an altered form. The precise dimensions of the departure from the original Oedipal model, however, are difficult to parse. Instead of "divining a word's juggle," Verney's "sorrow-tainted life" will somehow "reveal the meaning of the enigma" that "closed the history of the human race." What are we to make of this position?

Robert Snyder argues that Verney "is not permitted finally to decipher or understand what is happening around him." Rather than an apocalypse—or "unveiling"—the plague functions as "a limit-phenomenon" that discloses "nothing more than the tenuousness of man's ability to reason and his isolation within a Manichean universe." Thus

> the putative "meaning of the enigma" is precisely its absence of meaning, the fact that it does not yield any intelligible "explanation" or lend itself to the divination of the "word." Confronted with this arcane mystery, Verney can only iterate that it was, not expound why it was. When he finds it ultimately impossible to "express in human language a woe human until this hour never knew," he is plunged into Swiftian self-loathing: "my person, with its human powers and features, seem…to me a monstrous excrescence of nature" (445).

We might then say that the novel marks the cruel victory of the Sphinx. Man is tossed into the abyss, and the possibility of securing meaning is lost, a reading supported by the pain of isolation and complaints of incomprehension expressed at the novel's close. Viewed from a different angle, though, the plague does not function as the novel's primary riddle since we know what it means: doom on a global scale, death. There is, however, another enigma, the question of how to relate to death—how, in other words, to approach the limit. Here we should remember that Verney rejects Oedipus's model—finding a solution, "divining a word's juggle"—and instead suggests that meaning might be achieved through suffering.

One possibility Shelley holds out is that Verney's authorship provides the means for living in the face of death's inevitability. After all, he writes the downfall of humanity and, near the end of his account, is seized with a desire leave desperate messages in the towns he travels. Though these messages stem from misery, Verney's determination to mark the world rather than simply wander through it becomes a source of comfort: "It is strange," he notes, "that so trivial an occupation should have consoled, and even enlivened me" (355). Robert Snyder, in fact, finds in Verney's writing an element of heroism. Since "the plague not only jeopardizes the *a priori* apparatus of the soul but also voids the very constructs within and by which man defines his conscious being," the only possible hero is one "who, like Verney, is able to discover within himself another principle upon which to affirm his essentiality—even though it be a supreme fiction." Thus Verney's heroic response to the violence of the plague is to become "the artist" who,

> recognizing the inherent nullity of time apart from man, is compelled to recreate his experience and give imaginative conception to his own historicity. Although he cannot renounce consciousness or dissociate himself from what he has been spectator to, he yet discovers in imagination the strength for a new beginning. Thus, in one of the novel's closing scenes, Verney ascends to the summit of St. Peter's and there carves in stone the year 2100, so dating the end of "the old out-worn age"…and prefiguring a new era in his individual existence. (450)

I will here suggest that Verney's "new era" relates to his departure from authorship. Importantly, Verney's final message on St. Peters marks an end of writing and an embrace of the unknown. In the final paragraph, in fact, Verney tells us that that his desire for exploration and adventure came to him precisely at the moment he left his final inscription "on the height of St. Peters" (367). Indeed, much of the novel has already been concerned with Verney's role as writer-artist, beginning with the first two words of the first chapter. But as his history comes to a close, Verney's last communications function as a justification for putting down the pen and setting off to explore the world.

To make sense of this decision I return to the question of free will and necessity. On the one hand, the novel tells us that the human is that which directs itself, and on the other the human is that which is directed. Verney, as we have seen, has vacillated between these poles. In the end, though, it appears his struggle is replaced by acquiescence. Echoing *Queen Mab*, he writes:

> "Mother of the world! Servant of the Omnipotent! Eternal, changeless Necessity! With whose busy fingers sittest ever weaving the indissoluble chain of events! I will not murmur at thy acts. If my human mind cannot acknowledge that all that is, is right; yet since what is, must be, I will sit amidst the ruins and smile. Truly we were not born to enjoy, but to submit, and to hope. (312)

The passage also recalls Parmenides' dictum—"whatever is, is, whatever is not cannot be"—but Verney oddly finds that that his submission is coupled not with dejection but newfound hope, an emotion which elicits an enigmatic smile. Here we might read yet

another reversal in the novel. Verney, rather than simply function as a second Oedipus, also becomes a second sphinx who suggests a second riddle: Why does the last man smile?

