

The Crisis of Infinity:
Mathematics, Philosophy, and Nineteenth-Century Poetry

by

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INTRODUCTION

This is a dissertation written decades after the long 1980s; as such, it must deal with its own romantic idealizations of that period in literary-critical history. Because the project's guiding obsession is with Romantic poetry and its afterlives, the argument's center of gravity falls on the Romantic sublime, an aesthetic category that is both intellectually evergreen and, as I will show, always already dated. The project is therefore fueled, at least in part, by a desire to reopen the classical Romanticist discourse on the sublime, or rather, by a curiosity about what would happen were one to reopen that discourse.

The Romanticist discourse on the sublime was, in many ways, a debate about Romanticism, and about the aesthetics of literary criticism itself in a period of methodological innovation and theoretical inquiry. Thomas Weiskel diagrams the connections between Romantic aesthetics and the modern obsession with mind¹; Neil Hertz mobilizes the Romantic sublime as the perfect metaphor for critical inquiry²; and, for all his poststructuralist twists and turns, Steven Knapp points out the obvious—that the sublime was deconstruction before deconstruction was deconstruction.³ Frances Ferguson's stunning defense of Idealism is, in the end, a critique of materialism—a materialism that, for Ferguson, sneaks into academic argumentation.⁴

Like many books about the Romantic sublime, this one makes a claim about Romanticism, in this case, that understanding Romantic aesthetics and poetics means crossing the historical borders that we use to delimit the Romantic period. Understood in this way, the Romantic sublime represents the crux of a broader intellectual-historical phenomenon—a moment at which Enlightenment debates about infinity are reimagined as aesthetic arguments. Attending to this conceptual genealogy reveals another, that is, the processes by which infinity and sublimity, twin Romantic aesthetic categories, permeate later modern poetic practices. By situating Romantic aesthetics in a broader historical context, my project engages in a false paradox insofar as it breaks down the critical barriers separating the Romantic period from the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and Romantic from Victorian poetry, on the other. The project does so in the service of understanding Romantic aesthetics, long a high ideal of Romanticist studies, in the context of the history of ideas with the goal of diversifying our understanding of the Romantic inheritance in later modern poetry.

This last point—that we might complicate our understanding of the Romantic inheritance—represents another starting point for the project. My interest in reopening the classical Romanticist discourse on the sublime grew out of an initial set of questions about how modern and contemporary poetry responds to mathematical methods and forms. Pursuing these questions led me to view modern and contemporary poetic responses to math as reiterations and responses, not to the science itself, but rather to prior poetic projects. I thus became interested in the Romantic obsession with infinity, and with the Romantic sublime, as a source of these literary traditions. In particular, a moment in Marjorie Levinson's 2007 graduate seminar on Romantic poetry and philosophy illuminated Kant's reliance on Locke's

understanding of infinity in his development of the mathematical sublime, and this signaled to me that there might not have been an agreed upon or stable definition of infinity in the period or periods in question. Research into mathematical history confirmed my suspicion that Enlightenment formulations of infinity and Romantic responses to these formulations were part of an expansive intellectual-historical phenomenon that I call the crisis of infinity.

This dissertation employs varied methodologies to explore the history, cultural inscription, literary influence, and artistic legacy of this crisis. To this end, the first half of the dissertation makes an influence argument in the context of intellectual history, namely, that Romantic aesthetic theories, and in particular formulations of the Romantic sublime, come out of a prior discourse about the nature and reality of infinity. Expanding this method for the purposes of historically-informed exegesis, I argue that understanding the connections between infinity, sublimity, and poetry is crucial to producing new and compelling readings of nineteenth-century poems.

The crisis of infinity provides an important context for literary criticism in a number of ways. The first and most tangible is that it provides a productive framework for rereading canonical texts in intellectual-historical context and for reading less- or non-canonical texts in relation to more canonical texts, not via acts of critical recuperation, but rather by rethinking conceptual genealogies. An example of the former mode of reading is my interpretation, at the end of chapter two, of Wordsworth's *The Tables Turned*, in which I invert the widely accepted reading of that poem's infamously anti-intellectual statement—that we murder to dissect—in order to show that it can in fact be read as an intellectual intervention defending Hume's rejection of infinite divisibility. An example of the latter

mode of reading occurs at the beginning of chapter three, where I read two poems by Dorothy Wordsworth—one of her most famous poems, *Floating Island*, which has been taken up in ecocritical and other contexts, and a poem of hers that is virtually unknown insofar as I found it in the back of a notebook—and demonstrate how these two poems, when read in their various material-historical contexts, can be shown to make an intellectual-historical intervention insofar as they pick up on William Wordsworth's response to Locke's formulation of infinity but also alter this formulation in meaningful ways.

Beyond facilitating new readings, understanding the link between poetry and infinity contributes to the discipline in two major ways. The first is by highlighting a moment at which literary discourse participates in mathematical debates. This is a moment of crisis in another sense of the term—that of discursive crossing over—that I argue must be taken into account by scholars seeking to develop a field of literary-critical inquiry focused on the intersections between mathematical and literary history.

There exists in nineteenth-century literary studies a trend towards interdisciplinary approaches to literature and science, and an emerging sub-field focused on literature and mathematics. Scholars working in or in relation to this field include Alice Jenkins, Andrea Henderson, Maureen McLane, Marilyn Gaull, Daniel Brown, and Jason Hall, and a year ago the first conference devoted to nineteenth-century literature and mathematics was held at the University of Glasgow. The sub-field is becoming increasingly established, and, if you'll forgive the witticism, is about as trendy as anything involving both poetry and mathematics could ever hope to be.

Studies of nineteenth-century literature and mathematics have involved a variety of interdisciplinary methodologies, ranging from detailed historical interventions (such as Alice Jenkins' current work on the print circulation of mathematical riddles alongside literary texts in English periodicals) to broader cultural claims (such as Andrea Henderson's work on artistic responses to post-Euclidian geometry).⁵ This varied and fascinating field of inquiry is lent some historical weight, and might even be to some extent changed, when we recognize that early nineteenth-century literature actively participates in mathematical discourse. Romantic aesthetic and poetic responses to and refractions of Enlightenment debates about infinity represent a signal example of what I might call genuine or historical interdisciplinarity—of literature and mathematics in conversation even before any external methodological or conceptual understanding of interdisciplinarity is applied. The exact nature of this contribution to the subfield remains an open question.

In sum, the first half of the dissertation argues that the crisis of infinity represents a broad—and broadly neglected—intellectual-historical phenomenon the understanding of which facilitates clarifications and complications of nineteenth-century verbal art. Within the context of Romantic literature, such an investigation contextualizes the Romantic obsession with infinity, an obsession readily apparent in some of the most famous and most enigmatic passages from the Romantic canon. Wordsworth concludes *The Prelude's* vision atop Mount Snowdon with a “meditation” in which “appear[s] [...] The perfect image of a mighty mind,/Of one that feeds upon infinity”⁶; Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* claims that “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite”⁷; Byron, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, describes a divine experience of nature as stirring “the feeling infinite, so felt/In solitude, when we are *least* alone”⁸; and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*

describes how “Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,/Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene” and then addresses Mont Blanc with the assertion, “The secret strength of things/Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome/of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!”⁹ Each mention of Romantic infinity adds another turn of the screw, so that the term, “infinity,” becomes the literary-historical analogue of a sestina end-word, a term that does and does not hold together its divergent contexts and appropriations, to aesthetic effect.

Yet a dissertation motivated solely by an interest in the Romantic obsession with infinity might look quite different from the dissertation at hand. Such an investigation of the crisis of infinity might investigate, for example, the landscape as value system in the early gothic novel, the invention of perspective in the visual arts, and so forth. I have focused instead on the issue of poetics—on reading canonical and non-canonical poems in intellectual-historical context. There are two questions of methodology that remain to be answered, namely: *Why poetry?* *Why infinity?* Of all the mathematical, scientific, and philosophical debates of the Enlightenment period, why does the topic, problem, or practice (so to speak) of infinity show up so regularly and persistently throughout nineteenth-century poetry and poetics? Might the link between poetry and infinity tell us anything about poetry? Might we think about the poem as an enumerative object of verbal art, its lines counting towards something that cannot be contained?

Building on the influence argument (i.e. mathematical history influenced aesthetic philosophy, which in turn influenced poetic production/e.g. Berkeley read Newton, and Locke read Berkeley, and Wordsworth read Locke, therefore Wordsworth is influenced by Newton’s understanding of infinity) as well as the intellectual-historical argument (i.e. that

Romantic aesthetics, and in particular theories of the sublime, come out of a prior discourse about infinity) presented in the first half of the dissertation, the second half of the project asks what the connection between infinity and poetry means, and poses some answers.

To this end, chapter three represents a moment of methodological transition. On the one hand, the chapter argues that understanding the crisis of infinity can provide one framework for pulling more- and less-canonical Romantic texts into conversation with one another; because some of the less-canonical texts I consider are archival texts, this process involves rethinking the Romantic archive as an intellectual-historical nexus. On the other hand, this chapter considers the daily and enumerative forms of Dorothy Wordsworth's writings in relation to poetic forms, and thus raises some issues about how and whether debates about infinity can function as literary theories.

In response to this challenge, chapter four brings both eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century infinity discourse to bear on a range of poems from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and from Britain and the United States. The point of this excursus is to show that the crisis of infinity represents not only an historical origin but also a set of theories—indeed, a system of poetics—with enduring influence. Casting the relationship between enumeration and infinity as a question of form, I thus conclude with an inquiry at once more concrete and more theoretical, namely, the role of the line—the poetic line—in a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century long poems. It is, I believe, the historically specific understanding of the relationship between enumeration and infinity that gives us a new purchase on the line and its centrality to modernist poetics, while at the same time bringing out the extent to which many nineteenth-century poems may be said to anticipate that

device. This final chapter departs from a strictly historicist method in order to ask whether Enlightenment formulations of infinity and Romantic responses to these formulations may be applied as literary theories, and to venture some answers, all of them in some fashion rooted in my explication of infinity as a matrix for coordinating enumeration with affect, or practices of counting with the notion of experiencing something that seems to transcend the sum of its parts.

Following this theoretical experiment, I offer a coda that begins to think through the modernist afterlives of Romantic infinity, that is, I return to some of the modern and contemporary poetic treatments of mathematics that first caused me to travel back in time, this time with some sense of their history.

PART ONE: THE AESTHETICS OF INFINITY

Prelude:

infinite immensity

The Crisis of Infinity: Mathematics, Philosophy, and Nineteenth-Century Poetry offers two interlocking arguments, one literary-historical and one meta-critical. The dissertation's historical argument claims that Romantic aesthetic theories and early nineteenth-century poetic practices participate in Enlightenment debates about infinity, and that these debates are therefore of consequence to our understanding of nineteenth-century literature. The dissertation justifies an historically-grounded method for reading Romantic aesthetics in mathematical terms, and argues that the application of this method: 1) helps us to re-read Romantic texts that both do and do not address infinity explicitly, beginning with theories of the sublime; 2) helps to clarify certain aspects of the Romantic inheritance in later modern poetry; and 3) allows us to ground critical treatments of poetry and mathematics in an early nineteenth-century moment at which aesthetics and poetics participate in mathematical debates. The meta-critical argument that accompanies this historical intervention posits the turn of the nineteenth century as a moment at which literary history and mathematical history intersect, and thus as a moment for which we must account as we develop a literary-critical field focused on literature and mathematics.

The first part of this dissertation, “The Aesthetics of Infinity,” asks how an understanding of the early nineteenth-century links between mathematics, aesthetics, and poetics can help us to reconsider the nineteenth-century poetic canon. To this end, the first two chapters of the dissertation take formulations of the Romantic sublime as a case study, the analysis of which yields a deeper understanding of the intersections among mathematical and literary discourses; the terms and formulations of these discourses clarify and complicate certain nineteenth-century poems. The second part of the dissertation, “The Poetics of Infinity,” expands the scope of this critical investigation in the following ways. Chapter Three asks how the intellectual-historical connections established in the first half of the project can help us to rethink the Romantic archive as an intellectual-historical nexus, taking the poetic/daily writings of Dorothy Wordsworth as its point of focus. Chapter Four asks how Enlightenment and Romantic formulations of infinity might be considered and applied as theories of poetic form, and a concluding coda considers how the Romantic poetics of infinity persists into the twentieth century.

Along with the historical argument I have sketched, *The Crisis of Infinity* has a meta-critical dimension, namely, the suggestion that the current interest in mathematics and literature among scholars of Victorian literature would do well to look back to the early nineteenth century, and to that era’s still active engagement with key philosophical texts from the Enlightenment. Our critical readings of later modern poetry in relation to mathematical history are not only enhanced but to some degree changed when we extend that history back through the late eighteenth century.

One example of a later nineteenth-century poem that can be productively reread in terms of the connections between Enlightenment debates about infinity and Romantic aesthetics and poetics is Emily Brontë's brief, untitled poem that begins "I'm happiest when most away." When the poem's conclusion in praise of "infinite immensity" is understood in the context of debates about infinity, the poem becomes a much less stable text than it may first appear. Specifically, the negotiation of selfhood with which Emily Brontë concludes [*I'm happiest when most away*] takes on new meaning when read in terms of Locke's understanding of counting as that process the apparent endlessness of which allows us to believe in infinity, and in terms of Locke's abstraction of this model to suggest that counting also leads us to believe in our identity and in the infinity of God. Invoking one voice from Enlightenment debates about infinity thus provides us with a framework for understanding Brontë's portrayal of the paradox of self-escape as the proposal of a new definition of selfhood.

Chapter Two will explore in greater detail the ways in which John Locke's touchstone formulation of infinity is inextricably linked to issues of self-identification, self-recognition, and faith in oneself and in the divine. For the purposes of this reading, let me just very briefly present Locke's argument. In his 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that the "endless *addition* [...] of numbers [...] is that which gives us the clearest and most distinct idea of infinity"¹⁰; furthermore "the identity of the same *man* consists [...] in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body."¹¹ Locke posits infinity and identity as twin abstractions understood via counting—by counting anything, in the former case, and moments that one is oneself, in the latter. While we will return to the contexts and nuances of Locke's argument later, for now we will consider how Brontë's

figuration of the disembodied soul dwelling in infinite immensity applies Locke's triangulation of infinity, selfhood and belief to activate a process of simultaneous self-assertion and self-dissolution.

Brontë's poem expresses a desire to liberate, or a remembered joy associated with liberating the soul from its worldly ties, enabling its spiritual and visionary movement, and defining it as part of the infinite. Brontë describes the infinite as the soul's ultimate home, better than a home of clay. Puns and syntactic turns confound what is and what is not, what self and what other, what seen and what embodied:

I'm happiest when most away
I can bear my soul from its home of clay
On a windy night when the moon is bright
And my eye can wander through worlds of light

When I am not and none beside
Nor earth nor sea nor cloudless sky
But only spirit wandering wide
Through infinite immensity¹²

The phrase "only spirit" in the penultimate line invokes diverse possibilities for meaning. Is the I only spirit? Is there nothing but spirit? Is the spirit singular, only, or alone? If we take these three possible meanings together, then the poem ends with the self reduced to spirit, the world reduced to spirit, and the singularity of spirit. In other words, the poem ends with the dissolution of everything into spirit "wandering wide/through infinite immensity." Everything dissolves into the infinite.

And yet, in the poem's closing line, the spirit wanders "through" the infinite. Such syntax might indicate that the spirit, or the I composed of spirit, is distinct from the infinite, or is

somehow behind or obfuscated by it. Just as the two words “infinite immensity” contain remixes of one another’s phonemes, just as they combine to create an absolute that is in its own right self-modifying and self-definitional, so too is the I or the spirit somehow both an integral part of and distinguished from the substance through which it moves. To “wander wide,” after all, denotes one’s finitude—expansion indicates that something is not already wholly expansive. Thus, even when dissolving into infinity, the soul remains finite. Whether the self is obfuscated or liberated, the poem cannot imagine a self that is not self-determined. Taking the word “spirit” as a verb furthers this interpretation, as the I may be animating, creating, and/or inspiring its own spirit. In this sense, the spirit is action rather than axiom, just as “away” is also “a way,” an escapist methodology.

Applying a Lockean model of infinity to the poem’s presentation of the paradox of self-escape shows us that the poem’s escapist fantasy involves a redefinition of selfhood. If counting towards infinity is a process constitutive of self-recognition, then what version of selfhood comes into play when a poem subtracts towards infinity? [*I’m happiest when most away*] answers this question by activating a poetics of negation: the I is most happy when most away; the punning “bear” occurs not to but from; the punning “eye” wanders through worlds made up of no more than the light that would reveal them; “I am not and none beside/Nor earth nor sea nor cloud~~less~~ sky” [emphasis mine]. The poem erases its elements almost as soon as it presents them, so that the poem progresses via a process, not of addition, but of subtraction. The infinity realized by this process is “infinite immensity,” and the selfhood activated is “spirit wandering wide,” a selfhood accumulated and dissolved through mass inclusion, a selfhood at once indistinct and substantial.

One way to illustrate the affective dynamics of the poem's process of negation and accumulation is to read the poem bottom to top. Read in vertical reverse, the poem portrays a self, located and delineated, glorifying in its dreamy forays into personal and spiritual excess. The modest and beautiful result of such an inversion sounds like something by Emily Dickinson:

Through infinite immensity
But only spirit wandering wide
Nor earth nor sea nor cloudless sky
When I am not and none beside

And my eye can wander through worlds of light
On a windy night when the moon is bright
I can bear my soul from its home of clay
I'm happiest when most away

That the inversion of Brontë's poem presents a bounded self presided over by a transcendent boundlessness further demonstrates the extent to which the original poem presents a transcendent boundlessness infused with the self. Beyond the paradox of self-escape, Brontë's poem argues for the possibility of a new definition of the unlimited self. This is a self that exists insofar as it lacks a separate identity. Rather than a point of concentration at which the forces of the universe gather, the "I" in Brontë's poem is almost godlike—we might picture a sieve through which the elements that once made up the individual fan out to take the form of "spirit."

This new self, achieved by negative or negating expansion, provides a compelling counterpoint to the mythology of a continuous, elusive authorial self often received alongside Emily Brontë's work as a matter of cultural inheritance. While [*I'm happiest when*

most away] was left unedited by Charlotte Brontë after Emily's death, Charlotte's editing of a volume of Emily's poetry for posthumous publication, her exaggerated and expurgating portrayal of her sister in the introductory matter to that volume, and her erasure of the extended Gondal myth that transfixed many of Emily's poems in a narrative web put into motion the mythology of a Sapphic figure of authorial continuity. Lucasta Miller provides an extensive interpretation of Charlotte Brontë's remaking of her sister in the anti-biography *The Brontë Myth*, in which she examines, for example, how Charlotte turned Emily's [*No coward soul is mine*] into the impassioned swan song of "a stoic whose 'spirit was inexorable to the flesh' and who faced her end with superhuman strength."¹³ While the evidence at hand will not suffice to counter the artifice surrounding the reception of Emily Brontë as a Victorian heroine, it is interesting to take as counterpoint the opposing and to some extent neo-Romantic vision of expansive and infinite selfhood set forth by Emily Brontë in [*I'm happiest when most away*]. Perhaps the diffuse selfhood portrayed in this poem provides us with one way of understanding the authorial model that has been erased by the textual and editorial legacy at work in the production of Emily Brontë as a cultural icon.

In fact, when this poem first circulated it included early twentieth-century traces of the sorts of revisionary practices exercised by Charlotte Brontë in constructing her sister's legacy. In his 1910 edition of *The Complete Poems of Emily Brontë*, the first such attempt, Clement Shorter presents a version of [*I'm happiest when most away*] with a very different sense of temporality and struggle for transcendence:

I'm happiest now when most away
I can tear my soul from its mould of clay,¹⁴

The meter-regularizing “now” in the poem’s opening line defines the occasion of the poem itself as a moment of escape; in so doing, the edit follows Charlotte Brontë’s portrayal of Emily as a perfect, womanly creature passively transcribing brilliant if improper inspiration.¹⁵ This insertion also follows Charlotte’s emphasis on the swan song, as the “now” of readership occurs in 1910, when the poet is long deceased. Similarly, to “tear” the soul from its “mould,” as opposed to “bearing” the soul from its “home,” shifts an image of revelation, transport, and agency to a register of painful struggle, if not death. The “mould of clay” explicitly connotes the mortal body, while “tearing” the soul away denotes permanent if not violent separation. To some extent, then, Shorter in his edit overwrites Emily Brontë’s presentation of a new understanding of selfhood with an early twentieth-century editor’s figuration of the ways in which the dead author—“When I am not, and none beside[...], but only spirit” here takes on a clear and distinct meaning—is somehow happier, or at least freer, than she was in life. Reading, editing, and publishing her work, then, becomes a kind of celebration or rescue within the discursive space of the edited poem itself. The poet remembered posthumously in the first edition of her edited work is “happiest now,” and it is not only the meter that is corrected. In some sense, then, if we care to wax psychoanalytical, perhaps we could say that Shorter’s edit expresses a sort of wish for his edited volume. Transfiguring the notion of selfhood presented by [*I’m happiest when most away*] becomes, in this case, an act of both honoring and ventriloquising the dead.

A glance at the original manuscript page helps us to refine our claims regarding the extent to which Shorter engages in a tradition of remaking-by-transcribing Emily Brontë. To see

what Shorter saw proves that “now” and “mould” represent editorial choices. However, to be fair, “bear” looks a lot like “tear”:

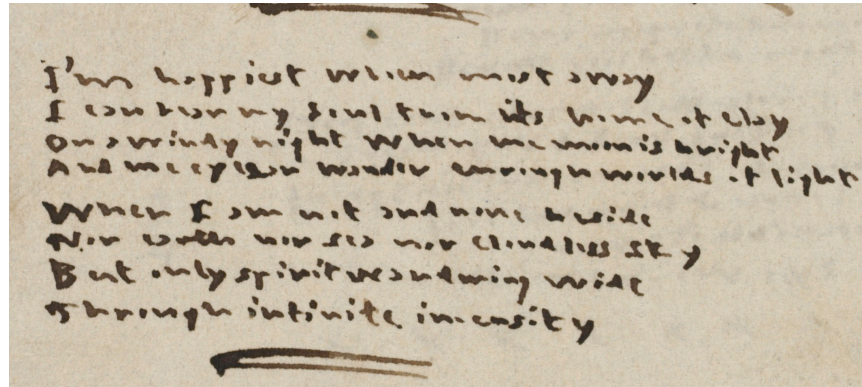


Fig. 1. Manuscript page containing Emily Brontë's [*I'm happiest when most away*], printed with permission of the Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.

Comparing, for example, the “t” at the end of “happiest” with the “b” in “bear” demonstrates how easily one could misread the word. Closer inspection, however, reveals that the lowercase “t” consistently has a trunk, while the lowercase “b” branches off at the base of the letter. Thus, at least one part of Shorter’s inaccurate transcription of the poem, for all its symbolic resonance, could just as easily be the product of smudged glasses or a failure to triple-check the details. Overall, however, we must view Shorter’s transcription as an act of editing, not only the poem, but also Emily Brontë.

One interpretation of [*I'm happiest when most away*] is, of course, no match for a tradition of reading Emily Brontë into and out of liberal remakings of her poems. Our purpose here is not to reshape, re-craft, or replace the version of authorial selfhood we associate with Emily Brontë’s poetry, nor is it to remake Emily Brontë or add up the accidents and impulses that have colored her canonization. What I mean to suggest is that the intellectual- and literary-

historical framework of Locke's infinity allows us to recognize a potentially surprising formulation of selfhood in one of Brontë's poems; this historical framework also allow us to rethink and approach Brontë's archive. Situating [*I'm happiest when most away*] within this frame also exposes its negotiation of one particular inheritance of Romanticism. These three objects of inquiry—how we might reread poems in the context of the crisis of infinity, how this might allow us to think about the nineteenth-century archive, and what all of this means for our understanding of the Romantic inheritance in later modern poetry—form a guiding constellation for the project at hand.

I open with this set of observations in order to suggest that the early nineteenth-century links between poetry and infinity can help us to read a broad range of poems. Additionally, as I will show, working within such a framework helps to generate and structure critical innovations stressing the connections among literature, philosophy, and mathematics, on the one hand, and between material and intellectual histories, on the other. In the chapters to follow, my pursuit of these goals will take as axiomatic the premise that effective interdisciplinarity requires a willingness to cross scholarly boundaries delimiting not only discipline but also historical period. Insofar as the work at hand illuminates both the extent to which nineteenth-century poetry participates in the continuation of Enlightenment debates about infinity and the extent to which these contributions form part of the Romantic inheritance in later poetry, this project highlights ongoing discussions of infinity as a point of continuity between the Enlightenment and Romantic periods and between Romantic and later poetry.

Recuperating the intellectual-historical trajectory within which nineteenth-century poets remake and enter into Enlightenment discussions about the nature and reality of infinity disrupts the common understanding of the Romantic sublime as an impassioned and individualistic break from Enlightenment rationality. Similarly, establishing the Romantic emphasis on the infinite as an important component of the Romantic inheritance disrupts our assumptions about how Victorian and modern poems accept, reform, and reject this inheritance. Towards these goals and per Brontë's poem, the dissertation accumulates via acts of erasure—of historical boundaries, dominant readings, and assumptions about historical and disciplinary divisions. Through these acts of erasure, the dissertation traces a crisis from its moment of rupture and expansion to its afterlife as rhetorical form, literary trope, and un-romanticized touchstone of the Romantic inheritance.

Chapter One
The Calculus & The Sublime

I. Rates of Change

William Wordsworth's lyrical ballad *The Last of the Flock* recounts a tragedy in mathematical terms.¹⁶ In the poem, "[a] healthy man, a man full grown" tells of the tragic relationship between two rates of change (l. 3). He explains how he has come to hold a single lamb, the last of his flock. At the beginning of the tale, the man's flock grows: as "such a one," "a single man," he buys "a ewe" (l. 5, ll. 21-4). The stanza goes on to report that "then I married" (l. 27), as if to imply a single rubric for both events, something like an existential emergence from singularity into sociality via the figuring of a "you"/"ewe." From the wife come "[t]en children," from "this single ewe" come "[f]ull fifty comely sheep" (l. 41, ll. 32-3). Yet the parallel rates of change by which "[t]hey thrive, and we at home did thrive" do not last (l. 36). Denied relief from the parish in a time of need, the man must sell his sheep to buy his "little children bread" (l. 52). As the flock dwindles "one by one" (l. 66), the rates of change in the flock of children and the herd of sheep are pulled into an inverse relationship. The more mouths the man has to feed, the more sheep he must sell, and:

They dwindled, dwindled, one by one,
And I may say that many a time
I wished they all were gone:
They dwindled one by one away;

For me it was a woeful day.
(ll. 66-70)

The deep tragedy of the poem, however, lies not in the depletion of the man's flock or in the family's poverty, but rather in the fact that economic rates of change—selling sheep to feed children—usurp upon those rates of change that govern the man's emotional life. The relationships that govern the economic realm¹ come to govern the world of feeling:

Sir! 'twas a precious flock to me,
As dear as my own children be;
For daily with my growing store
I loved my children more and more.
Alas! it was an evil time;
God cursed me in my sore distress,
I prayed, yet every day I thought
I loved my children less;
And every week, and every day,
My flock, it seemed to melt away.
(ll. 81-90)

The ambiguous mention of “my flock” in the last line of this stanza mirrors the man's “wish” that “they all were gone,” a wish followed by a mysterious passage about the man's “wicked deeds” and “wicked fancies,” and the “ill” known of him by other men (ll. 71-4). Leaving the reader to imagine the substance of these facts and fantasies, the man complains: “And crazily, and wearily,/I went my work about./Oft-times I thought to run away;/For me it was a woeful day” (ll. 77-80).

¹ We note that the laws governing the economic situation in this case contradict the law of supply and demand—here, more is more. Furthermore, I should note that my argument concerns itself not with economics but with mathematics. In terms of *The Last of the Flock*, this means that I am concerned with rates of change and the approach of limits, though I acknowledge that such concerns come up against Marxian analyses of Capitalism in which the commodity form and the laws of the marketplace come to determine all social relations.

The grisly inference, i.e. that the man murders his children, is supported by mathematical law. While the flock increases, the man's family grows. Now that the flock dwindles, it is both logical and mathematically probable that the flock of children will decrease as well. In a crazed logic, then, the fortune of the man is both made and unmade by forces outside of his control. Rates of change that once paralleled one another, and that indeed seemed causally linked, cannot suddenly fall into an inverse relationship. By this token, the logic of the parish—that the man should reduce his flock in order to build up his family—represents a false logic, a logic imposed by a governing body on a rural man who must obey the laws of nature, which in this case dictate twin prosperities or total demise.²

However darkly or sympathetically we choose to read the image of the man holding the lamb at the poem's close—a lamb that, through the course of the poem, undergoes a transformation from alive (“—This lusty lamb of all my store/Is all that is alive” (ll. 37-8)) to dead (“And here it lies upon my arm,/Alas! and I have none” (ll.97-8))—we must reckon with the logic implied by this image. Whether we judge the man at his tale's end to have ten children at home or none, we recognize that the poetic approach towards this end has been enumerative. The elements of the poem are repeatedly numbered: e.g. “such a one” (ll. 5); “He makes my tears to [“two”] flow./To-day[...].” (ll. 18-19); “Another still! and still

² In the 1993 article “Double Economics: Ambivalence in Wordsworth's Pastoral,” Mark Jones cites the dominant reading of this poem as follows, that “[t]he shepherd interprets his own situation as showing that the ability to love depends on material well-being.” Jones argues that the poem's subject's “claim that his flock was ‘[a]s dear’ to him ‘as [his] own children’ is belied by his actions; if the claim were true, he could not have sacrificed the flock to feed his children. That he has reflects his ability even in hardship to distinguish and choose in socially acceptable ways between material and spiritual values.” Thus, Jones states that “[t]he poem argues that love really can survive property” and reads the suggestion of murdered children as “an appropriately crisscrossed exclamation, a single figure that at once expresses his anguish at the killing of his flock, displaces his guilt (the killing is self-sacrifice), and obliquely equates the killing with the murder of his own children.” Here, I focus not on the poem's psychodrama but on those dark possibilities opened up by the poem's suggestion of its adherence to mathematical law. [Mark Jones, "Double Economics: Ambivalence in Wordsworth's Pastoral," *PMLA* 108, no. 5 (Oct., 1993): 1105-6.]

another/A little lamb, and then its mother!/It was a vein that never stopp'd,/Like blood-drops from my heart they dropp'd./Til thirty were not left alive/They dwindled, dwindled, one by one" (ll. 61-66). Whatever the logic that governs the descent to zero and the approach of ruin, these abstractions occur in enumerative increments predictably approaching their dire limits. Luck is in flux, but that does not make it random.

I offer these observations by way of introducing a set of claims about the naturalization of mathematical concepts in Romantic poetry. In this case, Newton's fluxion theory—a set of expectations about infinity that could be used to predict rates of change, limits and disappearances—plays out over the course of the lyrical ballad with physical and emotional consequences. Identifying the links between Newton's fluxion theory and early nineteenth-century literature will provide a fruitful starting point for thinking through the ways in which Romantic aesthetics participates in mathematical debates. Located in the middle of a century-long period over the course of which there was no stable definition of infinity in either the mathematical or the philosophical realm, the early nineteenth century represents a moment at which discussions of infinity, already couched in the idioms of mathematics, philosophy, and religion, gave rise to innovations in aesthetic philosophy and verbal art.

The Romantic sublime serves as the crux and emblem of this crossing over. As an aesthetic category with multiple versions and guises, the sublime borrows, builds on, and remakes Enlightenment formulations of infinity in terms of number, selfhood, divinity, and sensory experience. Thus, reading the sublime in particular, and Romantic period aesthetics in general, in terms of prior mathematical debates means reading these aesthetic theories on their own terms. In so doing, I aim to recover a conceptual genealogy that has been effaced

by disciplinary divisions separating Enlightenment from Romantic thought and mathematical from literary inquiry.

Introducing the ubiquitous cultural influence of Euclid in the Victorian period, Alice Jenkins writes that little attention has been paid to the workings of mathematics in Victorian culture and that this “problematic absence [...] has resulted in a tendency to overemphasize the cultural impact of some scientific disciplines, and hence in a skewing of our understanding of the readership for and reception of scientific knowledge.”¹⁷ In the four years since Jenkins sounded this call to arms encouraging interdisciplinary studies of nineteenth-century literature and mathematics, the practice of identifying resonances and commonalities among literary and mathematical histories has come into vogue, and has facilitated productive readings of a number of nineteenth-century texts. Using Enlightenment debates about infinity to situate early nineteenth-century aesthetics and its poetic applications, however, does more than to illuminate common ways of thinking or chains of cultural influence. Rather, such a critical practice highlights an historical moment at which responses to a touchstone mathematical problem were reimagined as theorizations of a foundational literary category. On this count, Romantic aesthetics marks a signal point of focus if we are to develop a critical approach centered on the intersections between mathematics and literature. In so doing, we ensure that interdisciplinary approaches to later modern poetry take into account this aspect of the Romantic inheritance.

While early nineteenth-century philosophers and authors formulate questions of infinity in aesthetic and literary terms, we should note that these were in many cases already questions of effect, that is, of infinity’s role in the workings of mind and mathematics alike. Alongside

Berkeley's religious examination of whether it might be possible to say anything about infinity, we find in eighteenth-century thought, for example, Locke's proof regarding why we might come to feel that infinity exists and Hume's exploration of how infinity belies the information inherent in sensory experience. We will begin, however, with the case of Newton's fluxion theory, a system of mathematical half-truths that predicts and describes the effects (and, as I will argue, affects) of infinity as it works in the calculus. Our examination of Newton's fluxion theory will allow us to enter into a broader discussion of the aftermaths of an uncertain infinity.

II. *Infinity Effects: Newton*

In current usage, the word "infinity"—boundless, limitless, as large as possible—may evoke mystery, but is not in itself an enigmatic term. The word's relatively stable denotation coincides with a stable mathematical definition of the concept, with debates about infinity more or less closed since the end of the nineteenth century. Cantor articulated his bedrock definition of infinity in 1874. In so doing, he built on the findings of classical analysis, the development of which flourished between the 1810s and the 1850s and focused on making calculus sound and developing related theories. Thus, the period of mathematical history that led to Cantor's definition of infinity involved the piecemeal construction of an infinity enmeshed in notions about limits, recursion, continuity, and series—a veritable poetics of ideas.¹⁸

Cantor's groundbreaking proof of infinity in its original (1874) and subsequent forms not only answered but also to some extent mirrored prior debates. This is because, while Cantor

was able to offer a stable mathematical proof of infinity, this proof involved showing that infinity was not a monolithic concept, i.e. that there were different versions of infinity. Cantor developed his proof of infinity based on set theory and the concept of cardinality (how many elements are in a set). Mathematical historian Hans Niels Jahnke explains that “Cantor was the first to use the concept of pairwise correspondence to distinguish meaningfully and systematically between the sizes of infinite sets” and goes on to explain how Cantor distinguished between countable infinite sets, or sets that “can be mapped one to one onto the set of positive whole numbers[.]” and non-countable sets.¹⁹ In other words, the question of whether or not the items in an infinite set can be counted (that is, lined up with the numbers one, two, three, and so on) indicates what kind of infinity one is working with.

I mention these distinctions here because, in addition to building on prior mathematical innovations, Cantor’s breakthrough recapitulates philosophical treatments of the infinite. As I will show, the idea of countable infinity draws on Locke’s understanding of counting as inductive proof, and the notion that there are different kinds of infinity resonates with Burke’s aesthetic taxonomy of infinite experience. Indeed, Cantor’s mathematical work appears to have had a philosophical and theological component. Joseph Dauben argues that “[t]here can be no mistake about Cantor’s identification of his mathematics with some greater absolute unity in God” and that “[t]he theological side of Cantor’s set theory, though perhaps irrelevant for understanding its mathematical content, is nevertheless essential for the full understanding of his theory and why it developed in its early stages as it did.”²⁰ Similarly, tracing Cantor’s understanding of the “absolute infinite,” Ignacio Jané claims that “[t]he true infinite is, for Cantor, absolutely unlimited: it is the *absolute infinite*, or simply the

absolute” and goes on to explain how this concept, “[a]lthough of theological origin,” informs Cantor’s mathematical projects.²¹ In these ways, Cantor’s proof of infinity captures the spirit of the crisis that it concludes.

We turn now to this crisis. Infinity existed in the mathematical sphere as well as in the cultural imagination long before the development of classical analysis. In fact, the century or so preceding 1810 might be termed the “crisis of infinity” for the preponderance of formulations, definitions, and debates conceptualizing infinity as mathematically necessary, logically problematic, and religiously and philosophically inflected. The Romantic period signaled the expansion of this discourse field into the aesthetic realm and, by extension, into literary history. Thus, when we anachronistically project a stable definition of the word, “infinity,” onto Romantic period literature, we sideline a broad band of intellectual-historical influence and we open up gaps in our critical understanding as well.

To state that infinity achieved no stable definition during the Romantic period is by no means to suggest that the word lacked a semantic presence in the age’s marketplace of ideas. Rather than invent for the term a stable definition which in fact it acquired only later, I will restore to our knowledge the many problems, questions, and debates associated with the concept, for these are the mediations through which the term circulated and evolved. By analyzing and contextualizing these debates, we recover some aspects and themes of the aesthetics of infinity, or the extent to which mathematicians, philosophers and poets account for, interpret, or formulate infinity based on sensuous experience. Such analysis suggests that we can only fully understand the complexity and dynamism of the Romantic sublime in

terms of and in relation to Romantic infinity. Put another way, such analysis suggests that infinity is the lost category of Romantic aesthetics.

It is one of the great paradoxes of mathematical history that calculus predates a strong definition of infinity. Calculus is based on the idea of limits, and limits require their opposite—that which is not bounded. Newtonian calculus finesses the problem of an unfounded infinity by devising a method for recognizing and predicting infinity effects. This method is called *fluxion theory*, and it forms an important chapter in the history of mathematics. As Niccolò Guicciardini explains, fluxion theory never generated a logically rigorous system, nor did Newton even make the attempt. Fluxion theory constituted a set of “successful problem-solving techniques” that Newton “did not attempt to systematize into a logical structure” and understood to be “in the end nondemonstrative.”²² In the context of Newtonian calculus, fluxion theory operated as a highly successful set of tools rather than a paradigm—a praxis rather than a bona fide theory. Fluxion theory stood in for those aspects of the calculus that could not be understood in the absence of a mathematically developed concept of infinity.

In mathematical terms, fluxion theory refers to a methodology with which to consider the rate at which a function changes at a given moment, what we would now call the derivative of the function at a given moment.³ A primary effect of fluxion theory is to allow certain values to disappear when a derivative is taken. What in the lexicon of contemporary calculus

³ In other words, assessing and visualizing the rate of change of a function at any given moment allows one to visualize the behavior of a more complicated function in terms of a straight line at a given point. From *The Princeton Companion to Mathematics*: “The derivative of a function f at a value a is usually presented as a number that measures the rate of change of $f(x)$ as x passes through a [...] a general function can behave in very complicated ways, but if it can be approximated by a linear function, then at least in small regions of n -dimensional space its behavior is much easier to understand.” [Timothy Gowers, June Baroow-Green, and Imre Leader, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Mathematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 33.]

we would now call “the *limit* of the ratio of the changes” Newton was thus able to describe as “the *ultimate* ratio of the changes.”²³ In other words, the results of what we now understand to be a ratio approaching zero—for example, consider the fraction $1/x$, which approaches zero as x approaches infinity—could be implemented with the same results ($1/x$ disappearing) without directly engaging with the idea of x increasing with infinity as its limit. As this example indicates, before the advent of a stable definition of infinity, there could be no concept of approaching infinity, and thus no concept of zero as a limit. Fluxion theory picks up the slack for this failing by allowing parts of a function to disappear. In this way, fluxion theory shows an operational field for infinity, however undefined the concept. By allowing mathematical phrases to disappear, this operational field makes zero possible.⁴

⁴ The 1795 printing of William Blake’s *There is No Natural Religion* claims that “The desire of/Man being Infinite the possession/ is Infinite & him-/self Infinite”; under the “self Infinite,” the figure of a man rises up from a tableaux of clouds, his arms spread wide. [William Blake, *The Complete Illuminated Books* (New York: Thames & Hudson in Association with The William Blake Trust, 2004), 38.] The document concludes:

Application
 He who sees the in-
 -finite in all things,
 sees God. He who
 sees the Ratio only
 sees himself only

[plate break]

Therefore

God becomes as
 we are, that we
 may be as he
 is

(Ibid., 39-41)

Introducing his monograph on Blake and Newton, Stuart Peterfreund states that “[t]he evidence for Blake’s having read widely and deeply in Newtonian literature is extensive [...] there is accordingly no need to reargue the issue of Blake’s degree of familiarity with Newtonian thought.” [Stuart Peterfreund, *William Blake in a Newtonian World: Essays on Literature as Art and Science* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 27.] Kevin Hutchings argues that “[...] Blake all too often fails to differentiate Newton’s historical legacy from Newton’s actual work, unfairly blaming the scientist himself for the uses to which his work had been put by the mechanists, deists, and atomists who appropriated and modified its ideas.” [Kevin Hutchings, *Imagining Nature: Blake’s Environmental Poetics* (Montreal; Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 123-4.] Setting aside

In *The Nothing that Is: A Natural History of Zero*, Robert Kaplan offers a somewhat dramatized interpretation of the process by which Newton developed his fluxion theory:

In 1665, when Newton was in his early twenties, the plague swept through London and his university, Cambridge. He hid himself away at his family's country house and set about solving the mysteries of motion. He was to say later that these were the two most fruitful years of his life. Like his teacher Barrow, he thought in terms of infinitesimals, lifting the symbol "o" for them from a shrewd Scotsman, James Gregory. [...] Once back in his rooms at Trinity College (where he lived, ironically, a secret Unitarian)—surrounded as chaotically as Dürer's *Melancholia* by his tools of astronomy and alchemy, his lenses, retorts, hermetic texts and calculations—he slightly but significantly transmuted his terms. He still did what we saw done before: deleting (or as he said, "expunging") negligibly small terms from his equations; but these he came to think of not as infinitely small quantities in space but as points of time, calling them "moments." Under the guise of removing the harshness (as he put it) from the doctrine of indivisibles, a more dynamic point of view was emerging. Did this happen continuously or in the twinkling of an eye? All we have are these little glimpses.

The last one is stunning: he rejects dropping terms involving his o, since "in mathematics," he says, "the minutest errors are not to be neglected." He drops instead the whole notion of infinitesimals, whether spatial or temporal: "I consider mathematical quantities... not as consisting of very small parts, but as described by a continuous motion." Curves, in fact, are generated by continuously moving points: "These geneses really take place in the nature of things, and are daily seen in the motion of bodies." Names he had previously invented for the variable ("fluent") and its changes ("fluxion"), now, as his x's and y's flowed, came fully into their own. "Barrow's differential triangle"

the critical discourse on Blake's attitude towards Newton, it is possible to read the above excerpt as a commentary on fluxion theory. Fluxion theory involves the disappearance of ratios caused by the operations of an undefined infinity (recall the example of $1/x$, which approaches zero when x approaches infinity). In *There is No Natural Religion*, man's desire, and therefore self, is infinite. However, to see one's own infinity in and as the infinity of God, one must focus on infinity in all things. Focusing on the ratio itself—a ratio that, in Newtonian calculus, disappears in the face of a mysterious infinity—leads to a myopic self-centeredness and ignorance of both the infinite and the divine. These observations provide counterpoint and complement to Donald Ault's claim that "for Blake Newton's fluxions, with their infinitely divisible 'Moments' which generate finite 'Particles of Time' in which discrete solid atoms find their freedom to move, are the perfect symbol for the Satanic union of the fluctuating and the solid. For, although Newton's fluxions do not have the characteristic of erratic instability or, on the other hand, oscillatory and cyclic recurrence, they do have the characteristic of ultimate imaginative indefiniteness, at the very point they should be most definite—at the point of the generation of 'action' in the world." [Donald Ault, *Visionary Physics: Blake's Response to Newton* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 134.]

became “evanescent.” Just as an error shows up everywhere in a proof made transparent, so does the underlying premise of a life seen from the right angle. Newton’s insistence on asking not what something is but how it acts is all of a piece with his making motion fundamental.²⁴

Kaplan’s colorful explanation of fluxion theory emphasizes Newton’s focus on action and effect, rather than on definition. While Kaplan is less interested in infinity than in zero, in the calculus, the two concepts go hand in hand. Another history of fluxion theory, by mathematical historian Carl B. Boyer, emphasizes some of the complications inherent in Newton’s methods:

[...] Newton first had in mind infinitely small quantities which are not finite nor yet precisely zero. “Ghosts of departed quantities” they were fittingly called by the critics of the method in the following century. [Berkeley coined this particular phrase.] These offer too great difficulty of conception, so Newton next focused attention on their ratio, which in general is a finite number. Knowing this ratio, one may now substitute for the infinitesimal quantities forming it any other easily conceived finite magnitudes having the same ratio, such as quantities which are thought of as velocities or fluxions of those entering into the equation [...] Although Newton apparently preferred to link his method of fluxions with the idea of a limiting ratio, he so often used infinitesimals for dispatch that we shall find many of his successors later interpreting the fluxions themselves as infinitely small quantities, confusing them with moments.²⁵

Considering fluxion theory as a series or system of infinity effects allows us to recognize the extent to which Newton’s calculus operates in a tradition of thinking about the affective experience of infinity. If, as critics have argued, Newton’s mathematics is another expression of his theological and alchemical writings, then Newton’s mathematical treatment of the problems and paradoxes of infinity is already aesthetically, spiritually, and culturally inflected. Indeed, the argument that Newton’s mathematics is just one branch in the expression of a larger intellectual project dominates recent criticism.