Though the novel is concerned with attempts to shape the world, Shelley's final pages suggest another option. Much of the narrative has consisted of a catalogue of past occurrences, familiar political disputes, and engagements with the world that, when compared with the plague's power, appear ineffectual. Admittedly, it would be hard to deny that Shelley proposes an absurd view of the human condition at the end of her novel. Anything the human does—and any thought it might have—is rendered inadequate in the face of inexorable and indifferent doom. But it should also be remembered that the last man, after placing himself under the authority of fate, acquires bravery in the midst of desolation, finding the strength to return to what the novel calls the "watery death of Adrian and Clara:"

> To that water—cause of my woes, perhaps now to be their cure, I would betake myself…Peril will now be mine; and I hail her as a friend—death will perpetually cross my path, and I will meet him as a benefactor; hardship, inclement weather, and dangerous tempests will be my sworn mates. (366)

Though the storm of plague wrecks the "vessel of society" and ultimately annihilates all human connection, Verney is able to come to a tense détente with the foe. Death is here figured as both poison and cure: it is inexorable and unavoidable and one must, somehow, find a way to become its friend. This, perhaps, is the answer to the Sphinx that

Verney provides—or, rather, the non-answer. The imponderables will be with us to the end—up to the limit—but instead of fighting the Sphinx, instead of trying to uncover the "meaning" of man, one must instead find a way to live and suffer through the enigma, making death and its elemental emissaries "sworn mates." Verney, in fact, will not only read death as an end but connect it to multiple potentials. Though he rejects certitude—like Hamlet Verney claims that the afterlife is an "unknown country"—he nonetheless opens the possibility of a ghostly realm, places necessity under the authority of "the Omnipotent," questions materialism upon the death of his child, and, in the novel's final sentence, imagines himself observed by angels, the spirits of the dead, and the eye of the Supreme.

But Verney's final position—refusing the pen and accepting fate—does not only result in hopeful acquiescence and bravery in the face of inevitable defeat, though a defeat moderated by the possibility of a beyond. Instead, Verney's confrontation with the limit fosters a critical change in perspective which is intimately connected to his departure from authorship. Recall that Verney was earlier depicted on the peak of a pyramid, a lofty vantage point that allowed him to survey the entirety of history. Earlier in the novel, he described his perspective in godlike terms, claiming the capacity to not only see the past but "comprehend" it "as a whole" (209). Futurity, on the other hand, appears as a "dread blank" that will not easily give up its secrets. But when Verney abandons his role as a historian and instead sets off toward the unknown, the emptiness of futurity is transformed into a plenitude of possibility. No longer the author, Verney becomes the reader, a position that offers ample material for exploration. Fittingly, the

last man decides to depart with the writings of "Homer and Shakespeare" at his side, but he also notes the possibility of wider reading: "the libraries of the world are thrown open to me—and in any port I can renew my stock" (367). In the end, the desire to master nature is supplemented with openness to it. The entire world, in fact, becomes a text which might be absorbed: "I shall witness all the variety of appearance that the elements can assume—I shall read fair augury in the rainbow— menace in the cloud—some lesson or record dear to my heart in everything" (367).

Lomax writes that Shelley, "like most major Romantics," ultimately "turns inward to find alternatives and thereby achieves a kind of solace through the domination of outer reality by inner, imaginative reality" (15). Such a turn might be discerned in Verney's treatment of nature as text. By making the world readable, Verney is, in the end, able to reestablish the primacy of human mind over the threats posed by a powerful and uncaring externality, though he fails to recuperate the godlike heights he previously inhabited. As interpretable object, nature no longer inspires fear but instead promises revelation or at least "record" and "lesson."