For example, Scott Mandelbrote considers the connections among Newton's alchemical, religious, and scientific texts in order to argue that language links them and shows us how they are all revelations of the same interpretation of truth:

As alchemist and Arian theologian, Newton felt he belonged among a remnant, chosen by God, capable of restoring knowledge through the interpretation of difficult and corrupted texts. To do this, he taught himself the secret languages of the adepts and the prophets, as he had taught himself the secret language of mathematics, in which the book of nature was written.²⁶

In a similar vein, Ayval Ramati Leshem in a 2001 article argues that fluxion theory represents a specific spiritual process for Newton:

[...] Newton might have perceived his mathematical method of fluxions as a divine path through which humans can purify their distorted bodily senses. The method of fluxions calculates distortions undergone by equable flowing quantities, each calculation restoring momentarily the pure divine objective flow from which the flux of the distorted curve has deviated. The method of fluxions once embedded in physics enables human beings to purify their senses momentarily and converge, finitely, with God's infinite objective Sensorium.²⁷

Paralleling this potentially divisive claim is Ramati Leshem's argument, in her 2003 monograph, that "Newton's method of fluxions functions also as an epistemological method purifying the mind from material distractions."²⁸ According to Ramati Leshem, Newton's religiosity is inextricably bound up with fluxion theory. Leshem claims, in an early chapter, that "without considering Newton's strong preference for quantities that flow equably in relation to absolute time over those whose fluxion undergoes change, I will not be able to argue that the inherent hidden mechanical design of bodies had for him a structure that gave content and explanation to the true worship of the original religion of Noah and his sons around the sacrificial fire."²⁹

Offering yet another interpretation of the religious overtones of Newton's fluxion theory, M. Hughes argues that Newton is either an Arianist or influenced by Arianism, and that the debate between Newton and Berkeley is really a debate about God.⁵ Hughes sums up as follows:

[...] though all these controversies were pursued by Newton, Berkeley and their contemporaries in a religious spirit not widely shared now, none were introverted controversies caused only by religious belief. They reflect a philosophical dispute continued since ancient times which, because at root it concerns the nature of power and because the concept of power is of such importance, will always raise conflicting opinions both in religion and in science.³⁰

Scholars seeking to develop a holistic understanding of Newton's work highlight the extent to which the historical importance of Newton's fluxion theory is not limited to the development of the calculus. Such critical investments in the humanistic overtones of Enlightenment thought reveal continuities between Enlightenment rationality and the Romantic imagination, and the concept of infinity proves an intersection between the two. Recent scholarship on the subject of Newton's fluxion theory, by suggesting that every infinity *effect* is also an infinity *affect*, thus underscores the extent to which fluxion theory not only stands *in* for infinity but also stands *for* infinity, a concept under cultural interrogation, debate, and surveillance. Indeed, scholarly debates on the subject of Newton's fluxion theory render it impossible to separate the ways in which Newton "minded Mathematicks & Philosophy[.]"³¹ Perhaps the best we can claim, then, is that to inherit or respond to Newton's treatments of the topic of infinity is to inherit or respond to a problem at once

⁵ Hughes defines Arianism as "the rejection of any idea of interdependence between God and creatures"; a more straightforward definition of Arianism is the belief that Christ is not divine. [M. Hughes, "Newton, Hermes and Berkeley," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 1 (Mar., 1992): 15.]

philosophical, religious, and, as I will show, aesthetic. Those minor fractures in Newton's mathematics that fan out from the intellectual-historical crisis of infinity described above both divide and connect method and result, mathematics and philosophy. Recent critical interpretations suggest that, in attacking Newton's use of infinity in the calculus as heretical, George Berkeley responds to the extent to which the mathematical discussion is invested in a dynamic field of philosophical and religious debate.

Finally, whatever its stake in such debates, Newton's fluxion theory anticipates certain trends in aesthetic theories that respond to the same problems and paradoxes of infinity. Certain models of the Romantic sublime, not unlike Newton's fluxion theory, ask not what infinity *is*, but what infinity *does*. When we arrive at the final stanza of *The Last of the Flock*, we cannot know whether the man's children exist or not. In either case, the lyrical ballad tells a story of their disappearance.

III. *The Analyst & The Artificial Infinite: Berkeley & Burke*

Published seven years after Newton's death, Berkeley's 1734 critique of calculus, *The Analyst*, argues that the unfounded nature of calculus goes so far as to upset the difference between scientific knowledge and religious faith. Berkeley states that "he who can digest a second or third Fluxion, a second or third Difference, need not, methinks, be squeamish about any Point in Divinity[.]" asking, "with what appearance of Reason shall any Man presume to say, that Mysteries may not be Objects of Faith, at the same time that he himself admits such obscure Mysteries to be the Object of Science?"³² Alongside his clear religious agenda of proving hypocritical the ways in which science distances or discounts religion, Berkeley gets

at the core problem of Newtonian calculus. Indeed, responding to a rejoinder to *The Analyst*, Berkeley states that even if no mathematicians were, in his opinion, “Infidels,” “my Remarks upon Fluxions are not the less true; nor will it follow, that I have no Right to examine them on the Foot of Humane Science, even though Religion were quite unconcerned[.]”³³

In order to trace reinventions of infinity from Newtonian calculus to Romantic aesthetics, I look at *The Analyst* in concert with Burke’s formulation of the sublime in terms of infinity. Just as Berkeley’s illustration of infinity as both undefined and philosophically resonant helps us to historicize Burke’s theory of the sublime, so too does Burke historicize Berkeley insofar as Burke’s aesthetic philosophy helps us consider the extent to which Berkeley’s mathematical treatises center on an emotional and spiritual reaction to a concept that transcends the concerns of mathematics.

Berkeley’s challenge to Newton’s calculus is at once poetic, philosophical, and mathematical. In one particularly dramatic passage of *The Analyst*, Berkeley writes that the mathematicians in question:

[...] scruple not to say, that by the help of these new Analytics they can penetrate into Infinity itself: That they can even extend their Views beyond Infinity: That their art comprehends not only Infinite, but Infinite of Infinite (as they express it) or an Infinity of Infinities. But, notwithstanding all these Assertions and Pretentions, it may be justly questioned whether, as other Men in other Inquiries are often deceived by Words or Terms, so they likewise are not wonderfully deceived and deluded by their own peculiar Signs, Symbols, or Species [...] But if we remove the Veil and look underneath, if laying aside the Expressions we set ourselves attentively to consider the things themselves, which are supposed to be expressed or

marked thereby, we shall discover much Emptiness, Darkness, and Confusion;⁶ nay, if I mistake not, direct Impossibilities and Contradictions.³⁴

While Berkeley's critique resulted in a strong effort to ground the calculus in logical proof, we recall that this mathematical project was not accomplished until Georg Cantor's foundational paper of 1874.³⁵ Berkeley's intense philosophical reaction to the crisis of infinity can help us to contextualize other philosophical responses to this wayward concept. Such a long view of philosophical treatments of infinity illuminates the intellectual-historical conditions under which Burke posits infinity as one cause of sublime experience in his 1756 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. We see, for example, that Burke draws on a particular concept of infinity as available for proof and definition as the sublime itself. In so doing, he not only anticipates the rigorous discourse that will eventually lead to the concept's mathematical definition but also begins to establish its aesthetic definitions, the very definitions that are most relevant when the term appears in Romantic literature.

From the inconceivability of a "complete whole" (arrived at by infinite addition, i.e. a conglomerate) and of a "perfect unity" (arrived at by infinite division, i.e. a state in which everything is the same, broken down into its most basic parts), Burke arrives at a theory about the ways in which even *thinking* about infinity can lead one to experience the sublime:

Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime. There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the

⁶ These terms may call to mind certain passages in which Burke cites terror, obscurity, and power as potential causes of sublime experience. [Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. David Womersley (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), part II, sects. i-iv.]

bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so. We are deceived in the like manner, if the parts of some large object are so continued to any indefinite number, that the imagination meets no check which may hinder its extending them at pleasure.³⁶

Infinity, according to Burke, is a sublime form of self-deception. It involves both a sense of how things might be, and a sense of how to position oneself so as to make things seem as if they were that way.⁷ Just as, situated below Mont Blanc, Shelley's poem rejoices in its blind spots—"the snows descend/Upon that mountain; none beholds them there"³⁷—the seeker of the Burkean sublime must position himself such that some finite thing appears to be unbounded if he is to achieve the desired effect/affect. Similarly, something can repeat *ad* apparent *infinitum*, a notion from which Burke derives his idea of the "artificial infinite," the "[s]uccession and *uniformity* of parts" that "impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits" and "stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity."³⁸ The concept of seemingly endless repetition leading to an idea (however partial) of infinity Burke borrows from Locke, who claims in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the "endless *addition* [...] of numbers [...] is that which gives us the clearest and most distinct idea of infinity."³⁹ For Burke, this phenomenon leads us to have a very specific and intense aesthetic experience, that of the sublime, which Burke defines as "the

⁷ This aspect of the Burkean sublime may call to mind analogous theories of the picturesque. Dabney Townsend writes, "[t]hose who use the term [picturesque] most prominently in a self-consciously theoretical way—Gilpin, Price, and Knight—are most concerned with their own responses, and, for the latter two, the way that they will form their own country estates [...] Gilpin and Price seize on Burke's references to smoothness and size but do not fully understand the underlying philosophical psychology from which Burke derives his categories. So while Burke begins with basic premises about the relation of pleasure to fundamental individual and social human desires, Price sees only a set of categories identified in terms of their causes." (Townsend refers to Burke's aesthetics more generally.) [Dabney Townsend, "The Picturesque," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Col. 55, No. 4 (Autumn, 1997): 366.]

strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling[.]” the experience of “danger or pain” at “certain distances, and with certain modifications” striking one as “delightful.”⁴⁰

Along with Burke’s implication that actual and fabricated infinities may coexist—we recall that “scarce” as opposed to “no” things are really infinite—Burke’s critique rhetorically folds into itself a subtle taxonomy of infinities. Consider the following sampling of quotations: “the stars lie in such apparent confusion [...] This gives them the advantage of a sort of infinity”⁴¹; “unless you can produce an appearance of infinity by your disorder, you will have disorder only without magnificence”⁴²; “The modifications of sound [...] are almost infinite”⁴³; “hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity”⁴⁴; “Infinity, though of another kind, causes much of our pleasure in agreeable, as well as of our delight in sublime, images.”⁴⁵ Hedging his claims, Burke discusses infinity as indeterminate, fractured, and multiple. Here we see *a sort of infinity, an appearance of infinity, the almost infinite, some sort of approach towards infinity, another kind of infinity*. Burke’s infinity is fixed neither conceptually nor rhetorically. The sublime experience following from such an abstraction is equally abstract and multiple. Speaking of the “passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*[.]” Burke first claims that one will experience “astonishment”; he then builds on this claim by explaining that “astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.”⁴⁶ The soul frozen in horror, the mind can neither think about nor distract itself from the sublime object: “In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.”⁴⁷ In terms of this astonishment, Burke describes the relationship between the sublime and human reason:

Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.⁴⁸

To have a sort of how-to guide describing how things produce an experience that anticipates reasoning is to reasonably anticipate the anticipation of reason. Sublime experience, by this description, stands in paradoxical relation to reasoning. To put further pressure here, we might wonder just what Burke means by “anticipates”—in addition to coming before reasoning, could this imply that the sublime experience does what the mind will do when it regains its cognitive capacities? Does the sublime experience itself think, or represent a thought event? In addition to anticipating our reasonings, Burke states that the sublime “hurries us on,” which, in this context, could mean that the sublime experience causes one to think. Burke goes on to explain the payoff of the sublime, stating that the “effect of the sublime in its highest degree” is astonishment; admiration, reverence, and respect are “inferior effects.” What makes astonishment a “higher” effect than admiration, reverence, and respect? One possible explanation of the difference lies in noticing that, of these possible effects, only astonishment seems to be unreasonable. While admiration, reverence, and respect seem to describe a state of regained rationality, astonishment lingers in the space of the mind overtaken. Speaking of the sublime effect in literature, Burke describes a moment in which he notices “two ideas not presentable but by language; and an union of them great and amazing beyond conception; if they may properly be called ideas which present no distinct image to the mind[.]”⁴⁹ In his definition of sublimity, as in his definition of infinity, Burke grasps for something unreachable—not to render it reachable, not to bring it down to earth, but rather to recognize it, to stimulate astonishment. Infinity and sublimity, then, balance on the seam between the irrational and the hyper-rational. They depend on

one's ability to trick oneself into perceiving what both is and is not there and then to be shocked by what one does and does not find. Excusing the payoff of calculus from his attack, Berkeley writes of a mathematical progression, "by virtue of a twofold mistake you arrive, though not at Science, yet at Truth. For Science it cannot be called, when you proceed blindfold, and arrive at the Truth not knowing how or by what means."⁵⁰ For Burke, when we trick ourselves into thinking that we stand in the face of the infinite, we play a game of apparent cause and effect that may lead us to a sort of emotional transcendence. We gamble the truth to get to the truth. In the process, it is not the sublime, but rather infinity that is the illusion, the catalyst of experience, and perhaps the most relevant aesthetic category.

And although it is historically accurate and critically necessary to read *The Analyst* as an informed and impassioned rebuke that underscores some very real problems in mathematics, another possible interpretation now emerges. This is the theoretically problematic and yet aesthetically appealing interpretation of Berkeley as observing Newtonian calculus and thereby experiencing the Burkean sublime. Berkeley's apparent complaint, for example, that "[t]he further the Mind analyseth and pursueth these fugitive Ideas, the more it is lost and bewildered; the Objects, at first fleeting and minute, soon vanishing out of sight"⁵¹ speaks to the astonishment and to the pointless pursuit of a real, grounded infinity that characterizes this type of sublime experience. We may instead argue that George Berkeley is perhaps the first of several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers to experience Romantic infinity as sublimely productive.

Chapter Two

Counting to Infinity & Discounting Infinity

I. The Same Numerical Soul: Locke

John Locke's touchstone formulation of infinity is inextricably linked to issues of self-identification and self-recognition. In his 1689 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that the "endless *addition* [...] of numbers [...] is that [...] which gives us the clearest and most distinct idea of infinity"⁵²; in a parallel construction, Locke argues that "the identity of the same *man* consists [...] in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body."⁵³ According to Locke, the idea of infinity emerges when we count, and this practice is analogous to how we live. Counting, and realizing that we could continue to count, allows us to believe in infinity; this same process, when the objects counted are moments that we are ourselves, grants us our sense of identity.

Locke's chapter-long treatment of identity in the *Essay* is messy. The mind-body problem, talking parrots, limb amputation, metempsychosis, and the limits of memory⁸ confound

⁸ In the chapter *Romantic Memory* of the 2005 collection *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment*, Frances Ferguson links Locke's treatment of the problems of memory to Romantic literature and Romanticist criticism, summing up Locke's stance as follows: "Locke's treatment of memory meant that one didn't have to stake one's identity on the claim that a particular person must always be able to persuade others—and oneself as well—that one has remained the same person by being characteristic of oneself and, hence, recognizable. The persistence of memory relieved one of the need to continue to look the same or to produce consistent and predictable

questions of what we can know as and of ourselves. Despite these and other complications, Locke's definition of infinity is built around mathematical logic and defined by consistency. Something has identity, according to Locke, when it is always in the same place at the same time. Thus, constancy of mind and body makes a man:

For I presume 'tis not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone, that makes the idea of a *man* in most people's sense; but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it; and if that be the idea of a *man*, the same successive body not shifted all at once, must, as well as the same immaterial spirit, go to the making of the same *man*.⁵⁴

When this man recognizes the consistency of his various components, he achieves personal identity:

For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that that makes everyone to be what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things; in this alone consists *personal identity*, *i.e.* the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that *person*; it is the same *self* now it was then; and 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.⁵⁵

According to Locke, when we perceive that we remain ourselves from one moment to the next, we perceive ourselves, as “[s]elf is that conscious thinking thing [...] which is sensible, or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for *itself*, as far as that consciousness extends.”⁵⁶ While “[...] *personal identity* consists, not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of *consciousness*[.]”⁵⁷ it is that which remains united to this consciousness that is part of the self.

patterns of behavior. Locke was, in this, lending his support to a remarkable feature of the philosophy of everyday life—that we don't imagine that the continuity of an individual's identity rests on a series of ocular proofs, that we most often take someone who behaves differently from one day to the next to be the same person in a different mood rather than a different person altogether.” [Frances Ferguson, “Romantic Memory,” in *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment: Romantic Poetry and the Ecology of Reading*, ed. Helen Regueiro Elam and Frances Ferguson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 71-2.]

For all the philosophical problems and complications that the concept of identity brings up for Locke, its underlying truth is a matter of enumeration. We keep track, so to speak, of our identity, and its consistency proves its existence, which is necessary for the continuity we observe.

Locke uses this moment-to-moment model to structure his discussion of identity in Book II, Chapter XXVII: *Of Identity and Diversity*, but he works out the logic of this model earlier in Book II, in Chapter XVI: *Of Number* and Chapter XVII: *Of Infinity*. According to Locke, the thinking of complex thoughts is a process of conceptual counting, as “by adding one to one, we have the complex idea of a couple; by putting twelve units together, we have the complex idea of a dozen; and of a score, or a million, or any other number.”⁵⁸ Infinity, that concept which inflects all divine attributes, is thus intrinsic to every idea that, like number, could be compounded without end:

[...] all the ideas, that are considered as having parts, and are capable of increase by the addition of any equal or less parts, afford us by their repetition the idea of infinity; because with this endless repetition, there is continued an enlargement, of which there can be no end.⁵⁹

Locke defines this idea of infinity as “*an endless growing idea[,]*” a potentially limitless process of additive conceptualization.⁶⁰ It is this very process that allows one, not to know infinity in any positive sense, but to trust in the existence of the unknown. Debunking the possibility of a positive idea of infinity, Locke writes:

[...] yet there be those, who imagine they have *positive ideas of infinite* duration and space. It would, I think, be enough to destroy any such positive idea of infinite, to ask him that has it, whether he could add to it or no; which would easily show the mistake of such a positive idea.⁶¹

Infinity, according to Locke, isn't something we can ever fully know or understand; however, it is something towards the idea of which we possess a mathematically sound route of approach. Thus, when we depart from the abstract notion of infinity, which, by extension of its Godly mechanics, we may take as axiomatic, and approach the philosophical tangle of personal identity, the possibilities for knowledge expand. We may never know beyond question that we are not the reincarnation of Caesar or a figment of another man's dream or drunkenness or an idiosyncratic cocktail of the substances that be, but the very notion of consistency will always be consistent. If we could always be ourselves for one more minute, then we could always be ourselves forever.

By defining identity within the conceptual framework of counting to infinity, Locke departs from Enlightenment figurations of identity as a derivative of memory and sensation (a conceptualization epitomized by Hume's 1739 statement that "memory does not so much *produce as discover* personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions"⁶²). Identity-forming memory, for Locke, is a thing experienced as it accumulates. Ultimately, Locke argues that "[c]ontinued existence makes identity[.]"⁶³ To be some particular identity is to believe in that identity. That at one point, in the midst of a discussion of what makes Socrates Socrates, Locke refers to an individual as defined by having "the same numerical soul"⁶⁴ speaks to the emphasis on enumeration, continuation, and corresponding self-awareness at the heart of Locke's definition of personal identity. For Locke, the moments that we are ourselves add up to the next moment, which gives rise to a belief in the infinity of our identity.

Counting and living, according to Locke, are sister inductions. Thus, Locke's infinity is empirical. It is learned, quite literally, by practice. Even before we consider formulations of the Romantic sublime in terms of their dependence on Locke, we may wonder whether Locke's infinity is inherently appealing to crafters of poetry, or lineated writing, or enumerative verbal art. The leap from accumulation to transcendent concept—days lived to identity, numbers counted to infinity—resonates with, for example, Shelley's claims, in *A Defence of Poetry*, that "Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; Imagination the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole [...] Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be 'the expression of the Imagination'"⁶⁵ and that "[poetry] acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness[.]"⁶⁶

Whatever Locke's poetic logic, the influence of Lockean infinity permeates Romantic aesthetics. Recall our discussion of Edmund Burke's 1756 *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke identifies the "artificial infinite" as the "[s]uccession and *uniformity* of parts" that "impress the imagination with an idea of their progress beyond their actual limits" and "stamp on bounded objects the character of infinity."⁶⁷ Such a pathway towards sublimity is really a game of cause and effect, or affect—the infinite itself, or the supposed infinite, is the feeling that comes from a progression that appears to be indefinite.

Turning to another model, we can see Locke's version of infinity forming the foundation of the Mathematical Sublime described in Kant's 1790 *Critique of Judgment*. Kant states that "[n]ature [...] is sublime in such of its phenomena as in their intuition convey the idea of their infinity."⁶⁸ The mathematical sublime occurs when one encounters something of great

magnitude and is moved to try to comprehend infinity, which is impossible, because “the infinite is absolutely (not merely comparatively) great” and thus “the mere ability even to think it as *a whole* indicates a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses.”⁶⁹ One perceives that which inspires thoughts of infinity, realizes that these are impossible thoughts, and yet also self-reflexively realizes the powers of one’s mind in the face of the concept of infinity. And this is the sublime: “where the size of a natural object is such that the imagination spends its whole faculty of comprehension upon it in vain [...] instead of the object, it is rather the disposition of the mind in estimating it that we have to judge as *sublime*.”⁷⁰ As opposed to seeing something *as if it were* infinite and thereby experiencing the powerful emotion that is the sublime, as in Burke’s formulation, here one sees something, tries to imagine it as infinite, cannot, and is left, sublimely, with both the ungraspable concept of infinity and an awareness of one’s own working mind. For Locke, the impossibility of comprehending infinity allows one to believe in infinity. For Kant, the impossibility of comprehending infinity creates a moment of self-reflexivity at which we can locate the Mathematical Sublime. As in Locke’s formulation, the moment of recognizing that one’s counting will never reach infinity is the moment of self-realization.

Let us pause for a moment to situate this argument within critical discussions of Locke and Romanticism. In *The Self in Social Theory*, C. Fred Alford argues:

What is valuable about Locke’s account [of the self] is its emphasis on process, the way in which we must constantly appropriate and reappropriate our experiences in order to ensure what [critic John] Jenkins refers to as the survival of identity. The self is [...] a process in which we reinterpret the meaning of the past in terms of the events and crises of the present (particularly as these impact upon our ambitions and ideals) in order to project ourselves into the future—that is, to see the meaning of going on, the purpose of our lives, and ultimately the meaning of our deaths.⁷¹

Alford's use of the word "project" contains an interesting double entendre—for Locke, the self is both project and projection. It is a thing one makes in time. The idea that human understanding is the creation of one's own self generates a reading of Locke's groundbreaking formulation of identity ("in contrast to the mechanical self in Hobbes' account, and the 'bundle' of self in Hume's"⁷²) as an artistic manifesto. Defining identity, Locke sets out a formula for self-creation. So perhaps it is unsurprising that Locke's influence on nineteenth-century aesthetic theory doesn't stop at the sublime but rather takes root in the poetry itself. Locke connects his "genuinely revolutionary" "account of personal identity" to his contribution to Enlightenment debates about infinity.⁷³ In so doing, Locke not only creates a version of infinity of particular use to aesthetic formulations of the Romantic sublime but also inspires poetic remakings of his ideas about identity in an historical period over the course of which the popularity of his philosophy is far less consistent than the degree of its literary impact.

By citing the *Essay's* literary effects, my argument engages two fairly recent studies of Locke and Romanticism, both of which critique the equation of empiricism with conceptual stability and call for a more nuanced understanding of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a (to greater or lesser extents) literary text. Cathy Caruth's 1991 *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, Freud* argues that one must reread Empiricism in order to approach afresh the vocabulary of Romanticism. Calling Locke's influence on Romanticist criticism a problem of oversimplification, Caruth points out that "[a] number of interpretations of English Romantic texts depend on an approach to empiricism which neglects the complexities of individual arguments as well as the peculiarities of the tradition as a whole"⁷⁴ and states the necessity of finding "a way of talking

about empirical philosophies not just as doctrines but as texts” so that “we might consider new ways of reading the self-meditations of Romantic texts as well [...] A rereading of empiricism, in other words, can open up our ideas of self-understanding insofar as it is an essential part of the interpretive vocabulary of Romantic poetry.”⁷⁵ Answering Caruth’s insistence that Locke’s texts are just that, the present study argues that there is great formal consistency between Locke’s writings about infinity and identity and several Romantic and later poetic formulations of this conceptual interplay.

In a similar vein, William Walker’s 1994 *Locke, Literary Criticism, and Philosophy* attends to the ways in which Locke’s *Essay* is simplified in its literary-critical applications. In defense of nuance, Walker states, “It is, in part, because I find the *Essay* to be *complicated* in certain ways that I challenge the authority that this text wields within studies of post-Renaissance literature.”⁷⁶ Walker goes on to argue that “the dualism in relation to which Romanticism is commonly defined is the product of a particular reading of Locke, one which represses precisely those images which Romanticism is then seen to formulate as the abrogation of this dualism.”⁷⁷ Thus, Walker argues that the simplification of Locke’s ideas obscures certain parallels between Locke’s writings and the writings of Romanticism. While the chapter at hand uses Locke’s definition of infinity to clarify certain nineteenth-century poetic formulations, it does so not to make Locke into a monolithic figurehead but rather to take his definition of infinity as one among many in a period specific spoil of shifting definitions. Although Locke’s formulation of infinity is in no way definitive, it is a particularly common model to be taken up by nineteenth-century poetry. This may be the case for logistical reasons (e.g. Wordsworth’s interest in Locke’s infinity and introduction of this version of infinity to the poetic realm) or on account of Locke’s concerns (e.g. connections among

selfhood, divinity, the other, and the infinite). In any case, understanding Locke's formulation of infinity becomes necessary if one wishes to clarify certain nineteenth-century poems.

Beyond calling for a literary-critical recuperation of Locke's complexity, both Caruth and Walker suggest that we attend to the literariness of Locke's treatise when applying it to literature. Beyond highlighting certain similarities between the openness of Locke's text and the texture of Romantic poetry, Walker interprets Locke's definition of mind as one that "opens the possibility for, but does not demand, a *narrative* about the mental agent."⁷⁸ Caruth is more explicit in this regard, arguing that "Locke's empiricism takes the form of a narrative, a narrative that tells a very specific tale about itself [...] empirical arguments, as we understand them, have very little in common with their experiential descriptions; it is precisely by means of the vocabulary of experience, I suggest, that the narratives of Romantic literature question their own referential status."⁷⁹ Using Locke's formulation of infinity in terms of identity in order to understand parallel moves in nineteenth-century poetry means recognizing commonalities between empiricist and poetic logic, between philosophical and literary problems, and between the problems and the poetics of infinity.

However groundbreaking the studies in question, it is worth noting that Ernest Lee Tuveson's 1960 tract arguing that Locke's texts may be understood as the basis of several key Romantic figurations was critiqued along these same lines some fifty years ago. In a review of *The Imagination as a Means of Grace* in *The Philosophical Review* (1961), A. C. Baier argues that "[Tuveson] rather argues in a quite a priori way that what they wrote is what one would expect to be written after Locke [...] from another selection of writers, or from

another interpretation of these same writers, a different pattern of development could equally plausibly be exhibited.”⁸⁰ In a somewhat parallel review from *Modern Language Notes* (1961), M. H. Abrams argues that, “[h]aving made the prior decision to narrate the history of prominent aesthetic ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century solely in terms of Locke's scheme of the mind, independently of relevant earlier thought, or of contemporary developments in English and Continental philosophy departing radically from Locke, Tuveson is constrained to attribute to his one available source, by analogies however remote and tenuous, the ultimate responsibility for concepts with which Locke did not deal at all, or which he explicitly denied.”⁸¹ Thus, while Caruth and Walker challenge a simplification of Locke's text that in turn simplifies the terms of Romanticism, they not only counter certain trends in Romanticism but also participate in a long-established tradition of advocating the restoration of Locke's complexity to Romanticist studies.

II. *Nothing Less Than Infinity*

In the 1810 essay *Upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth applies Locke's logical formulation of infinity to his justification for belief in the afterlife. Wordsworth explains this belief by presenting a verbal diagram of a child watching a stream that continues and continues to flow. Realizing that the stream has an inexhaustible source, the child is made to think of the ocean, but this body of water is invested with a special significance:

Origin and tendency are notions inseparably co-relative. Never did a child stand by the side of a running stream, pondering within himself what power was the feeder of the perpetual current, from what never-wearied sources the body of water was supplied, but he must have been inevitably propelled to follow this question by another: “Towards what abyss is it in progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?” And the spirit of the answer must

have been, though the word might be sea or ocean, accompanied perhaps with an image gathered from a map, or from the real object in nature—these might have been the *letter*, but the *spirit* of the answer must have been *as* inevitably, —a receptacle without bounds or dimensions;—nothing less than infinity.⁸²

Infinity, then, is already a contradiction, both an inherently paradoxical receptacle without bounds or dimensions and the very “real,” bounded, dimensional sea (or a drawn image thereof). In the analogy through which Wordsworth investigates how we understand our origin and the ever-after towards which we ultimately tend, he both borrows Locke's logical framework and gives its end result an illogical yet sensible translation—that believing in an endless source demands an “answer” that is something different in “*letter*” than in “*spirit*,” both an “image gathered from a map, or from the real object in nature” and “nothing less than infinity.” Such conceptual play recasts the connection Locke draws between the mathematically infinite and the singular human life. For Locke, infinity is both a grand abstraction and a simple faith in the self as such. For Wordsworth, the two aren't so different.⁹

⁹ Dewey W. Hall discusses this passage in his 2001 article “Signs of the Dead: Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and the Discourse of the Self,” in which he claims that “*Essays upon Epitaphs* is a metaphysical inquiry about death which links the act of dying to that of writing.” [Dewey W. Hall, “Signs of the Dead: Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and the Discourse of the Self,” *ELH* 68, no. 3 (Fall, 2001): 658.] When the passage at hand is taken as part of a statement of poetics, Hall argues, we see that “Wordsworth’s concern with ‘remembrance’ reveals anxiety over the state of forgetfulness—the dead people slip into oblivion and cease to exist. The absolute end of life begins with absolutely forgetting the dead; whereas, remembrance retains the past for the sake of the future.” [Ibid.] Thus, Hall reads our passage as follows:

The quest after origins involves the search for an ideal language to express poetic inspiration.

Wordsworth’s trope of a “running stream” in a “perpetual” state of “influx” indicates the idea of meditating upon the forward drift of a memory by looking backward to its “never-wearied” source. The “body of water” becomes an interminable source of linear movement through space and time. According to Wordsworth, this source cannot be contained except in a word—“a receptacle without bounds or dimensions” [...] For Wordsworth, human language, boundlessly and limitlessly aspiring toward infinitude, becomes the intermediary between origin and its endpoint. The beginning of the end starts with the language of the living and finishes in the epitaphic mode—a ventriloquism of the dead. (Ibid., 659.)

Applying Locke's logic to *Upon Epitaphs* reveals that this passage expresses not only an artistic desire for the infinite but also a logical belief in the existence of the infinite. Beyond a desire to counter, immortalize, or embody mortal anxieties in language, this passage transposes the logic by which Locke proves the existence of infinity, or at least convinces his reader to believe in the infinite. That the stream continues to flow means that it could always continue to flow; that the child continues to be himself is proof enough of the infinite spirit given by God, and of the reality of an infinite receptacle for that spirit in the afterlife. Here is a statement, not only of poetics, but also of faith—of a faith bolstered by a certain Enlightenment model of thinking through the mathematical qualities of identity.

III. *The Good Minute Goes*

Tracing Locke's infinity through the nineteenth century clarifies certain poetic considerations of identity and expands an account of Locke's nineteenth-century reception to include his influence on verbal art, an influence mediated by the poetic inheritance of Romanticism. Crafting such a literary history also emphasizes the extent to which Locke conceptualizes identity as *process*—whether that process be philosophical, psychological, or artistic. Identity, like infinity, is something that happens in the accumulation of everyday details:

When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this everyone is to himself that which he calls *self* [...]⁸³

While Hall helpfully contextualizes this allegory within questions of artistic form and inspiration, understanding the extent to which *Upon Epitaphs* responds to Locke's infinity reveals some of the text's broader philosophical stakes.

According to Locke, doing what one does, and knowing that one does what one does, produces an experience of selfhood. Thus, the moment-by-moment progression of life gives rise to a belief in continuous identity, and self-awareness and consciousness at every regular moment reinforce this sense of identity and fill in a picture of the self. For Locke, selfhood is at once infinite and quotidian.

Locke's link between the repetitive and the transcendent is further dramatized in his description of how, through enumeration, one might worship the divine. At the beginning of his chapter on infinity, Locke writes:

For when we call them [i.e. God's attributes] infinite, we have no other idea of this infinity, but what carries with it some reflection on, and intimation of that number or extent of the acts or objects of God's power, wisdom, and goodness, which can never be supposed so great, or so many, which these attributes will not always surmount and exceed, let us multiply them in our thoughts, as far as we can, with all the infinity of endless number.⁸⁴

Here, even prayer happens through counting—*let us multiply them in our thoughts, as far as we can*. Locke emphasizes the connection between the doable and the transcendent, between repetition and revelation.

Remaking Lockean infinity as a mode of response to romantic longing, Robert Browning's *Two in the Campagna* reckons with an ever-frustrated desire to embody the infinite in the finite, imagining a landscape within which love is inscribed and figuring thoughts as elusive and tangible. The poem ultimately offers a definition of love and a corresponding definition of a love poem that embrace the frustrations of finitude as both forever distinct from and responsible for the possibility of the infinite.

Two in the Campagna provides a mathematical definition of the struggles of love, or the struggles of one finite being aching to contain and to be contained by another finite being. The first line of the poem, “I wonder do you feel to-day[.]” enfolds the phrase “I one, you two,” and then moves to the one-to-one connection or identification of the second line: “As I have felt since, hand in hand[.]”⁸⁵ At its outset, then, the poem identifies the love object as a separate, countable being, and then attempts to identify with it, to highlight a point of similarity and connection. Examples of the attempt to add up I and you, or to bring one and two together, occur throughout the poem. In the third stanza, for example, the phrase “yonder weed/took up the floating weft” invokes the homonym “we’d,” or “we would,” thereby implying that not only the weed but also the couple would take up weaving—stitching themselves together. Another expression of this desire occurs in the seventh stanza, where the easy idiom “How say you?” connotes, not only a request for permission, but also the question, “How do I say you?” While the poem thus acknowledges the difficulty of understanding or expressing the other as such, it also denies that such recognition is a choice, asking: “How is it under our control/To love or not to love?” (VII).

The poem depicts the struggles of love as endlessly frustrating. The two cannot weave into one, and no matter how much the I says you, such a process of worship can never be all-encompassing. The poem laments the limitations of the other, and the failure of the other to serve as a totalizing force of love: “I would that you were all to me,/You that are just so much, no more./Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!” (VIII). Thus bemoans the lover who cannot “Set my heart/beating by yours” (IX) or fully render “your part my part” (IX). The countable I and you, or one and two, cannot contain the infinity of love, and so it is in a decidedly singular first-person construction—one that asks you to discern or separate only

the I—that the poem concludes, “Only I discern—/Infinite passion, and the pain/Of finite hearts that yearn” (XII).

The poem’s portrayal of the lover’s struggle to contain the infinite is also a statement of poetics. Take, for example, a passage in which *Two in the Campagna* discusses the lover’s frustration at not being able to hold on to a beautiful moment of connection with the beloved: “Then the good minute goes./XI/Already how am I so far/Out of that minute?” The transitional poetic moment occurs over a stanza break. The good minute going, then, chimes with a roman numeral; the reader may feel as if she has looked up at a clock. In this way, the poem announces its own physicality, its own attempt, by ticking time and focusing on number, to hold within it love—to be, quite literally, a love poem. That the interrupting number is composed of an X and an I furthers this interpretation, as the number itself embodies the exclusion of the I. Further examples of self-referentiality occur throughout the poem: in the second stanza, the interruption of “for rhymes” seems to be inserted for the very purpose of rhyme itself, while imperatives such as “Let me hold it!” and “I traced it. Hold it fast” speak to the poem’s failure to contain meaning. In the world of *Two in the Campagna*, romantic and poetic desires to embody the infinite within the finite are always thwarted, until the very pain of love and the very subject of the poem become these desires and failed attempts to satisfy them.

And yet, considering the poem’s meditation on frustration within the conceptual framework of a Lockean formulation of infinity deepens this interpretation to expose how *Two in the Campagna* also rejoices in this eternal frustration as that which makes love and the infinite possible. Just as counting allows us to believe in the infinite, so the finite self and the failure

of the finite self to contain the beloved other create romantic desire, an infinite passion defined by the failure of the finite ever to reach it. In other words, the essential frustration of love makes love possible. Without the failure to count to infinity, we could never have infinity; without the failure to fully identify with the beloved, and without the desire that ensues from this failure, we could never have love. Thus, “Only I discern” indicates both that the separate, singular self, and the eye of this self’s vision, is alone as it divides or notes the division between “infinite passion” and the “pain” of “finite hearts,” and that the self must be alone to behold these things. Only when singular, only when finite and thus frustrated, can the I discern, or make out, the infinitude of love. The frustrations of love are also its revelations. *Two in the Campagna* claims that our failure to objectify love—in our relationships or in the amulet of a poem—is precisely our success at recognizing it. Thus, the poem plays with Locke’s infinity as it develops an idiosyncratic sentimentality centered on problems of number.

IV. *Anti-Infinity: Hume*

Wordsworth’s claim, in the lyrical ballad *The Tables Turned*, that “Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;/—We murder to dissect” (ll. 26-8)⁸⁶ is generally taken as an antiscientific statement. In the 1963 article “Wordsworth, *The Borderers*, and ‘Intellectual Murder,’” Geoffrey Hartman claims:

When Wordsworth wrote “we murder to dissect,” he was stating a truth as plainly as he could. The intellect is a passion that can lead to crime; especially to a crime against nature [...] What Wordsworth does not disclose in the Romantic auguries is his still darker intuition that the mind of man may be generically linked to death. If the intellect murders, it is because it comes into being by a mutilation of original nature or of the natural self: its

act reflects its origin. This darker intuition, founding the intellect—the growth of the mind—on death, is expressed with symbolic power in Wordsworth’s earliest poems.⁸⁷

Thus, for Hartman, the poem’s claim is, on one level, a statement that intellectualism leads to crimes against nature; on another level, it connects the machinations of the human mind to the darker psychological impulses of human existence. More recent references to the famous passage take Hartman’s reading as axiomatic.¹⁰ But what if we understood the poem’s famous/infamous statement as an intellectual argument? Understanding *The Tables Turned* as a refraction of one Enlightenment model of infinity—in this case, the anti-infinity of David Hume—allows us to do just that.

Hume presents his disbelief in infinity, and in particular his rejection of the premise that something can be broken down into an infinity of parts, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. There, Hume argues that the human mind is capable of perceiving natural minima, and that thus there is “error” to the “common opinion, that the capacity of the mind is limited on both sides, and that ‘tis impossible for the imagination to form an adequate idea, of what goes beyond a certain degree of minuteness as well as of greatness.”⁸⁸ Hume argues that infinity is an unnecessary concept insofar as “[n]othing can be more minute, than some

¹⁰ For example, Paul Bové in his 2009 article “Philology and Poetry: The Case Against Descartes” refers to the analogical significance of Wordsworth’s claim, thus deducing the claim’s meaning as follows: “Ever since Wordsworth, of course, a simple cry has resonated among some poets, critics, and ordinary readers: ‘We murder to dissect.’ Neither Vico nor I wish to defend this too often sentimental and anti-intellectual gesture of affective ideology or common sense.” [Paul A. Bové, “Philology and Poetry: The Case Against Descartes,” *Law and Literature* 21, no. 2 (Summer, 2009): 151.] Similarly, in a footnote to a 2003 article about Coleridge, Noel Jackson writes, “I refer in this sentence, of course, to Wordsworth’s famous comparison between analytical thinking and medical barbarism in ‘The Tables Turned[.]’” [Noel B. Jackson, “Critical Conditions: Coleridge, ‘Common Sense,’ and the Literature of Self-Experiment,” *ELH* 70, no. 1 (Spring, 2003): 145.] The footnote explicates Jackson’s claim that this “metaphor that Wordsworth would later immortalize” is anticipated by Shaftesbury’s remark that “the activity of self-exploration is thus better likened to ‘the business of self-dissection.’” [Ibid., 127.] Even cited tangentially, the claim, in Wordsworth’s *The Tables Turned*, that “we murder to dissect” is thus understood as an “anti-intellectual” and “immortal” metaphor that one would, “of course,” recognize, whether one finds in it a basic truth or a touchstone articulation of a problematic attitude.

ideas, which we form in the fancy; and images, which appear to the senses; since there are ideas and images perfectly simple and indivisible.”⁸⁹ Infinity, then, is a mistake of induction, as “finding by reason, that there are other objects vastly more minute, we too hastily conclude, that these are inferior to any idea of our imagination or impression of our senses.”⁹⁰ The concept of infinite divisibility, and thus of counting to infinity in either direction, poses a challenge to Hume’s understanding of distinct ideas representing the known world. Addressing the alleged fallacy of an infinity beyond the bounds of human comprehension, Hume writes:

‘Tis universally allow’d, that the capacity of the mind is limited, and can never attain a full and adequate conception of infinity: And tho’ it were not allow’d, ‘twou’d be sufficiently evident from the plainest observation and experience. ‘Tis also obvious, that whatever is capable of being divided *in infinitum*, must consist of an infinite number of parts, and that ‘tis impossible to set any bounds to the number of parts, without setting bounds at the same time to the division. It requires scarce any induction to conclude from hence, that the *idea*, which we form of any finite quality, is not infinitely divisible, but that by proper distinctions and separations we may run up this idea to inferior ones, which will be perfectly simple and indivisible. In rejecting the infinite capacity of the mind, we suppose it may arrive at an end in the division of its ideas; nor are there any possible means of evading the evidence of this conclusion.⁹¹

Thus, for Hume, the largest and the smallest things are no more or less knowable than anything else. In anticipation and shadow form of William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* (“To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour” (ll. 1-4)⁹²), Hume praises the simple, knowable perfection of nature’s smallest forms:

When you tell me of the thousandth and ten thousandth part of a grain of sand, I have a distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions; but the images, which I form in my mind to represent the things themselves, are nothing different from each other, nor inferior to that image,

by which I represent the grain of sand itself, which is suppos'd so vastly to exceed them. What consists of parts is distinguishable into them, and what is distinguishable is separable. But whatever we may imagine of a thing, the idea of a grain of sand is not distinguishable, nor separable into twenty, much less into a thousand, ten thousand, or an infinite number of different ideas.