Moreover, Verney's readerly relation to the world marks an important shift in the novel. It is when Verney rejects the pen that the oppositions that have structured the narrative—body/mind, fate/free will, Orient/Occident, nature/civilization—collapse into each other, transforming from binary oppositions to non-exclusionary potentialities. Verney plans to travel away from Europe toward the East, though he carries with him the authors most emblematic of both the Classical and English literary traditions. He holds on to the hope of meeting a companion—and therefore does not dismiss the possibility that

human life might be perpetuated—but also resigns himself to death. He seeks mental exercise—his books and dreams of worldwide libraries attest to this—but also looks forward to the "spicy groves of the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean" as well as physical combat with the elements (367). Even fate and free will no longer stand in direct opposition. Instead, "the lone wanderer will still clasp the tiller" while "obeying the breezes of heaven" (367).

In the end, Verney the reader is possessed by "wild dreams." His despair becomes "restless," and his "desire for change…fierce" (367). "A solitary being is by instinct a wanderer," he earlier writes, and it is this dream of wandering that finally comes to define his new posture (365). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is here that the beginning and end of the novel—the introduction and the concluding paragraphs—seem to reach toward each other. Richard Albright notes that Verney "abandons the past tense" when outlining his planned explorations, opting for the future tense, "the tense of the Sybil." But there is another similarity between the last man in 2100 and the prophetess in ancient Italy: Verney's readerly position anticipates the Sybil's receptivity. As the last man leaves Italy—his prow facing forward, toward the unknown—the messages of the end travel to the beginning: first to be received, then to be deciphered.

More than a therapeutic strategy—an attempt achieve inner-peace and so on—turning from the past and facing the unknown becomes the means through which dead repetition is counteracted. Bennett tells us that "in *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley constructed a being from parts to startle the world from its complacency; in *The Last Man*, she again constructs from parts, this time, the written word." When Verney puts

down his pen and heads for the Tiber, he provides materials for his precursors to unravel and patch together, thereby bringing the questions of the end to the beginning. The introduction's decipherer, apologizing for imperfect translation, writes:

> Sometimes I have thought, that, obscure and chaotic as [the Sybil's leaves] are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should give to another artist, the painted fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael's Transfiguration in St. Peter's; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind and talent. Doubtless the leaves of the Cumaean Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition. (4)

Here Shelley offers multiple transfigurations. The first is Christ's, the second Raphael's depiction of Christ, the third Stefano Pozzi's mosaic, the fourth an imagined reworking of the mosaic copy, and the fifth the arrangement of the Sybil's leaves. This last transfiguration is, of course, double—the Sybil has transfigured future autobiography into prophetic leaves and the decipherer, in turn, has transfigured unintelligible prophecy into readable narrative. But the extent to which decipherers can match Christ, Raphael, or the "pristine" message of the leaves is not really at issue here. In fact, it is precisely because the translation lacks perfection—or finality—that the possibility of new translations persist. Other decipherers might emerge, after all. And perhaps undiscovered leaves remain hidden in some dark passage of the Sybil's cave, waiting to be discovered.

VI. Conclusion

I ultimately find that Shelley's depiction of Verney's future suffering functions as a means to inspire thought. Betty T. Bennett:

> When Verney calls on his reader 'whoever thou art, wherever thou dwellest, whether of race spiritual, or, sprung from some surviving pair' to 'here read of the acts of the extinct race' and 'learn the deeds and sufferings of thy predecessors'…readers are encouraged to ask themselves who they are, to question their origins and their destinies. (150)

No doubt, Shelley's novel functions as a means to spur reflection. As I see it, Verney offers a model for life in the face of the limit, a model that does not rely on endless repetition of the same—the "living death" of plague-beset humanity—but instead opens the possibility of new experiences and new thought. Fittingly, then, Verney's audience is not confined to the imagined offspring of a "surviving pair" or a "race spiritual"—creatures of the future. As Barbara Johnson notes, "the reader is inscribed in Mary Shelley's book precisely as dead:"

> DEDICATION
>
> TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.
>
> SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!
>
> BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE
>
> LAST MAN. (364)

This "silly flourish," Verney says, is the result of "childish" and "capricious" despair, but when considered in light of the novel's frame it makes perfect sense (364). From the last

man's perspective in 2100, the Sybil's prophecy will make the dead readers: shadows will arise, and they will read their fall. Perhaps the novel suggests that these zombies might escape their "living death" by following the last man into the unknown. Shelley's dead might do well to read Verney as the human, not as the definable creature, but the creature in the process of transfiguration, a "rude shape," that, as of yet, is "unsubjected to our perceptions"—a creature, in other words, rather like ourselves.