'Tis the same case with the impressions of the senses as with the ideas of the imagination [...]⁹³

Arguably, anti-infinity, or a denial of infinity, can be understood as another way of defining what infinity means. Dale Jacquette observes that “[i]nfinity and infinite divisibility thus provide a sharp focus for dispute about the metaphysics, epistemology and scientific methodology of Descartes, Leibniz, and Newton versus Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.”⁹⁴ While our analysis destabilizes a sharp distinction between those thinkers who challenge infinity and those thinkers who rely on conceptualizations thereof, we may find it useful that Jacquette has also noticed the centrality and plurality of formulations of infinity to Enlightenment debates about the structures and details of the known.¹¹

Whether we see Hume’s anti-infinity stance in terms of its continuities with or its departures from other thinkers, we must see it as a contribution to a broad discourse about the nature and reality of infinity. Thus, Hume’s definition of infinity as unnecessary and unknowable represents one Enlightenment model of infinity. Notably, Jacquette explores the aesthetic payoff of this model in terms of the sublime, arguing that “Hume’s aesthetics of the sublime is not neatly packaged [...] but must be extracted from his solutions to three problems about the experience of distance in space and time, and the explanation of the pleasure that these

¹¹ Jacquette explores Hume’s denial that infinity is knowable or worthwhile, focusing on the ways in which Hume prioritizes “properly humanized empirical epistemology and theory of mind” [Ibid., 5.] over mathematical knowledge and ultimately “argues that we do not and cannot have an adequate idea of infinity or infinite divisibility in the first place, and that we can get along perfectly well without it, thereby avoiding the methodological confusions that the concept entails.” [Ibid., 5, xiii-xiv.]

sensations afford, from the perspective of his early empiricist psychology of the passions.”⁹⁵ Jacquette goes so far as to hypothesize that “because of its longstanding associations with the concept of infinity, Hume may have preferred to downplay references to the sublime, and substitute instead the philosophically more responsible and accurate though less dramatic ideas of greatness and vast distance in height and depth.”⁹⁶ Building on the supposition that resisting infinity entails recategorizing the sublime, Jacquette ultimately proposes that, for Hume, “in aesthetic judgment in general or aesthetic judgment of greatness and the sublime in particular, the mind’s esteem and admiration for sublime aesthetic qualities of nature and art primarily and essentially belong to reason and reflection rather than exclusively to the passions.”⁹⁷ According to Jacquette’s interpretation, Hume denies infinity because it cannot be known; his formulation of the sublime thus centers on questions of reason and reflection. According to Hume, aesthetic experience, unlike infinity, can be mindful.¹²

Hume defines infinity as an impossible concept that contradicts a basic truth—that the world is composed of non-divisible units that humans can both perceive and comprehend. Put another way, the impossibility of infinity is the inverse of the innate truth that nothing

¹² Pierre Bayle’s *Zeno* article from the *Dictionnaire critique et historique* is commonly taken as the object of Hume’s response in his treatment of continuity. J. M. M. H. Thijssen in the article *David Hume and John Keill and the Structure of Continua* surveys the literature on the subject in order to argue that “it is too limited to consider Hume’s exposition solely as a reaction to Bayle” and that Hume’s discussion of continuity responds to an older geometric tradition. [J. M. M. H. Thijssen, “David Hume and John Keill and the Structure of Continua,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1992): 285.] In a similar vein, Jacquette argues that Hume’s position regarding infinity also responds to George Berkeley, stating that, like Hume, Berkeley “holds that only ideas of possibly existent objects can be conceived, and [...] general ideas are ideas of things that cannot possibly exist.” (Jacquette, *Critique*, 29.) (Jacquette proves Berkeley’s adherence to the particular by analyzing various passages in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* and in Berkeley’s private notebooks later published as *Philosophical Commentaries*.) Thus, we may understand Hume’s claim that “[n]othing can be more minute, than some ideas, which we form in the fancy; and images which appear to the senses; since there are ideas and images perfectly simple and indivisible” as, in the words of Thijssen, “Hume’s deliberations concerning continuity” which “are the result of his basic conviction that (our ideas of) space and time consist of mathematical/physical points.” (Thijssen, *Hume*, 286.)

about the makeup of the world exceeds human comprehension. Taking Hume's anti-infinity stance as a literary-critical lens allows us to read Wordsworth's *The Tables Turned* beyond its potential anti-intellectualism to uncover a statement of the essential intellectual accessibility of the world.

The poem's subtitle, "An evening scene, on the same subject," links it to the previous lyrical ballad, *Expostulation and Reply*, in which "William" is questioned by "Matthew" regarding why William sits alone on a stone, dreaming his time away, ignoring his books, and enjoying the sweetness of life with no sense of purpose. William's reply argues that he "[...] deem[s] that there are powers,/Which of themselves our minds impress,/That we can feed this mind of ours/In a wise passiveness.//Think you, mid all this mighty sum/Of things for ever speaking,/That nothing of itself will come,/But we must still be seeking?" (ll. 20-8).⁹⁸ Thus, the reply to a charge of passivity/purposelessness is answered by a vindication of that very mindset. According to William (both the poet's name and a name composed of the "will" and the statement "I am"), the powers of the universe will act upon our minds, whether or not we seek enlightenment. The "wise passiveness" activated and articulated by sitting on a stone and gazing out at the landscape is predicated on an understanding of the world as "this mighty sum/Of things for ever speaking." The world is a collection of speaking things, a totality composed of communicative particulars, and a passive openness to the world is in itself a kind of wisdom.

One might expect the next lyrical ballad, *The Tables Turned*, to be comprised of a counter-claim, a defense of book learning and purposeful intellectualism. However, the poem is "on the same subject" insofar as it defends a passive or receptive attitude towards the world.

The “tables are turned” because the proponent of passive/receptive nature-watching aggressively chides the “friend”: “clear your looks [...] quit your books [...] Come, hear the woodland linnet” (ll. 1, 3, 10).⁹⁹ When the poem declares that “on my life/There’s more of wisdom in it [the music of the linnet]” (ll. 11-12), it not only uses an idiom to swear faithfully but also implies that the wisdom in the birdsong is “on my life”—both on the subject of, or relevant to, the life in question and imposed or impressed on that life. And yet, the bird that affects and illuminates the poet’s life is not a nightingale, nothing distant or symbolic or mournful, but only a simple finch, a small bird the twittering song of which is broken into notes, or parts. After the song of the linnet, the poem introduces the friendly throstle, a bird whose song repeats its melodic phrasings.¹³ The twittering linnet and chorusing throstle syncopate the outside world and deliver the basic and repetitive units of their knowledge to the passive recipient. In *The Tables Turned*, the wisdom and pleasure of birdsong is delivered in pointillism.

In a similar vein, “Come forth into the light of things,/Let Nature be your teacher” (ll. 15-16) suggests that to accept Nature as one’s teacher does not mean stepping into the light of a transcendent or spiritual truth, but rather stepping “into the light of things.” By this description, it is almost as if things themselves are illuminating or radiating meaning. Without taking our reading that far, we can at least claim that, in *The Tables Turned*, the light of the world belongs to the things around us. It is not the light itself, but the everyday things illuminated, that the poem values. That nature “has a world of ready wealth” (l. 17), then, may denote not only that the wealth of nature is easily accessible, but also that the

¹³ Robert Browning, in *Home Thoughts, from Abroad*, emphasizes this repetition: “That’s the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,/Lest you should think he never could recapture/The first fine careless rapture!” (ll. 14-16). [Browning, *Poetry*, 1125-6.]

wealth of nature is in itself active or potentially active. Putting more pressure on the diction here raises the question of whether the wealth of nature has its own capacities for knowledge and communication. Thus, the poem conceptualizes the natural world as an independent entity.

By this token, “spontaneous wisdom” denotes wisdom without any external, determining, or transcendent cause. The natural world governs over itself. In a circular logic, “health” “breathe[s]” “wisdom” and “cheerfulness” “breathe[s]” “truth” (ll. 19-20). This implies, both that wisdom and truth come out of health and cheerfulness, and that health and cheerfulness sustain wisdom and truth. Thus, to be healthy and happy is to be enlightened and wise because the elements of the world exist in a sort of closed system and depend on one another in like manner. Within this system, “One impulse from a vernal wood/May teach you more of man;/Of moral evil and of good,/Than all the sages can” (ll. 21-4).

In addition to understanding *The Tables Turned* as a poem that privileges the experiential knowledge available in the living leaves of trees over the intellectual knowledge available in the “barren leaves” (ll. 30) of books, it is thus possible to see *The Tables Turned* as a praise poem directed at a self-contained universe that is made up of units of meaning and presided over by nothing. Reading the poem in light of Hume’s rejection of infinity, the famous chastisement that “Our meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things;/—We murder to dissect” (ll. 26-8) can be read as a statement against infinite divisibility insofar as dissection beyond the “beauteous forms of things” murders these things, not only in an act of symbolic violence, but also in an act of “mis-shaping,” of changing or denying the perfect forms, or *minima*, that build up the world around us. Read this way, Wordsworth’s poetic

conflation of the quotidian and the transcendent can be understood not only in relation to David Hume's definition of infinity but also in relation to Benedict de Spinoza's claim that "of things as they are in themselves, God is really the cause insofar as he consists of infinite attributes."¹⁰⁰

PART TWO: THE POETICS OF INFINITY

Interlude:

kimonos, wrap-arounds and diatribes

In her 1935 masterpiece of the everyday, *Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous*, Lorine Niedecker pens a brief breath of a poem on each page of a tear-off calendar. We may never know whether she composed one tiny poem per month, or breathed the whole year into being at once. But there the year is, each image and idea linked to the others in a diary of thought, each poem surrounded by the names and numbers of days. Aside from their textual context, the poems themselves all share an air of timelessness, of the transient or ethereal. January 1935 reads "Wade all life/backward to its/source which/runs too far/ahead."¹⁰¹ Life moves in two directions, in this formulation. Many of the poems mark time in this circular and circulating way, illuminating the forward progression of the calendar, the flipping back through the calendar in order to read its observations, and the encircling numbers:

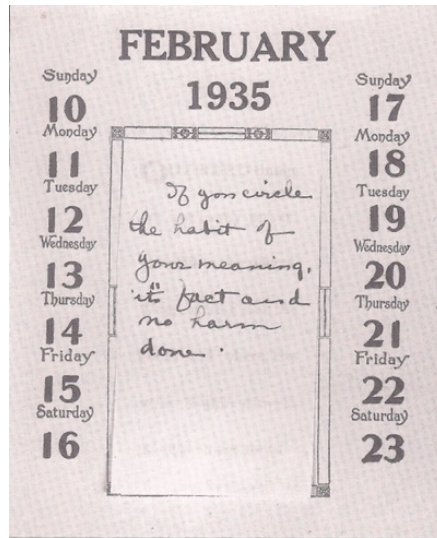


Fig. 2. Excerpt from Lorine Niedecker's *Next Year Or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous*. Printed in Lorine Niedecker, *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 44.

February 1935: If you circle/the habit of/your meaning,/it's fact and/no harm/done.¹⁰²

April 1935: I can always/go back to/fertilization,/kimonos, wrap-/arounds and/diatribes.¹⁰³

June 1935: The trouble/is: this stirs/a real mean- /ing./Humanity/is engaged—/on equal burial.¹⁰⁴

In *Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous*, the year is circular. The day is circular. Consider the title: *next year*, a year to come, that exists wholly in the future and yet delimits itself, that maps onto this year and thus allows us to imagine it, and that is, in this way, circular. Similarly, *I fly my rounds* denotes both to fly to all the places one tends to fly (taking the idiomatic definition of “my rounds”) and to fly in round shapes, in circles.

On a page marked January 1935, Niedecker writes: “The satisfactory/emphasis is on/revolving./Don't send/steadily; after/you know me/I'll be no one.”¹⁰⁵ In this short

poem's paradoxical consideration of what it means to be and to be known, one statement is unequivocal: "The satisfactory/emphasis is on/revolving." The most basic question of the social—how to be and be with—is only satisfactory when one revolves. This method of counting moments, which both self-consumes and self-propagates, renders the additive process of the calendar a particularly resonant form.

We can apply a similar reading to the poem on the "August 1935" calendar page: "Good deed, my/love. The ele-/ment of folk-/time. Nerves/are my past/monogamy,/said her arms/going farther./Rock me out."¹⁰⁶ Here again, the overlay of different possible syntaxes and an emphasis on recurrent time and the other help the reader to perceive the intimate, revolving notion of counting at the heart of this collection. Rocking back and forth, the poem aligns, through a line break, folk and time. "Nerves are my past/monogamy" and "Nerves/are my past [.] monogamy/said her arms"—here intimate commitment both is, and does away with, nerves. Being committed to another is also a commitment to time, since folk is time. The regular, ticking rhythm of "Good deed, my/love" brings a sense of time into the poem's first mention of intimacy, precipitating this thematic overlay. And the time at stake is both and neither progressive and/nor cyclical, a rocking out, a regular motion back and forth that somehow results in escape, be this an escape from nerves, or the past, or monogamy, or time. Soothing in their multiplicity, the rocking arms are somehow also "going farther." Captured within the already-lost moment of the calendar page, this metered repetition continually approaches something "out" and "far."

Niedecker once wrote to Zukofsky that "The Brontës had their moors, I have my marshes."¹⁰⁷ In counterpoint and contrast to Emily Brontë's [*I'm happiest when most away*],

Niedecker's *Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous* introduces the second act of the project at hand, not by destabilizing, but by re-stabilizing. Niedecker's series of brief verses (if they are verses, and not bits of prose the edges of which are delimited by the calendar's layout) here assert a refraction of Romantic understandings of infinity, enumeration, repetition, and transcendence. They embody this literary-historical engagement within—and thereby theorize—the calendar form. Encircled by numbers and counting towards new years, *Next Year or I Fly My Rounds, Tempestuous* encourages us to consider its precedents in theorizing the quotidian and the transcendent properties of cyclical time. Likewise, Niedecker's series may ask whether all poetry counts.

Chapter Three

The Poetics of the Quotidian

I. A Theory of the Particular

Dorothy Wordsworth's poem *Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* has become something of an ecocritical darling. Generally construed as an informal exercise in nature writing that anticipates some of today's ecology awareness, the poem presents a world separated from the greater world by water. Its creation via erosion is a mystery—"Loosed from its hold -- how no one knew."¹⁰⁸ Such a world-in-miniature is, at once, wild and domestic. Plants and insects live their lives upon it; though only the size of a "tiny room," the island is "a peopled world." Separate from the water in which it floats, the wild matter of the island functions as a room, a home, and a dwelling. And yet, adrift in water, the island also represents a world that may upon some future viewing appear to have "passed away." What stands to pass away is both visionary and tangible, for the poem claims that, even when the sight is lost, "the lost fragments shall remain/To fertilize some other ground." Thus, the image encodes a premature nostalgia. The vision will pass away, into the lake; the island will pass out of perception. Perspective is here doubled, as the text sees the isle from the shore, and from an imagined memory projected onto the lake from the shore in the future. Along with the mystery of its origin, the island contains a vision of its own loss.

Attending to the poem's emphasis on cycle and temporality,¹⁴ Kenneth Cervelli argues in *Dorothy Wordsworth's Ecology* that "Dorothy's description of the entire cycle represents a classic early manifestation of ecological thinking[.]" citing Kroeber's understanding of an ecosystem as involving a "constantly self-transforming continuity[.]"¹⁰⁹ Such a critical apparatus is very timely—so timely, in fact, that it obfuscates the poem's actual philosophical stakes. While I would not discount the resonance between *Floating Island* and a twenty-first - century eco-focus, I argue that such an act of interdisciplinary thinking covers up the extent to which the poem, in its various material contexts, already engages disparate discourses.

Dorothy Wordsworth's poetry, which occurs in and as her daily writings, not only manifests the traces of certain intellectual-historical discourses of the day but also intervenes in them. In the case of *Floating Island at Hawkshead, an Incident in the Schemes of Nature*, the poem takes up John Locke's conceptual collusion of infinity and identity, and William Wordsworth's response to this theory. William Wordsworth's response to Locke's infinity therefore provides the backdrop for an historical investigation, which is to say rereading, of the poem. When read in its material contexts, first as one of a number of "Sick-bed consolations" penned in Dorothy Wordsworth's commonplace book, and then subsequently published alongside and partially incorporated into a poem by Sara Hutchinson heavily edited by the Wordsworths to read as a dramatic swansong, the poem shows itself to be a religious allegory theorizing the afterlife in relation to natural patterns of daily change. The effusion

¹⁴ Viewing this emphasis as more symbolic than naturalist, Lilla Maria Crisafulli argues that "[h]ere the poet is celebrating the natural cycles that traditionally stand for the perpetual renewal of life, yet the fragility of this floating island seems to overshadow quite another fate, one marked by death rather than rebirth"; Crisafulli also cites Anne K. Mellor's understanding of the poem as "a metaphor of a fleeting self[.]" [Lilla Maria Crisafulli, "Within or Without? Problems of Perspective in Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Dorothy Wordsworth," in *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropoli (Amsterdam New York: Rodopi, 2007), 59-60.]

also emerges as Wordsworth's response to her brother's interpretation of Locke's notion of infinity. I shall not abandon ecocriticism just yet, however; rather, I will ask whether that contemporary set of concerns can find traction in the poem when it is considered historically.

We begin, then, with textual history, which is to say, by tracing the floating island through its various permutations in Dorothy Wordsworth's archive. Following *Floating Island* from Wordsworth's commonplace book to the poem's publication illuminates the text's philosophical stakes and elucidates its relationship to practices of daily writing and to the concept of the quotidian. *Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* appears in the commonplace book¹¹⁰ with that title and in print, in William Wordsworth's 1842 *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years; Including The Borderers, A Tragedy*. There it is titled *Floating Island*, and this title is followed by a note that reads, "These lines are by the Author of the Address to the Wind, &c. published heretofore along with my Poems. Those to a Redbreast are by a deceased female Relative [this refers to the previous poem, by Sara Hutchinson]."¹¹¹

In the commonplace book, *Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* occurs two-thirds of the way down a page, separated by a row of dashes from the conclusion of *Lines Intended for Edith Southey's Album, Composed in June 1832 in recollection of a request made by her some years ago, & of my own promise till now unfulfilled*.¹¹² *Lines Intended for Edith Southey's Album* represents an extended meditation on what it means to face death, examining human weakness and love of life in relation to the "unknown reward" of "eternal life." The poem concludes: "Then pray with me that in the hour/When here on earth [written above: below]

I must no longer dwell,/Must part from Friends, & this fair world,/I may in calmness speak the last farewell!]. Following such a prayer for peace and faith at the time of death, *Floating Island at Hawkshead* presents *An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* in which fragments of a departed world “fertilize some other ground,” in which the destruction of a finite world is inevitable when understood in time. Indeed, occurring in the commonplace book just after a long meditation on death, the text seems already to convey the idea of memory—read in this light, the text remembers what it was like to anticipate a memory. Thus, in its local context in the commonplace book, *Floating Island at Hawkshead*, *An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* may be understood as answering the final lines intended for Edith Southey’s album insofar as the poem presents a metaphor for life cycle and afterlife, community and inevitable fragmentation. Such abstract themes, however, are treated as day-to-day changes. Thus, if *Floating Island at Hawkshead* replies to the prayers in *Lines Intended for Edith Southey’s Album*, it does so by invoking the daily changes in the landscape, the monthly or yearly changes in a view.

In the left-hand margin of the second page containing *Floating Island at Hawkshead*, we find the poem presented in hieroglyph:

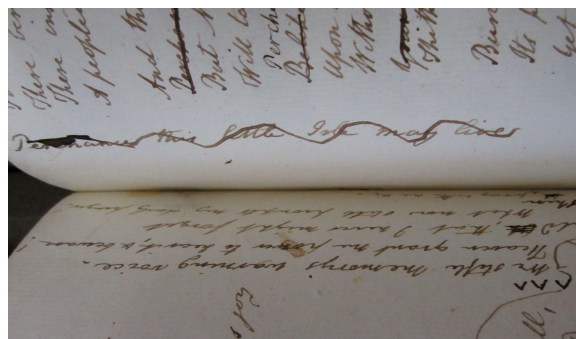


Fig. 3. Manuscript page from Dorothy Wordsworth’s commonplace book, printed with permission of the Wordsworth Trust. DCMS 120.26.

Presumably a possible revision of the line “This little Island may survive[,]” the margin contains the words “Perchance this little Isle may live[,]” crossed out with a particularly wave-like swipe of ink. In *Floating Island at Hawkshead*, the island is afloat in a sea of that which both sustains it and determines its eventual destruction. The notion that “Perchance this little Isle may live” is negated, crossed out, by a wave of ink. Writing marks time, and attending to the passing of days evokes those changes that time renders inevitable.

This hieroglyphic bit of rejected revision faces a stanza written in the opposite margin and meant to be inserted into *Lines Intended for Edith Southey's Album*: “We stifle memory’s warning voice,/Heaven grant me power to hear it, + beware!/Would that I never might forget/What now still prompts my daily prayer!/Then pray with me &c.” In the context of the commonplace book, then, we can read *Floating Island at Hawkshead* as a reminder of that which prompts daily prayer. Even though the world or home or community represented by the island is ephemeral, there is other ground to fertilize.

Broadening our view of the poem within the commonplace book further supports this reading, as the poems *Lines intended for my Niece's Album, To Dora Wordsworth* (on an insert), *Lines intended for Edith Southey's Album, Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature*, and *Thoughts on my sick-bed* seem to be entered into the commonplace book at once, judging based on the consistency of handwriting and ink quality. Before this set of poems, one finds a sort of title page inscribed: “Sick-bed Consolations_composed during the Spring of the year 1832__[.]” Understanding *Floating Island* as one of a collection of “Sick-bed Consolations” means recognizing the poem as occasional—the occasion being an act of

consolation, or self-consolation. While the twenty-first-century reader may find comfort in reading the poem as a statement of deep ecology, in its original context the poem functions as a deeply religious allegory.

The pages immediately following *Floating Island at Hawkshead, An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* in the commonplace book contain the poem *Thoughts on my sick-bed*,¹¹³ which in this version concludes:

No prisoner in this lonely room,
I saw the green Banks of the Wye,
Recalling thy prophetic words,
Bard, Brother, Friend from infancy!

No need of motion, or of strength,
Or even the breathing air:
_I thought of Nature's loveliest scenes;
And with Memory I was there.

Read after, with, and against *Floating Island at Hawkshead*, these stanzas recast the memory of a natural scene, not as that which will serve when time has passed for the scene, but as that which will serve when time has passed for the perceiver. Whether the natural world is viewed first-hand or recalled by word, thought, and poetry, it is memory that links dweller and landscape.

Considered in the context of *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years*, Wordsworth's poem, here entitled *Floating Island*, is loosed from the hold of the commonplace book, though not from the hold of mortal and religious themes. This poem (here attributed to the less-gendered D. W.) follows S. H.'s swansong, *To A Redbreast — (In Sickness)*, which asks a redbreast to "my requiem sing/nor fail to be the harbinger/Of everlasting Spring." Additionally, the

introduction to *Floating Island* retroactively introduces *To A Redbreast — (In Sickness)*, thus linking the two poems and asking the reader to remember the previous poem as prelude to D.W.’s poem. *Floating Island*, then, opens with an invocation of memory, which may allow us to read it, in this new context, as an elegy for S. H.

Indeed, *Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years* not only invokes the auto-elegiac tone of the “deceased female Relative” in its introduction to *Floating Island*; the text also cultivates that tone in S. H.’s poem itself. The proof copies of the book, corrected in Mary Wordsworth’s hand, show the transmutation of the second stanza from:

And I not destined to enjoy
 The promise of thy song ;
The thought shall not the charms destroy
 Which to thy strain belong.

to:

Though I, alas! may ne’er enjoy
 The promise in thy song ;
A charm, *that* thought can not destroy,
 Doth to thy strain belong.¹¹⁴

In the published version as opposed to the original proof, the emphatic italics and interjected “alas!” highlighting the first-person pronoun dramatize the text and may highlight similar themes in *Floating Island*. It is tempting, then, to read the brief poem by William Wordsworth that follows *Floating Island* on the page of the printed text as a praise poem elevating these two heavenly texts and claiming that they are too perfect to be compared:

The Crescent-moon, the Star of Love,

Glories of evening, as ye there are seen
With but a span of sky between --
Speak one of you, my doubts remove,
Which is the attendant Page and which the Queen?

Floating Island at Hawkshead, *An Incident in the Schemes of Nature* and *Floating Island* both appear in material-historical contexts that highlight the poem's function as a religious allegory expressing belief in the afterlife. When taken on its own, the poem tells a simple story: of a small, inhabited bit of the world, at once domestic and wild, changing over time. Read in its material-historical contexts, however, *Floating Island* demonstrates a religious and philosophical theorization of what it means for a bit of land to crumble into water, of what it means for the landscape to shift as the seasons change, of what it means to take a walk one day and see things as they are.

To return to Locke and William Wordsworth, we see that such a theorization does not come out of nowhere. Rather, it recasts and reshapes Wordsworth's religious reworking of Locke's twinned understandings of infinity and identity. We recall how, applying Locke's inductive model to belief in the afterlife, William Wordsworth in *Upon Epitaphs* describes a child who watches a stream flow continuously and comes to believe in the infinity of his soul in the afterlife. In *Upon Epitaphs*, the observer of nature identifies with the infinitely flowing stream, and realizes that his spirit is as infinite as the stream. Here the moment of identification with nature is powerful, inductive, and inevitable—in short, it facilitates a broad philosophical understanding of the interconnectedness of all things with each other and with God. The spirit of the child is crafted in the same mould as the running stream, and both must have infinite receptacles in the ocean or in the afterlife.

Dorothy Wordsworth alters this formulation in *Floating Island at Hawkshead, an Incident in the Schemes of Nature*. In the poem, the observer achieves the broad philosophical perspective attributed to the child in *Upon Epitaphs*. However, this perspective is activated and gratified, not via identification with the “great and sublime in nature[,]”¹¹⁵ but rather via identification with nature’s humble, mortal forms. The poem’s grandiose opening stanza:

Harmonious Powers with Nature work
On sky, earth, river, lake, and sea:
Sunshine and storm, whirlwind and breeze
All in one duteous task agree.

Slips into the small, the simple, the quotidian example:

Once did I see a slip of earth,
By throbbing waves long undermined,
Loosed from its hold; —how no one knew
But all might see it float, obedient to the wind.

When we read the poem as a religious allegory theorizing the afterlife, we see the mortal being represented, not by the broad, mysterious lake or the stream flowing perpetually to the river to the sea, but rather by a “slip of earth” that “float[s], obedient to the wind.” The mortal being here does not see the infinity of personal identity by observing the infinity of nature; by contrast, the mortal being recognizes her or his vulnerability and insignificance via identification with the small, dissolving island, and even with the insects that live upon that island, for whom the island represents the world entire. The limited scope of daily life symbolized by the microcosmic interactions of the natural world becomes the key to spiritual transcendence. The island-as-mortal moves, not towards an “infinite receptacle,” but towards the promise that “the lost fragments shall remain,/To fertilize some other ground.” The afterlife, then, is described not as the expansive and cohesive continuation of

identity but rather as the promise that what little one has done or had will come to good. Here we find a poetics of divine humility—rather than figuratively elevate the little island, Wordsworth literally sinks the island in the lake. Consolation comes with the promise of divine dissolution of selfhood. In this way, Wordsworth anticipates both Emily Brontë’s poem in praise of “spirit wandering wide/through infinite immensity” (*I’m Happiest When Most Away*), ll. 7-8) and later modern experiments in search of poetic selflessness.

While this analysis may call to mind the tired critical formulation by which one compares the works of William and Dorothy Wordsworth with the aim of upsetting canonical hierarchy, this is not my goal. Indeed, I must resist the temptation to offer a bevy of examples from William Wordsworth’s poetry that exemplify just the sort of humility and attention to detail found in *Floating Island*. Rather, I offer the above comparison in order to show Dorothy and William Wordsworth in conversation—with each other and with Locke. The conjunction of material and intellectual history reveals the intellectual-historical intervention of *Floating Island* as well as the extent to which the poem is “interdisciplinary”—engaging religious and philosophical debates—even before any critical apparatus is imposed on it.

I return now to the ecocritical mode, for *Floating Island* has more to offer the ecocritic when the poem is taken in its various historical contexts. While the poem may anticipate our contemporary awareness of ecological patterns and environmental interconnectedness, the poem’s “ecopoetic” intervention lies not in its portrayal of the grand scheme of things but rather in its praise of self-identification with the fragile and vulnerable aspects of a landscape. In Wordsworth’s poem, one praises the divine and thus consoles oneself; one does this by empathizing with insects, with a clot of dirt, with the tufts of grass on an ephemeral island

formation. The poem's proto-ecological gesture thus lies in its assertion that empathy with all life, and with the fragility of all life, is essential to one's understanding of divinity and self-identity. Dorothy Wordsworth's intellectual-historical intervention is thus to ground Locke's description of the building up of identity within an understanding of natural breaking down. If *Floating Island* helps us to be better environmentalists, it does so by reminding us to take on the plight of each creature as if it were our own, because it is.¹⁵

I will conclude my reading of *Floating Island* with a few observations about a different poem by Dorothy Wordsworth that treats many of the same themes. The untitled poem, which begins [*Dear Vale*], appears only once in Wordsworth's archive, in the back of a book containing notes towards William Wordsworth's *Memoir of the Rev. Robert Walker*. The notebook, written primarily in Dorothy Wordsworth's hand, contains notes about Walker, transcriptions of graves in the churchyards of Ulpha, Ashdale, and other towns, and extracts from the Register of Loewswater; these notes record a tour taken by Dorothy and William in 1804. However, since William would have dug out the notebook to write his memoir in 1820, by which time Dorothy's poetic practice was active, that might be a better approximate date for the poem. [*Dear Vale*] is written in Mary Wordsworth's hand without attribution, however the consistency of its form, themes, and tone with Dorothy Wordsworth's poetry suggest that it was transcribed, and indeed, very many of William and Dorothy's poems were transcribed by another member of the Wordsworth household. Since the poem is not in

¹⁵ I argue that this is the most historically-grounded naturalist sensibility one can plausibly attribute to Dorothy Wordsworth's poem while recognizing that the twenty-first century ecocritic might take issue with this form of ecology awareness insofar as it insists on anthropomorphizing the landscape and placing human consciousness at the center of all conceptualizations of nature. To this objection I answer that, if ecocriticism is to benefit from its engagement with literary history, it must aim to recover diverse models of nature intrinsic to literary writing rather than to retro-project its own idealizations.

print anywhere (to my knowledge, I am the first to have dug it out), I will reproduce it here in its entirety:

Dear Vale when Spring thy charms unfold
How pleasing tis to view
Thy flowery meads and blooming groves
Thy mountains[?] vernal hue

Or when triumphant Summer comes
How sweet it is to stray
And hear thy happy nymphs and swains
To labour tune their lay

Or when ripe Autumn's tawny vest
Adorns each field and grove
How charming mid thy plenteous stores
With thankful heart to rove.
But when stern Winter's freezing breath
Arrests thy howling rills
How awful then it is to view
Thy hoary mantled hills

Thy rills proclaim our changeful state
Like them is human life
And as thy lakes, so is the grave
Where ends our wordly [*sic*.]¹⁶ strife

And as thy waters rest not there
But seek the expanded sea
Even so shall man's existence flow
To dread Eternity

O, may it be my happy lot
In Thee to end my days
And undisturbed with joy to sing
Our great creator[?]'s praise

In this poem as in *Floating Island*, the observation of the natural world leads one to have faith in the afterlife. As in *Upon Epitaphs*, waters “seeking the expanded sea” provide the viewer

¹⁶ The substitution of “wordly” for “worldly”—a substitution that could have occurred in Dorothy’s dictation, in Mary’s hearing, or in Mary’s transcription—creates an apposition between writerly attempt and worldly strife, between poetry and daily life.

with an analogy—indeed, with a Lockean induction—on which to base this belief. However, the poem focuses, not on the perpetual current of an individual stream, but rather on the earth eroded by trickling rivulets. “Thy rills proclaim our changeful state/like them is human life” thus suggests, as in the case of the floating island, that human life is an ephemeral incident, analogous to runoff dividing into trickling streams over eroding earth. As these waters seek the lake that symbolizes the grave and the sea that symbolizes “dread Eternity,” they run together, the singularity of each rill dissolving like the ground into which it carves its path. The island dissolving into the lake leaves a memory for the perceiver; the rills write their stories on the earth even as they run together and dissolve into the schemes of nature.

To read *Floating Island* and [*Dear Vale*] historically, we must take into account a peculiar conjunction of material and intellectual history. In so doing, we not only recontextualize and thereby decipher the religious and philosophical projects of these poems but also begin to think through the Romantic archive as an intellectual-historical nexus. Just as the material forms of the archive reveal the text’s intellectual intervention, so too does the intellectual-historical context (in this case, William Wordsworth’s remaking of Locke’s formulation of enumeration and infinity) facilitate a literary-critical approach to, for example, Dorothy Wordsworth’s commonplace book—a text at once poetic and prosaic, quotidian and literary, personal and communal. When we interpret such an artifact as a document of intellectual history, we motivate the critical study of commonplace books and other nineteenth-century forms of daily and/or women’s writing. In so doing, we can expand our definition of Romantic poetry, not through recuperation, but by rethinking.

II. *Communal Genres*

Dorothy Wordsworth is most famous for her journals, and critical investigations of her work must and do address questions of everyday life. We can heighten our attention to these concerns by taking into account nineteenth-century poetic formulations of infinity, including Dorothy Wordsworth's own. This context can help us think about how Wordsworth elevates and in some cases theorizes the quotidian as a formal and philosophical concept. Extrapolating from these connections, we can reconsider Wordsworth's archive, an archive within which poetic, aesthetic, and daily writings are often inseparable.

In *Floating Island* and [*Dear Vale*], Dorothy Wordsworth theorizes the quotidian as a foundation for religious experience. Such a philosophical argument is of a piece with Wordsworth's practice of daily writing. Keeping in mind Locke's theory of enumeration, we can investigate how Dorothy Wordsworth's practice of writing poetry in and as daily writing accumulates responses, repetitions, and fragments, and how these ephemeral writings add up to a textual embodiment, and indeed formation, of community.

Dorothy Wordsworth may not have written her own poems in her earlier journals; however, her later writings, most notably her commonplace book, later journals, and albums, are the main sources of her poetry. In Wordsworth's journals of 1824-1835, for example, drafts and bits of poems edge in on the space used for journaling, sometimes appearing in palimpsest with journal entries. For example, as Levin notes, Wordsworth in her journal of February 12th, 1831 through September 7th, 1833 pens a journal over her poem *Thoughts on my Sick Bed*, so that the poem, occurring under or covered up by, say, the phrase "short-lived attack of

spasms in night,” takes on the status of diary and writing cure.¹¹⁶ In this same, hand-stitched journal, we may find: a recipe for cough medicine; a penciled epitaph with monetary accounts written over it in pen; two of Dorothy Wordsworth’s poems; two of William Wordsworth’s poems; and a fair number of epitaphs including names, dates, and the particular church-yard where they were found.¹¹⁷ Such shrapnel of texts encountered every day accompanies the journal, and poetry in various forms makes up a large part of this daily writing. In a similar collusion of genre, the notebook in which Wordsworth wrote her journal of January 21st-August 9th, 1830 is sewn from rejected fair copy pages of one of her travel narratives, and accountings crowd in on the journal from both sides, tracking purchases of gingerbread and night caps, coach hires and lace.¹¹⁸ In the commonplace book of 1820-1836, Wordsworth’s poetic writings occur, not only in fair and working copies, but also as marginalia and response to transcribed or copied texts. Thus, in Wordsworth’s oeuvre, poetic writing and daily writing are inseparable, as are poetic and daily texts. These texts—daily and poetic, personal, communal, and interpersonal—enact Romantic sociality.

In her commonplace book, Dorothy Wordsworth conflates poetic and daily writings in a communal textual space that both imitates and activates forms of community. Extrapolating from the form and content of such a book, we may ask whether combining poetic and daily writing develops an aesthetics, poetics, or elevation of the quotidian. These questions resonate with some of the key concerns of Dorothy Wordsworth’s poetry. For example, in *Floating Island* and in [*Dear Vale*], we find Wordsworth’s response to her brother’s remaking of Locke’s definition of infinity. This intervention involves grounding spiritual experience in moments of self-identification with the fragility of the natural world, and in the formation of a schematic in which transcendent belief supervenes upon moments of humble interaction

with the details of day-to-day life. In her travel writings, Dorothy Wordsworth makes a parallel move, this time entering into the Romantic discourse on the sublime, a discourse that grew out of Enlightenment debates about infinity.

Like her journals and her commonplace book, Wordsworth's travel writings incorporate descriptions of aesthetic experience into a record of daily life. Recognizing the repeating patterns within which Wordsworth's travel writings encode both her poetics of the quotidian and her understanding of genre elucidates her intervention in Romantic period aesthetics. When we read Wordsworth's travel writings as generically, formally, and overtly aesthetic expressions, we find daily interactions elevated to the realm of aesthetic experience; moreover, we see the category of the quotidian come into play as a predictable aspect of sublime experience.

In general, evocations of the sublime in Wordsworth's travel writing follow a set pattern within which the sublime experience resolves in a moment of communal, quotidian interaction. In counterpoint to Kant's Mathematical Sublime, the mind is recalled from the fragmenting aesthetic experience, not by recognizing itself, but by recognizing others. Daily, group activities and social interactions play a role in the aesthetic category insofar as they represent a final stage of or resolution to sublime experience. In this way, daily and social activities are raised to the level of the aesthetic, and the sublime is brought back down to earth.

Examples of this "social sublime" occur throughout Wordsworth's travel writings. Take the following passage from *Journal of a Tour on the Continent*:¹¹⁹

The road ascends directly from the bridge and is conducted along the range of hills bordering the river which flows below on our right hand. The town is seen to great advantage from the road; and the river's banks all the way exhibit a succession of pleasant houses, gardens, woods, and vineyards. The first visible indication of our approach to the cataracts was the sublime tossing of vapour above them, at the termination of a curved reach of the river. Upon the woody hill, above that tossing vapour and foam, we saw the old chateau familiar to us in prints, though *there* represented in connexion with the Falls themselves, and by us now seen at the end of the rapid, yet majestic, sweep of the river; where the ever springing, tossing clouds are all that the eye beholds of the wonderful commotion. But an awful sound ascends from the concealed abyss: and it would almost seem like irreverent intrusion, if a stranger at his first approach to this spot, should not pause and listen before he pushes forward to seek the revealing of the mystery. Making a little descent we drove into the courtyard of the chateau, and thence walked to the summer-house, which looks down upon the cataracts. After the subsiding of our first astounding sensations, we talked with an old man and woman, who had followed us. They keep a tavern in part of the chateau [...]¹²⁰

In this representative example, the aesthetic experience resolves in social interaction. The penultimate sentence in the above quote summarizes Wordsworth's quotidian sublime: "After the subsiding of our first astounding sensations, we talked with an old man and woman, who had followed us." The sublime experience ends in a social experience, and it is unclear whether that social experience represents another stage of the aesthetic experience or simply the conclusion of that experience. In this example, talking with the "old man and woman" occurs after "our first astounding sensations[,]" which seems to imply that the social counterpoint to sublime experience involves a second astounding sensation, its own aesthetic value. Indeed, that Wordsworth's descriptions of sublimity so often resolve in daily/social interaction seems to suggest that these interactions are part of the aesthetic experience.¹⁷

¹⁷ For an in-depth discussion of critical theorizations of the female sublime and potential points of relation to Dorothy Wordsworth's writing, see Helen Boden's 1998 article, "Matrilinear Journalising: Mary and Dorothy Wordsworth's 1820 continental tours and the female sublime." Rather than focus on how the sublime may be

We may notice a similar conjunction of sublime experience with daily, social life in

Wordsworth's description of the iconic Mont Blanc:

Oh! that I could describe,—nay, that I could *remember the sublime spectacle of the pinnacles and towers of Mont Blanc while we were travelling through the vale, long deserted of the sunshine that still lingered on those summits! A large body of moving clouds covered a portion of the side of the mountain. The pinnacles and towers above them seemed as if they stood in the sky;—of no soft aerial substance, but appearing, even at that great distance, as they really are, huge masses of solid stone, raised by Almighty Power, and never, but by the same Power, to be destroyed. The village of Chamouny is on the opposite (the north-western) side of the vale; in this part considerably widened. Having left the lanes and thickets, we slanted across a broad unfenced level, narrowing into a sort of village green, with its maypole, as in England, but of giant stature, a pine of the Alps. The collected village of Chamouny and large white Church appeared before us, above the river, on a gentle elevation of pasture ground, sloping from woody steeps behind. Our walk beside the suburban cottages was altogether new, and very interesting:—a busy scene of preparation from the night! Women driving home their goats and cows,—labourers returning with their tools,—sledges (an unusual sight in Alpine valleys) dragged by lusty men, the old looking on,—young women knitting; and ruddy children at play,—(a race how different from the languishing youth of the hot plains of the Valais!)—Cattle bells continually tinkling—no silence, no stillness here,—yet the bustle and the various sounds leading to thoughts of quiet, rest, and silence.¹²¹

remade or subverted in the writings of Dorothy Wordsworth, my argument here seeks to understand how Wordsworth's travel writings engage with the various signposts of their genre, including dominant aesthetic categories, while at the same time theorizing the quotidian.

Additionally, in her 1995 monograph *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818*, Elizabeth Bohls points out the link between daily life and landscape aesthetics in Wordsworth's travel writings. Bohls notes that “[l]ike the *Grasmere Journals, Recollections [of a Tour Made in Scotland]* insists that land is inhabited by people with practical needs, feelings, desires, subjectivities, and voices; both texts thus counteract to some extent the dehumanizing tendency of landscape aesthetics.” In the context of Bohls' argument, the payoff of this observation is that “in *Recollections*, recurrent, oddly intrusive images and tropes trouble the balance that the *Journals* had painstakingly achieved. Travel forces Wordsworth to confront the mediatedness of the natural world with which she had lived in comfortable intimacy at home. Images from the city and its consumer culture, as well as recurrent allusions to the overseas Other of colonial exploration, manifest the intimate fragmentation of this female aesthetic subject.” I argue that Wordsworth's formulaic inclusion of the social/human/quotidian realm in her travel writing marks her intervention in aesthetic discourse, whether or not this intervention is necessarily or meaningfully biographical or gendered. [Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 171.]

While in this passage Wordsworth claims that she struggles to “describe” or even “remember” the sublime spectacle of Mont Blanc, this description slips easily into an excitedly punctuated recounting of the village, in which the energy of the place has a self-effacing quality, as “the bustle and the various sounds lead[...] to thoughts of quiet, rest, and silence.” The sublime aspects of the natural world “appearing as they really are,” the daily and social space of the village proves a no less effective, and perhaps more memorable, aesthetic experience. Additionally, by evoking tranquility through its hustle and bustle, the sensory experience of the village offers its own aesthetic effect.

In keeping with their genre, Dorothy Wordsworth’s travel writings contain descriptions of sublime vistas and views, and of corresponding aesthetic experiences. (These descriptions of the sublime experience may have been encouraged by William Wordsworth, as Dorothy wrote to Catherine Clarkson of her brother’s request that she “amplify” her observations.¹²²) These descriptions tend to conclude with moments of daily social interaction, a pattern that has the effect both of raising the quotidian to the aesthetic realm and of enfolding sublime experience in the patterns of daily life. This pattern, the “social sublime,” also shows up at a structural level when we take into account *Journal of a Tour on the Continent* as a made object. Sewn and bound with commissioned illustrations and hand-written pages, *Tour on the Continent*, neatly scripted, is a one-of-a-kind, created book. It is a tome of travel writing, at once a homemade project and an imitation of a commodity.¹⁸ Thus the *Journal of a Tour* is

¹⁸ Pamela Woof accounts for the project of making the finished journals as follows: “By the end of August 1821, by working frequently, ‘very hard from ten o’clock in the morning till dinner time, at four,’ her Journal was finished, but still so roughly, Dorothy thought, ‘that I shall rewrite it in a *plain hand*.’ It was not until March 1822 that, in Dorothy’s view, it was really ready for readers, and then, she thought, owing to its length, it will be ‘dull reading.’ She asked [Henry] Crabb Robinson to procure prints, ‘a set of Swiss Costumes,’ clearly to enliven the further fair copy that she would go on to have made by ‘a young friend’ and bound in two

both daily writing insofar as it represents an accounting of events penned into a personal notebook, and a tome of Romantic travel literature, an interjection into a genre. Furthermore, the second volume concludes with a table of contents buffered by two examples of the genre, *Extracts concerning the Pass of the Simplon from Brockeden's Illustrations of the Passes of the alps* and *Extracts from "The Alpenstock, or Sketches of Swiss Scenery and Manners by Charles Joseph Latrobe."*¹²³ These extracts may be said to act as statements of form, or genre, here rendered social. On the one hand, such extracts provide a sort of genre standard or statement of the genre towards which the book writes (both literally and figuratively); this act of generic definition also renders *Tour on the Continent* dialectical insofar as it puts one act of travel writing into conversation with another.¹²⁴

Following these extracts, the volume concludes with two notes by Henry Crabb Robinson, in his hand.¹²⁵ Whether based in truth or novels in miniature, these notes, the latter dated June 1833, attest to an extensive acquaintance with and/or information about various characters met on the trip. The first note follows one Mr. Graham through crime and ruin, including an act of swindling the travelers, to his eventual demise in a duel. The second offers a more flattering portrait of three brothers, paying special attention to one who lost his money without losing his character, and who Crabb Robinson claims to have visited in Fiume in 1829. Whether these notes strike the reader as gossipy and far-fetched additions to the travel narrative or as factual addendum, their effect on the form of the travel narrative is to close with an invocation of social ties sustained over time, and of an aestheticizing (and even novelistic) perspective on the details of those lives—known and unknown—that one crosses when one travels and meets new people. Thus, Dorothy Wordsworth's extended

handsome volumes in 1827." [Pamela Woof, *William, Mary and Dorothy: The Wordsworths' Continental Tour of 1820* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2008), 3.]

travel narrative—at once a journal and a book—concludes with claims about form and claims about social connection.¹⁹

Taken as text and in material-historical context, Wordsworth's *Journal of a Tour on the Continent* reiterates and exemplifies her social sublime, the notion that daily, social interaction can act as antidote, resolution, result, and opposite to—and powerful example of—aesthetic experience. Wordsworth's direct intervention in Romantic aesthetics mirrors her poetic intervention in debates about infinity. The moment of quotidian empathy, in both formulations, functions as both the lowest and the highest principle—an experience of elevating the quotidian at which we can locate the key to religious or aesthetic experience. In the material forms of Wordsworth's poetic, daily and travel writings, we discover her intellectual-historical interventions.