Conclusion

Dissertations written in the humanities are often expected to have relevance to the contemporary social and political situation, even if the topic of study appears to be far removed from present concerns. The question of relevance has not been my primary focus, but it has lingered in the back of my mind. Surely the study of art is its own reward, but one still hopes to discover something useful. I conclude by offering an answer to the question of relevance.

Thomas Weiskel found that the era of the Romantic sublime had long passed. We are "too ironic" for its "capacious gestures" and no longer astonished or terrified by its "infinite spaces," he says (6). Who, after all, is still moved by the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*? The painting has become one image circulated among many, and its appearance often takes an altered form—some variation of the *Mona Lisa* with sunglasses. Yet, as I argued in my introduction, the sublime—both in theory and practice—tends to resist historical limitation, concerning itself with the enduring aspects of human mind and experience. It would, then, be too hasty to declare any variant of the sublime lost to history. In fact, Weiskel will note continuities, finding, for example, that Kant's mathematical sublime persists in contemporary drumming which "attempts to induce the sublime reaction by an insistent repetition of beat and by getting louder and louder until something breaks" (26). Even those altered versions of the *Wanderer* at times appear as sincere attempts to repurpose the painting for the present—substituting the natural landscape with depictions of techno-dystopic cityscapes, for instance.

For Jean-François Lyotard, the difference between the Romantic and the modern was not vast or unbridgeable. At times, in fact, he identifies the romantic with the modern and further claims that the postmodern, rather than denote a new period, instead is still contained within the modern or marks a particular "mood" (209). Though Barnett Newman's art, for example, does not perfectly reproduce romanticism, it nonetheless retains its "fundamental task, that of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible" (92-93). In fact, as Lyotard would have it, the period's two major theorists of the sublime—Burke and Kant—"outlined a world of possibilities for artistic experiments in which the avant-gardes would later trace out their paths" (101).

Perhaps part of the reason the Romantic sublime—and the period more generally—seems foreign is the tendency to think ourselves distinct. We are told we live in a unique era—an "information age," one of unprecedented speed and change. What, then, could be more remote from our world, with its blur of information and flickering screens, than, say, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"? Yet Wordsworth would approach his own period in terms that are reminiscent of the language we often use to describe our own. In his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, he found that "a multitude of causes, unknown to former times" had blunted "the discriminating powers of the mind," reducing "it to a state of almost savage torpor." City life, national politics, uniformity of work, and "rapid communication" had led to "a degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation" which came in the form of "frantic novels" and "extravagant stories in verse" (99).

Such concerns find contemporary analogs: the negative effects of social media and various species of entertainment, the rapidity of modern life, numbing working conditions, and so on. Indeed, Lyotard will complain of the negative effects of certain species of or tendencies within art, complaints that do not neatly reproduce Wordsworth's concerns but nonetheless recall them:

> Eclecticism panders to the habits of magazine readers, to the needs of consumers of standard industrial imagery, to the sensibility of the supermarket shopper. That kind of post-Modernism…aligns pictorial inquiry to the current state of "culture," and strips artists of their responsibility to the question of the nondemonstrable. That question is, to me, the only one worthy of life's high stakes, and of the world of thought in the coming century. Any denial of that question is a menace. (70)

Both Lyotard and Wordsworth point to contemporary ills in artistic trends. But of particular importance, in my view, is the language Wordsworth was able to draw on in response to the threats he enumerated. Though the "magnitude of general evil" was vast, he found hope in the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind" as well as the "powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it"—a hope that gave him the conviction that the "evil" he discerned would be "systematically opposed" (100). This language, in part, draws its confidence from the assurance that eternal truths govern the world and the human that inhabits it. Such a language has not disappeared, but it has become rarer. In my view, we would do well to rediscover it.

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