IV. *The Grasmere Journals: A Counter-History*

By way of a coda to this chapter, I will turn to the *Grasmere Journals* in order to elucidate the extent to which these journals contain a nascent poetics insofar as they manipulate and master the daily, or enumerated time, as a literary form.²⁰ Pamela Woof has noted that

¹⁹ Similarly, Catherine Clarkson's fair copy of Wordsworth's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* concludes with Clarkson's sentimental note about the process of transcription and then with fair copies, in Clarkson's hand, of several of Wordsworth's poems. In this case, the final, handwritten book copy of the travel narrative concludes with commentary about the making of the material object as a social act, in this case an act of friendship, and then moves seamlessly into poetic writing.

²⁰ Opening the first volume of *The Grasmere Journals* immediately locates one's reading in questions of daily life and enumerated time, as one finds a dairy that begins as and among literal accountings. Numbers and sums fill the inside cover and the margin above the first journal entry, and the accounting for days mimics and illuminates the numbers that surround it. For an admirably detailed accounting of the biographies of each of the four Grasmere journals, including historical and biographical contexts for the sums, lists, notes and sketches that dapple their inside covers, please see Pamela Woof's thoroughly researched endnotes to her edited volume of *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*. [Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals including The Alfoxden Journal*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).] For now, we note

Wordsworth “by no means always kept her Journal daily[.]” citing the following example of “confusion” as just one small sign.¹²⁶ The dates in question are July 29th and July 30th, 1800:

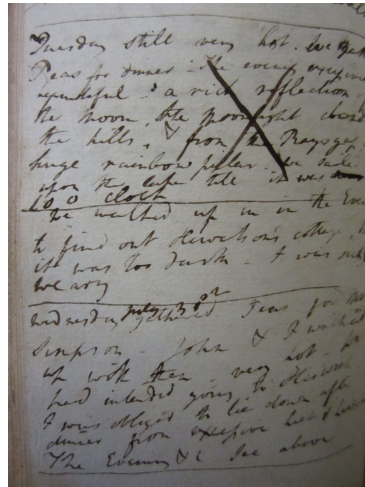


Fig. 4. Excerpt from Dorothy Wordsworth’s Grasmere journals, printed with permission of the Wordsworth Trust. DCMS 20.

Tuesday still very hot. ~~We gathered peas for dinner in the evening very beautiful. a rich reflection of the moon. The mournful clouds & the hills. & from the Rays of a huge rainbow pillar We sailed upon the lake till it was 10 o'clock~~

 We walked up in the Evening to find out Hewetson’s cottage but it was too dark. I was sick & weary.

 Wednesday July 30th gathered peas for Mrs Simpson—John & I walked up with them—very hot—Wm had intended going to Keswick. I was obliged to lie down after dinner from excessive heat & headach
 The Evening &c see above

Here, the events of Wednesday are, at first, falsely attributed to Tuesday; the error is then corrected. Beyond ensuring the accuracy of the record, there is a literary form at stake here—that of the journal as a genre of organized daily life, of fossilized memory. Journal,

that those texts that we compile under the title *The Grasmere Journals* represent a more formal or aesthetic definition of quotidian writing scripted alongside more mundane and fleeting acts of daily writing. [DCMS 20.]

then, refers not only to writing practice but also to literary genre. Viewed as a precursor to Wordsworth's later poetic experiments, *The Grasmere Journals* begin to take on a poetics of the quotidian, to display a use of the form of daily writing to achieve certain literary effects. "Rays of a huge rainbow pillar," then, follow from darkness; it is not the other way around. There is a formal aesthetics to the passage of the days.

Naturally, Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals* occur among and in response to poetry. Lucy Newlyn argues:

The material appearance of the notebooks, with Dorothy's entries interleaving drafts of William's poems, shows how her experiment in life-writing took place, literally, in and amongst his work, and how her identity as a writer was bound up in that of her brother. The journal celebrates their shared aesthetic and political credo. It can and should be read alongside the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 and 1800, as an expression of beliefs tested by empirical observation, and implemented in daily life."¹²⁷

The poetic phrase "interleaving" may make a bit of an overstatement—While William Wordsworth's words appear in all four of the journals, his handwriting appears in only three, and in only one are his writings and the writings of Dorothy Wordsworth truly interspersed (in the other two, W. Wordsworth's writings more or less take up one or two small sections of the notebook). Even so, the sharing of the notebooks and occasional "interleaving" could be interpreted as a precursor to the development of Wordsworth's own poems in, as, among, and in response to daily writing and to the writing of those with whom she shared a literal and a literary community. Newlyn's argument that both *The Grasmere Journals* and *Lyrical Ballads* represent "[t]he belief that living itself was a form of experiment, in which personal and political commitments could be put into practice"¹²⁸ suggests that *The Grasmere Journals* participates in discussions about the relationship between literary language and daily

life. Perhaps in response to such debates, *The Grasmere Journals* asserts a formal and aesthetic fidelity to the rhythm and number of days.

Dorothy Wordsworth's inclusion, in *The Grasmere Journals*, of moments of poetic beauty in a day-by-day accounting represents the *Journals'* poetics, a poetics that anticipates the sites, spaces, and projects of Wordsworth's later poetry and daily writing. To elevate poetic moments out of their daily contexts is to subvert the whole of Wordsworth's project. This is only one of many reasons why it is so easy to find fault with one particularly scandalous act of editorial carte blanche, that of Hyman Eigerman in his 1940 *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth*. There, Eigerman mines Wordsworth's journals and travel writings for moments of a certain modernist sensibility, which he then breaks into brief, Imagist lyrics. Describing his method in the book's preface, Eigerman writes that his process has involved "lifting out of the context those passages of her journals which have seemed to me to rise into poetry, preserving the words and the word order of the original, only marshaling them within the free-verse form which was un-known to their author."¹²⁹ Much fault has been found with such an act of appropriation, and I do not defend Eigerman's editorial ethic; even so, we may consider whether *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth* might be read as an act of experimental criticism. For example, one of Eigerman's "poems" taken from *The Grasmere Journals* shows us exactly what is not in the original, and this in turn highlights what is there. Here is Eigerman's poem eleven:

11

Grasmere very solemn
In the last glimpse of twilight.
It calls home the heart
To quietness.¹³⁰

It is ironic that Eigerman finds peace within this moment in *The Grasmere Journals*, given the sentence's context in the original entry:

Friday Morning [16th]. Warm & mild after a fine night of rain. Transplanted radishes after breakfast. Walked to Mr Gells with the Books—gathered mosses & plants. The woods extremely beautiful with all autumnal variety & softness—I carried a basket for mosses, & gathered some wild plants—Oh! that we had a book of botany—all flowers now are gay & deliciously sweet. The primrose still pre-eminent among the later flowers of the spring. Foxgloves very tall—with their heads budding. I went forward round the lake at the foot of Loughrigg fell—I was much amused with the business of a pair of stone chats. Their restless voices as they skimmed along the water following each other their shadows under them, & their returning back to the stones on the shore, chirping with the same unwearied voice. Could not cross the water so I went round by the stepping stones. The morning clear but cloudy, that is the hills were not overhung by mists. After dinner Aggy weeded onions & carrots—I helped for a little—wrote to Mary Hutchinson—washed my head—worked. After tea went to Ambleside—a pleasant cool but not cold evening. Rydale was very beautiful with spear-shaped streaks of polished steel. No letters!—only one newspaper. I returned by Clappersgate. Grasmere was very solemn in the last glimpse of twilight it calls home the heart to quietness. I had been very melancholy in my walk back. I had many of my saddest thoughts & I could not keep the tears within me. But when I came to Grasmere I felt that it did me good. I finished my letter to MH.—ate hasty pudding, & went to bed. As I was going out in the morning I met a half crazy old man. He shewed me a pincushion, & begged a pin, afterwards a halfpenny. He began in a kind of indistinct voice in this manner ‘Matthew Jobson’s lost a cow. Tom Nichol has two good horses strained—Jim Jones’s cow’s brokken her horn, &c &c --’He went into Aggys & persuaded her to give him some whey & let him boil some porridge. She declares he ate two quarts.¹³¹

Understood in context, Wordsworth’s beautiful sentence, “Grasmere was very solemn in the last glimpse of twilight it calls home the heart to quietness[.]” represents more than the poetic subject perceiving the world. It represents precisely a poetics of the quotidian—both a melancholy reaction, recorded as daily writing, to the absence of another form of daily writing, a letter, and a moment of cheering up upon coming home and before finishing the act of writing a letter. The heart called home to quietness, then, marks an aesthetics of the

empty mailbox, of alterations, substitutions, and absences in daily life. “Quietness” means both calming down and entering the quiet house. Here one of the most “poetic” passages in *The Grasmere Journals*—and I mean “poetic” in a the high modernist sense of the word implied by Eigerman in his selections—hinges on those aspects of the quotidian that root and reappear in Wordsworth’s later poetry: daily writing (here, journal and letter); writing promised to someone else; social interaction; and the conflation of the domestic space and the natural world. Eigerman may not have meant his anthology as an ironic piece of experimental criticism that exposes, by erasure, the poetics of the quotidian nascent in *The Grasmere Journals*, but our own act of critical appropriation allows Eigerman’s text to do some of this work. Eigerman shows us what poetry is *not* present in *The Grasmere Journals*, and thereby shows us what poetry is. *The Grasmere Journals* encodes an emerging poetics of the quotidian. We can understand those waves of ink that delimit and count each day to be poetic lines.

Chapter Four

Forms of Transcendence

Within a greater discussion of enumeration, number, and endlessness, we can sidestep the definitional traps inherent to considering “lyrics” or “epics” and instead define a new category of 19th- and 20th-century poems determined by their length. Considering the line-by-line movement of poems that, by the very nature of their form, resist closure demonstrates how dissecting the function of form can explicate a poem’s philosophical intervention.

If the long poem articulates an abstraction, then it does so by a process of accretion, of continuity. Wedding form and function, the readings that follow will consider what a long poem has the capacity to index—emotionally, spiritually, aesthetically, ethically, socially—and how, and why. For a diverse sampling of examples, I will explore the Hegelian synthetic self produced by the closing couplets to each Spenserian stanza in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, the meandering journey inward imitated by the blank verse of *The Prelude*, the pan-social projective verse of Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, the short-line pause for breath that incubates the iconic, excerpt-ready Imagist lyric all over *Spring and All*, and the formal inferno of dividing lines in Spicer’s Dantean *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*. In addition to

helping us understand these poems' overall projects, the line activates these poems' epic and anti-epical potentials.

I. Journeys, Mostly Inward: Byron & Wordsworth

Byron's great poem of the voyage out is also a formal assertion of self. The waves around the vessel sound in two harmonizing rhythms: the lapping back and forth of the metered, rhymed lines, and the larger ebb and flow of the alexandrines that conclude each numbered stanza. It is not only the sea that swells in the rhythm of these lines, but also the ego, or, more accurately, the formal act of self-assertion. Just as the poem's overall story, and each stanza, journey out, the cumulating lines pull back in to synthesize the inward and outward and posit the self. Consider the following representative stanza:

158

Not by its fault—but thine: Our outward sense
Is but of gradual rasp—and as it is
That what we have of feeling most intense
Outstrips our faint expression; even so this
Outshining and o'erwhelming edifice
Fools our fond gaze, and greatest of the great
Defies at first our Nature's littleness,
Till, growing with its growth, we thus dilate
Our spirits to the size of that they contemplate.¹³²
(Canto IV)

Here, we see the basic schematic of the soul or gaze journeying out and then flowing back as the self synthesizes that which it has seen. In a formulation not unlike Kant's mathematical sublime, here the perceptive faculty is taken aback by the greatness of the natural world—perhaps by the “o'erwhelming edifice” at which the self breaks off and the world begins—

which seems to defy “our Nature’s littleness”; in other words, the greatness of nature without indicates the smallness of nature within. This little Nature, the spirit, then grows, as “we thus dilate/Our spirits to the size of that they contemplate.” The personal spirit dilates—spreads out, spreads open—to provide a template suited to that which it contemplates. The small spirit journeying into the broad unknown is synthesized, at the point of the alexandrine, into a self the “size” of the world. The singular individual, or multiple “we,” here expands to incorporate the “greatest of the great,” to match infinity, perhaps. The caesura between “our spirits” and “that they contemplate” reifies the self-other dynamic at the level of form. By contrast, the cumulative, punch line-like rhythm of the alexandrine underscores the stanza’s conclusive act, though we may note that this act is also inconclusive insofar as it represents not only a statement of selfhood but also an erasure of the self as such.

Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, then, becomes a portrait not only of a journey out but also of a cognitive project of marshalling perceptions into synthetic statements. Let us consider the following stanzas, in which Byron/Childe Harold notes the ruins of antiquity, and then moves on:

25

But my soul wanders; I demand it back
To meditate amongst decay, and stand
A ruin amidst ruins; there to track
Fall’n states and buried greatness, o’er a land
Which *was* the mightiest in its old command,
And *is* the loveliest, and must ever be
The master-mould of Nature’s heavenly hand,
Wherein were cast the heroic and the free,
The beautiful, the brave—the lords of earth and sea,

The commonwealth of kings, the men of Rome!
 And even since, and now, fair Italy!
 Thou art the garden of the world, the home
 Of all Art yields, and Nature can decree;
 Even in thy desert, what is like to thee?
 Thy very weeds are beautiful, thy waste
 More rich than other climes' fertility;
 Thy wreck a glory, and thy ruin graced
 With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced.

(Canto IV)

Building on and departing from the eighteenth-century idea of an elect poem-maker casting a vast history (cf. Pope's *Essay on Man*) and on the by-now-cliché Romantic aesthetics of the ruin, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* transmutes objects and the epic histories they imply into an artistic register as the poet-elect notes the ruins and moves on. Insofar as Childe Harold floats by the ruins of Rome as a privileged perceiver, his take on them is reduced to the affective and aesthetic; in other words, this represents a self-centered moment. Rome “*was*” the “mightiest,” but now it “*is*” the “loveliest”—such a move unmakes epics, creating an apposition between the strength of a nation and the pleasure of an individual aesthetic experience. The closing line to stanza 25 reiterates this elision, as “The beautiful, the brave” suggests, either that the ancient people Childe Harold images and imagines were beautiful before brave—following the evaluative emphasis suggested by the order of these adjectives—or that brave is another word for beautiful. Interestingly, the “men of Rome” described in this puzzling manner are not actually named until the first line of stanza 26—as the wave pulls back, and the poem once again journeys out. Yet, even as the poem returns to its catalogue of things seen, Italy is described as the “fair” “garden of the world,” in which “weeds,” “waste,” and “wreck” are “beautiful,” “rich,” and “a glory.” This evaluative

portrait (landscape painting?) finds its fascinating, multifaceted conclusion with the expression of “thy ruin graced/With an immaculate charm which cannot be defaced.”

It is the “charm” of the ruin, and not the ruin itself, that cannot be “defaced.” If we take the word “charm” all the ways we can take it, a complex image of the poetic hero in the face of Italy’s ruins emerges—he may be not only attracted to the ruins and influenced by their apparent magic but also overcome by their power. Yet even as this seemingly affective term may suggest that the ruins have a power over our hero, other denotations of the word “charm” suggest that they will fortify or endow him. The image is an amulet, a pocket-book, an experience that the perceiver can take with him—in other words, the scene has the capacity to become text. And, in fact, herein lies another definition of “charm”: the denotations of “incantation” or “birdsong.” So in their aesthetic appeal and influential power, the ruins are aligned with notions of verbal art, whether purposeful or spontaneous. Furthermore, that the “charm” of the ruins, unlike the ruins themselves, cannot be “defaced” suggests, not only that this charm is eternal but also that it clings to a “face,” a personified form of identity or identification.²¹ When the soul goes out to “stand/A ruin amidst ruins,” it also brings the ruins back to stand a line among lines, a partial component of an aesthetic, poetic experience. Even when the soul and the poem journey out, the poem is always also a journey inward. The form of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*—more specifically, the line, and even more specifically, the alexandrine at the end of each Spenserian stanza—embodies this (poetically) productive tension and articulates the poem’s more abstract process of bringing together observation and experience to posit and visit the self even as

²¹ Naturally, there is more to make of this line. For example, we might ask what the descriptive word “immaculate” means in each of these cases, focusing on to what extent the word is religious or spiritual (and, therefore, connotatively out of place), and to what extent it is an aesthetic comment about the purity of an image or experience.

the poem purports to posit the world writ large. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* constructs a transcendent selfhood that takes into account and artistically accounts for history. The Spenserian stanza—a style of writing at once current and self-consciously archaic—is the resonant and productive form of this selfhood.

Then again, the rhythmic gathering-in-and-moving-on suggested by the Spenserian stanza becomes ironic by accretion. The ebb and flow, lapse and relapse, only happens locally—in a wider frame, the sheer number of numbered stanzas following one after the other rides against moments of lyrical self-perception. The pulling back in of each alexandrine becomes just another litany, part of a larger pattern: epiphany, epiphany, epiphany, epiphany. In this way, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* creates a space that isn't epic—because its driving narrative is more a chain of moments of self-recognition than a representative and represented story—but that also isn't what some might call “lyric” insofar as it cuts against the grain of those moments of self-reflection and self *reflected* that the poem's self-consciously vintage and productive form strives to formulate. By virtue of its length, the poem transcends the efforts of each stanza in a formal manifestation of the inherently impossible relationship between individual and collective, self and world, Childe and Pilgrimage.

By formally imitating the impossibility of fully comprehending self, other, or the relationship between, Byron's great voyage out embarks on a project that it shares with Wordsworth's great voyage in. In Wordsworth's depiction of the growth of a poet's mind, the line also functions as a formal apparatus key to the poem's overall creative project; by “creative” I mean both that the poem is a work of art and that it creates something, be it a “poet's mind,” a life story, a life, or an identity. In *The Prelude*, a flowing river of blank verse creates

an especially vivid instance of Kant's mathematical sublime in which the accumulation of lines leads to a state that transcends the mechanics of the reading experience.²² While following this analogy to its natural conclusion poses some interesting questions (do we become *self-aware*, and if so, do we become aware of our own self, of the self *The Prelude* journeys into, or of the implicated reader the poem builds into its project), what is most striking is the extent to which pattern, repetition, and accumulation function to realize the poem's project. In this sense perhaps Wordsworth's schematic is less evocative of Kant's mathematical sublime than Locke's formulation of infinity. With its accumulation of line upon line, *The Prelude's* blank verse approximates a Lockean enumerative framework in which repetition leads to a limited but real belief in selfhood and that which transcends it.

In order to think about the aims of *The Prelude*, let us consider its closing lines:

Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how:
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, 'mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.

(1805 ed., Book 13, ll. 442-452)

What might it mean to "teach" "others" how to "love" something? Contrary to an understanding of love as a naturalized, intangible emotion, *The Prelude* aims to teach love, or promises that love can be taught. By this token, in addition to the meandering journey

²² This observation cannot have been mine originally. In any case, it relates to certain points made by Neil Hertz in the chapter "The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime," from *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime*.

inward—to the detail-by-detail, memory-by-memory tracing of personal development epitomized in the click and slide of blank verse—we can read *The Prelude* as an act of teaching love. Through the sometimes tedious formal acts of attention that make up the poem, the reader is led to obsess, to consider, and to try to understand the details of a mind’s life story. Perhaps these seemingly endless acts of attention are in themselves a kind of love, or a mechanism of love. And, we note, perhaps this kind of love is the best one can do, something akin to “that best portion of a good man’s life,/His little, nameless, unremembered acts,/Of kindness and of love” (*Tintern Abbey*, ll. 34-36).¹³³ Transfiguring these unremembered acts into (often tedious) lines and vice versa, the long poem teaches love, thereby appropriating epic didacticism for intensely personal aims. As we journey inward through the form of *The Prelude*, the poem guides us through acts of reading which, like speech acts, *do*.

II. *A Note on Whitman*

The line is central to Whitman’s philosophical/social/national/erotic project—it is, in fact, the clearest articulation of that project. Both this project and the line that identifies it are epic in scope, making not only America but also a collectivity writ large. Within the long line, within the human heart and mind, there is room for every creature. Furthermore, as *Song of Myself* declares: “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,/You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,/You shall listen to all sides and filter them for your self” (sect. 2).¹³⁴ In this ever-expanding epic collectivity, everyone is heroic.

At one moment towards the beginning of *Song of Myself*, Whitman adapts his long-line aesthetic to a theory of reading:

Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? have you reckon'd the earth much?
Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
(sect. 2)

In this brief excerpt, *Song of Myself* argues that getting at “the meaning of poems” comes from reckoning grand spaces and practicing reading for “so long.” Getting at the meaning of poems comes from spatial and temporal extension. In this theory of reading, reckoning the earth can be compared to steady practice. Infinity, then—what one gets when one reckons the earth—is comparable to, maybe even the same as, steady practice, repetition, and enumeration. According to this excerpt, one gets at the abstract meaning of poems via the infinity of practice. Every act of practicing reading is an act of repetition that is like an act of expansion that will allow one to comprehend the infinite.

And yet, when *Song of Myself* asks, “Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning[,]” its tone is at once seriously self-reflexive and in urgent mockery. While on one level this sarcastic chastisement is a call to the reader to open the mind to the poem’s enlightening schemata, by another reading we see that a sense of mockery is in keeping with the theory of reading here presented. If the very act of reading—the repetition of it, the daily quality of it—is the surest path to a poem’s message, then understanding a poem is nothing to be proud of. The mechanism of the poem elucidates the poem. Every act of reading is an act of interpretation, of demystification.

Consider the following moment from *Song of Myself*, in which Whitman addresses questions of number:

44

It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers,
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety.

I do not call one greater and one smaller,
That which fills its period and place is equal to any.

Repetition leads to expansion, here, not only theoretically but also in the poem's explicit content. At the beginning of the section, an em dash creates a tangible apposition between "myself" and "us," the singular and the collective. In addition to the basic syntactic meaning, that the explanation begins with a call to stand, we see here that when the wish to explain "myself" is announced, the text typographically indicates that the collectivity, "us," then stands up. Or, perhaps then the collectivity can stand up; "let us" is interesting not only as an idiomatic representation of how one directs a group to which one belongs but also as a speech act in which permission is granted, in which "us" is "let," permitted to pass, or set free.

After the poem claims to "strip away" the known and "launch" every single being "into the Unknown," a resonant image of counting to infinity chimes in counterpoint: "The clock

indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?” In this way, the poem’s clear statement of its project—its claim to explain itself—can be seen not only as the pan-social standing up, stripping away of the known, and launching into the unknown that the poem narrates, but also as the question of what the sum of all time—the sum of all clocks ticking every moment—indicates. In the spirit of its theory of reading, *Leaves of Grass* explains itself via the question of what eternity indexes, or the idea of what ultimate repetition opens up.

By this token, we may notice anew that the section begins: “It is time to explain myself[.]” Flipping the syntax, we see that the algebra of this sentence also implies: “To explain myself is time.” In this way, the poem—and the expansive personality constructed within the text of the poem—equates itself with time, with the problem of the clock’s immediacy versus its tenuous relationship to eternity and everything after. *Song of Myself* here recapitulates its theory of reading and its overall project insofar as the poem, and “myself,” is at once the clock ticking the moment and, by extension, part of eternity. Thus, after a meditation on number, richness, and variety, *Song of Myself* concludes this meditation on “trillions” and “trillions” by stating: “I do not call one greater and one smaller,/That which fills its period and place is equal to any.” Equality, an integral part of the poem’s greater project, is here defined in terms of discrete number. One is not greater or smaller as long as one fills up period and place, or time and space—it is the sheer number of things, then, that makes them equal. And so, as with counting to infinity, or, in a Lockean frame, counting to believe in infinity or identity, in *Song of Myself* the spontaneous, spiritual, transcendent monism follows from discrete “trillions” and “trillions,” from number leading to numberlessness, from the immense value of filling up a bit of space or a moment of time or the span of a sentence. Returning to formal considerations, perhaps we can ask whether the Whitmanic long line

often gets too much credit. Sure, it reaches out and out to take in everything, but perhaps sometimes, as in *Song of Myself*, it is the spillage of line upon line, the seeming trillions, the encoded *practice* of reading, that lets us believe in the long line at all.

III. *And All: William Carlos Williams*

William Carlos Williams adapts Whitman's philosophy in his early long poem *Spring and All*, which takes the idea of the long line to the point of prose, or almost-prose. Alternating blocks of barely-lineated writing with highly-lineated, thin columns of writing, *Spring and All* questions the nature of poetry explicitly and formally. It also, purposefully or not, incubates the Imagist lyric, as certain excerpts from this long poem have circulated and been anthologized as key examples of this modernist form. Before these excerpts helped to crystallize the Imagist lyric as a high modernist pocketbook genre, however, they appeared as moments of brief, thing-y versification in *Spring and All*. In this context, they function less as self-contained masterworks in miniature and more as Tennysonian "Break, break, break[s]"¹³⁵—as points of contrast next to which blocks of almost-unbroken text become, not prose, but long-line poetry. In *Spring and All*, inconsistent line lengths become definitional of a poem that wonders what poetry is, and what it isn't.

Spring and All is also a long poem "addressed [...] to the imagination[,]" in perhaps-worship of, or at least insistence on, that "single force" which exists "[t]o refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live[.]"¹³⁶ Living collectively in an eternal moment guided only by the imagination sounds fairly Whitmanic. In *Spring and All*, Williams writes:

Whitman's proposals are of the same piece with the modern trend toward imaginative understanding of life. The largeness which he interprets as his identity with the least and the greatest about him, his "democracy" represents the vigor of his imaginative life.¹³⁷

In this passage, Williams both claims Whitman for his poetic project and distances this project from Whitman. Whitman's expansive, democratic identity is an example of those things we understand when we understand the realness of the imagination, and yet it represents the nature of "his" imaginative life. With this final turn of the screw, Williams contradicts Whitman even as he praises him by making his project—at least in the syntax of this text—representative of the individual, rather than the collective.

And yet, perhaps in *Spring and All* this one inherently represents the many:

In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say, "I" I mean also, "you." And so, together, as one, we shall begin.¹³⁸

If author and reader are one, then perhaps we can read Williams' mention of "his imaginative life" as representative of Whitman, and Williams reading Whitman, and ourselves reading Williams reading Whitman. By this extension, Williams promotes not only Whitman's imaginative democracy but also his theory of reading, as the vigor and vitality of a text seems to ripple, by this formulation, through a chain of readers just by virtue of being read.

Further incorporating Whitman's agenda into *Spring and All*, Williams responds to Whitman's democratic notion of the equality of all things that take up time and space:

We must acknowledge that the ocean we would drink is too vast—but at the same time we realize that extension in our case is not confined to the intestine only. The stomach is full, the ocean no fuller, both have the same quality of fullness. In that, then, one is equal to the other.¹³⁹

Here, we see that Williams recapitulates Whitman's belief in the poetics of equality, but to it he adds the idea of consumption, of combination. Not only are we as great as the world by virtue of being ourselves, we also recognize this equality via a process of wanting the world to enter into us. Adopting Whitman's idea of democracy, Williams adds the notion that trying to take something in helps us to understand our equality with it. Permeation and sharing become parts of collectivity in surplus of Whitman's emphasis on countable distinctness. Perhaps this passage calls to mind the child watching the stream in *Upon Epitaphs*, or the perceiver viewing the island in *Floating Island*. Here, Romantic figurations of perceiving the natural world are recast as literal consumption. In the above passage, one understands the potential for self expansion, not via perception, but via consumption or the desire for consumption.

Likewise, into his own prose-like take on Whitman's long line Williams interjects slices of highly-lineated text that resonate with, permeate, and complicate the blocks of text that surround them. Take the following example, a self-reflexive meditation on the very notion of a line:

From the petal's edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact—lifting
from it—neither hanging
nor pushing—

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates spaces¹⁴⁰

Here, the poem invokes and traces lines—which may or may not be poetic lines—starting from the “petal’s edge,” from, not just the thing, but the line where the thing ends and the world begins. “That,” which could refer either to the line in question, or to the petal’s edge or moment of interface with the world, is of steel both “infinitely fine” and “infinitely rigid.” In other words, it is infinitely thin (and, by denotation, defined) and strong or unbending. This hardy minutia “penetrates” the universe, while at the same time it may borrow from this universe if we note the steel/steal pun. The line, then—small, strong, and perhaps stolen or even stealing away—enters the greater world. And yet, it does not touch down: there is no “contact.” It is the “fragility of the flower,” its infinite fineness, that “penetrates spaces.”

In this way, Williams adds a short-line democracy to his appropriation of Whitman’s ethical aesthetic. It is the delicacy and strength of the short-line sliver of poetry—what happens in those passages that are so often turned into the Imagist lyric, i.e. those passages that begin at the edge of the object—that can permeate the universe without effect, without “contact.” The long line is all-inclusive; the short line is painlessly included. The long line is monist; the short line is a point of departure and entry. Alternating the two in the service of a long poem, Williams alternates between sameness and difference, between all-encompassing imagination and the slick but firm borders between things, between the infinite and the countable.

Since so much of the work of the line happens by point of contrast, we can understand some of what is undone when these thin arrows of text are removed from the thick, long-line universe they inhabit and permeate and are made to stand alone as generic representations. *The Red Wheelbarrow*, we must remember, is not a red wheelbarrow in the middle of nowhere. Adding to our discussion of the ways in which Imagist excerpting of *Spring and All* disrupts the contrast in line structures that does so much work to articulate some of the poem's key concerns, Easterbrook's critique of the history of excerpting *The Red Wheelbarrow* points to a power structure that this excerpting imposes.²³ When excerpts from *Spring and All* become high modernist, Imagist lyrics, they come with a critical or interpretive key rather than themselves serving as "fine" and "rigid" keys with which to unlock the stuffy, long-line blocks of text around them. And, since in the schematic of *Spring and All*

²³ In his 1994 article "Somehow disturbed at the core": *Words and Things in William Carlos Williams*, Neil Easterbrook explores what is created, and what erased, when this specific excerpt from *Spring and All* appears as an iconic Imagist lyric in anthologies and in the classroom. Speaking of the title, Easterbrook argues:

For example, changing the title from "XXII" to "The Red Wheelbarrow" gives the text a specific, specifically different frame. As "The Red Wheelbarrow," even the text's fragmented compound noun is fused into some different thing: literally, its syncretic counterpart becomes a minimalistic poem about a particular object, and figurally, it becomes a gloss on the perceptual horizon, a synecdoche for the pre-problematized experience Husserl called the "natural attitude" and Heidegger the "pre-original" or "pre-understanding."

In Easterbrook's text, this statement follows a discussion of how *The Red Wheelbarrow* is glossed in notable examples of twentieth-century anthologies, as well as what kind of poetic movements this phenomenon creates (a mimetic Objectivism, for example). Easterbrook goes on to discuss the ways in which considering the excerpt in its original context produces meaning, paying attention to how *Part XXII* is followed by a discussion of the differences between poetry and prose. Easterbrook argues that:

[T]he poem 'so much depends' conforms more to the rubric usually given for prose (discursiveness, clarity of statement, syntactical continuity) while the excessively rhetorical prose strikes images and figures non-discursively, paratactically, as in surrealist or postmodern poetry [...] editors perform a disservice, for it is one thing to present a poem without compounding confusion, but quite another to edit away its inherent—indeed, intended—problematics." [Neil Easterbrook, "Somehow Disturbed at the Core": *Words and Things in William Carlos Williams*," *South Central Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Autumn, 1994): 28-9.]

the implied writer encodes the reader in every act of self-mention, perhaps we can say that, within the di-verse space of *Spring and All*, the key is in the hand of every reader. To break the poem apart is to divest it of its power to self-actualize over the course of the reading process, to murder to dissect. Thus, understanding the power of the poem—or the power of any part of it—means taking into account the ways in which different types of lineation contrast and create each other.

IV. *Sending the Line to Hell: Spicer*

As a final example, I will consider Berkeley Renaissance poet Jack Spicer's maddeningly interpretive Dante intertext, *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*. In this long poem, Spicer employs a sort of Whitmanic democracy when it comes to types of language. *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* uses language from disparate realms of social life and forces these modes of address into conversation with one another. Allusions to canonical poetry answer nonsense syllables. Sexual innuendos cut off baby talk. A grammar-lesson list of pronouns responds to metaphysical musings about the afterlife. In this way, Spicer creates a space in which every, and thereby no, speech genre applies (to borrow Bakhtin's term).¹⁴¹ He also creates a space in which distinct and seemingly unrelated acts or types of speech allow one another to exist, by providing responses, and thereby endpoints and unity, to the communicative acts that come before them. These confluences and relations are how, in the vertically constructed hell section and fake-novel purgatory section of this Dante intertext, Spicer constructs an exploding inferno of words. The poem then rebuilds language with immense delicacy, with an eye always on its constructed nature, in order to

craft a space for poetic dwelling (channeling Heidegger).¹⁴² This is the poem's paradise, *A Textbook of Poetry*.

The line's²⁴ participation in this project of tearing down and rebuilding language is profound. In the hell section, *Homage to Creeley/Explanatory Notes*, the poetic line is materialized as a thick horizontal line that divides each page in two so that the "explanatory notes" occur physically under segments of poetic writing, the "homage to Creeley." By contrast, the purgatorial section of the poem, entitled *A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud*, moves in brief chapters that are often broken into prose paragraphs. (At one point, the text refers to itself as "this unattractive prose[.]"¹⁴³) Finally, the paradisaic city of language, *A Textbook of Poetry*, consists of twenty-eight numbered sections, which for the most part consist of clusters of brief, elegant paragraphs in which very short sentences—often sentence fragments—evoke the poetic line included in a collectivity. Claiming that "Where we are is in a sentence" and that "a city is a collection of humans[.]" *A Textbook of Poetry* folds sentences such as "Being faithful to it."¹⁴⁴ into full yet brief paragraphs of text.

The contrasting geometries produced by the line in *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* affect the directionality of the poem, as described by Ross Feld:

²⁴ *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* complicates readerly assumptions about what the line is, and where the line breaks. Although *A Fake Novel About The Life of Arthur Rimbaud*, *A Textbook of Poetry*, and the *Explanatory Notes* of the hell section often seem to progress paragraph by paragraph, when I reproduce sections of the poem here I make sure to follow the original line breaks within the paragraphs. As this long poem was originally produced and circulated in mimeograph, i.e. in small quantities and for a specific audience, it makes sense to take the typographical layout as more or less "set." Thus, we may consider paragraphs of text to be vertically lined if we so choose. Additionally, much like the alternating verse styles in *Spring and All*, *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, with its diversity of forms, raises questions about what the line is, and where the line ends. I will argue, for example, that the tight paragraphs built of fragmentary sentences in *A Textbook of Poetry* perform acts of collecting poetic lines into compact spaces. This argument, much like that section of the poem, relies on a stereotypical "lyric line" of poetry that is then subverted, reformed, and remade.

Though it's perhaps the most singular investigation of surrealistic disexpectation ever written by an American, the initial layer of compositional terms is strictly Dante's: Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Yet each of the three books making up the larger volume is situated upon a different *directional* axis as well. *Homage to Creeley*, with its Orpheus/Eurydice/Cocteau basis, is vertical—'Hell is where we place ourselves when we wish to look upward.' *A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud* is very much horizontal: 'Sentiment is not to the point. A dead letter is there because it has no longer real addresses.' And *A Textbook of Poetry* literally is crucial: both vertical *and* horizontal...and therefore circumferential: 'a fire that was neither a glow or direction. But the business of it was fire.'¹⁴⁵

Feld's use of the term "axis," here, highlights the extent to which the poem's movement is linear. In *Homage to Creeley/Explanatory Notes*, the verticality of the linguistic inferno relies on a horizontal line, perhaps the idea of the poetic line made manifest. This physical barrier between different parts of the poem emphasizes the poem's claim that "Sheer hell/Is where your apartness is your apartness[.]"¹⁴⁶ In stark contrast to the paradisaal community, or city, that the poem ultimately builds or rebuilds, in hell every page has a wall.

Let us consider the following page of hell in order both to understand how the physical line between sections functions and how it relates to other forms or questions of lineation.

This particular section also treats enumeration and number explicitly.

Magic

Strange, I had words for dinner
Stranger, I had words for dinner
Stranger, strange, do you believe me?

Honestly, I had your heart for supper
Honesty has had your heart for supper
Honesty honestly are your pain.

I burned the bones of it
And the letters of it
And the numbers of it
That go 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
And so far.

Stranger, I had bones for dinner
Stranger, I had bones for dinner
Stranger, stranger, strange, did you believe me?

Orpheus was never really threatened by the Underworld during his visits there. In this poem they present him with a diplomatic note.

Honesty does not occur again in the poem.

The numbers do.¹⁴⁷

As is often the case in *Homage to Creeley/Explanatory Notes*, the top half of the page is highly lineated while the bottom half loosely conforms to prose syntax and paragraphs. On this page in particular, the “poem” at the top utilizes repetition and wordplay to estrange the stranger—in other words, to insist on the fact of the stranger. This being a linguistic hell of apartness, “bones,” “letters,” and “numbers” are “burned” while the poem demands of the stranger (and perhaps the strange reader): “do you believe me?” “did you believe me?” This

moment of failed communication and self-complicated integrity (“Honesty honestly are your pain”) breaks off at the point of the horizontal line. Instead of the stranger’s reply, the poem runs up against the line made manifest. What follows, then, is criticism of the poem as such and not a reply to its protestations and prostrations. Occurring after not only the horizontal line but also a significant space of blankness, this criticism contextualizes the above text within the un-narrative of the poem’s underworld by re-labeling it as, not “Magic,” but rather a “diplomatic note” presented to Orpheus by the underworld. The gloss separates itself from what happens before the line.

Interestingly, this phrase, “before the line,” implies that what happens on the page above the line is pre-poetic. This is strange, as the top half of the page is the self-consciously poetic half, complete with title and overt lineation. Perhaps one possibility for understanding the role of the line in Spicer’s linguistic hell is as follows: the poem becomes a poem as such when it is delineated, distanced, and criticized. The practice of considering poetry qua poetry makes the reader a stranger. The critical apparatus activates separation. As in Easterbrook’s argument about *A Red Wheelbarrow*, hermetically sealing a poem imposes a power structure that may be detrimental or even painful; this struggle occurs not only between student and teacher, but also between reader and text. Seeing the poem as a poem—*after the line*—makes us a stranger to it, makes it beg us to believe it.

The bottom of the page insists that we don’t believe it, stating that “Honesty does not occur again in the poem.” Is this an ironic statement about a word variations of which occur four times, or is it an insistence on the ruthlessness of the poem? In a similarly complicating move, the statement that, by contrast, “The numbers do” could refer to the act of specifying

the numbers, which is in some sense an act of repetition (“And the numbers of it/That go 1,2,3,4,5,6,7”). This statement could also refer to the act of mentioning “the numbers,” or it could be a false or ironic statement, as these numbers do not reoccur. Either way, this is a statement about distinction. The enumeration that naturally flows towards infinity in Whitman and Williams here reinforces distinction. These lineated and delineated poems, in which numbers occur and recur again, are exactly what need to be taken apart in order for a communal linguistic space to be built.²⁵

Chapter IX of the purgatory section, *A Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud*, represents the first use of short lines (or, a column of broken lines in place of brief paragraphs) in that section. Chapter IX follows a somewhat-nonsensical “chapter” that is full of numbers (two illustrative examples: “Rimbaud is now fifteen and is shooting horses. Since he is now dead, the years 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14 are unimportant both to his death and to our lives” and “Imagine not being attacked by Indians (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14)”¹⁴⁸).²⁶ Chapter IX, subtitled “The Poem Rimbaud Wrote On October 20, 1869,”²⁷ proceeds as follows:

I do not proclaim a new age.
That I am fifteen God only knows.
I keep the numbers in my head
When I am dead
I will fall into a rage

²⁵ Throughout *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, Spicer employs numbers as part of the lyric ideal that he de- and reconstructs. Whether these numbers invoke questions of form, aspects of modernist experiments, or a longer tradition of poetry in conversation with mathematics, we can only speculate. That said, in the above example, the notion that “[t]he numbers do [occur again in the poem]” could suggest, both that counting is integral to poetic practice, and that the numbers are part of some other aspect of the poem, on the level of the word, sentence, or line.

²⁶ Here again, we see Spicer’s inclusion of numbers, which in this instance represent both the passage of time (the years passing in the poetic imitation of a novel) and the capacities and limits of imagination (perhaps a response or rebuttal to such modernist tracts as *Spring and All*).

²⁷ This was the date of Rimbaud’s fifteenth birthday.

And bite off all my toes.

When I am twenty I will see
Eternity
And all those old numbers
And be their anger
When I am dead
I will leave the stage
And bite off all my toes.¹⁴⁹

Here, number is at once holy and private. Numbers marking age are associated with the divine—“God only knows” that Rimbaud is fifteen, and when he is twenty he “will see/Eternity”—while “the numbers” in general are more private. Rimbaud “keep[s] the numbers in [his] head” and will see “all those old numbers” when he sees eternity. Thus, we see a sort of numerical purgatory. As opposed to hell, in which numbers only denote separation and failed connection, here numbers are markers of isolation (“I keep the numbers in my head”) but also the promise, and perhaps hope, of an enigmatic future: “I will see/Eternity/And all those old numbers/And be their anger.” This being purgatory, the notion of being the number’s anger is both painful and validating—being something to the numbers begins to suggest a sense of relation, an act of “seeing” something as external that was once only internal and then existing in relation to that other. And yet, since those numbers are or begin within the head, this “other” may be anything but—the poem may count on its toes.

As mentioned above, at this point in the poem’s linguistic purgatory, frequent lineation reappears. The chapter is subtitled “The Poem Rimbaud Wrote,” a striking generic definition in a section of a long poem that calls itself a “Novel” and proceeds by chapters and paragraphs. Relating to our discussion of number above, we may note that the inclusion of a specific date in the title creates an apposition between the poem and

numbers, which here become almost material if we apply a little exegetical pressure: Rimbaud wrote the poem *on* the date, and the date as a birthday symbolizes and embodies the birth of the poet. Whether I am making too much of the title or no, one thing is certain—to reintroduce line breaks is to reintroduce number to the space of the text. In this way, the poem’s careful assessment of possible connections may be self-referential; perhaps the numbers in the head are the numbered lines of the poem. The passing numbers implied by time and age, then, also involve the passing of the poem. Thus, eventually seeing eternity involves a process of considering the text’s separateness and togetherness. In a tortured, ambiguous, purgatorial, anti-Whitmanic/anti-epic (and in fact novelistic) way, here too acts of enumeration lead to infinity.

An interruption in the heaven section of the poem, *A Textbook of Poetry*, reopens this discussion of the line’s potential. This section of the poem unfolds over the course of numbered clusters of paragraphs that fold the fragmented poetic line into their image of resonant linguistic community. Here is a representative section:

8.

Descends to the real. By a rope ladder. The soul also goes there. Solely—not love, beyond the thought of God.

I mean the thought of thinking about God. Naturally. I mean the real God.

Disregards all other images as you disregard the parts of words in a poem. The Logos, crying to be healed from his godhead. His dismay.

Disappears within the flatiron of existence. That smoothes out all the words in the poem. Imparts them. Makes them real like the next day.

And as the words heal, I did not mean the real God.¹⁵⁰

This particular section represents a heavenly questioning of reality. The insistent, empty claims to honesty that we saw in the “Magic” section of *Homage to Creeley/ Explanatory Notes* are here recast as dynamic acts of self- and other-aware meaning. “I mean the thought of thinking about God [...] I mean the real God [...] And as the words heal, I did not mean the real God.” In this shifting register, the confused, compounding act of thinking about God shifts from meaning the real God to not meaning the real God. In other words, as the words heal (do they heal the poem, as language is rebuilt and restored? do they heal themselves?), the possibility of a real God emerges. Because of this possibility, the real God and the self-absorbed act of thinking about thinking about God are no longer one and the same thing. The poem creates a space for shifting meanings, a space in which something “descends to the real,” in which the words in the poem are “smoothed out.” In terms of the line, the folding of sentences and phrases into aesthetically appealing packets of observations and statements does just that—smooths out the words in the poem, creates a space for slippery meaning and facile movement.

There is one exception, and this is section 17, which not only reintroduces lineation and short lines to the poem but also highlights these lines with dashes. The section questions both conceptions of lyric poetry and arguments against their tenants:

17

—A human love object is untrue.
Screw you.
—A divine love object is unfair
Define the air
It walks in.

The old human argument goes on with the rhymes to show that it still goes on. A stiffening in time as puns are a stiffening in meaning.

The old human argument that goes ahead with our clothes off or our clothes on. Even when we are talking of ghosts.

—A human love object is untrue
Screw you

—A divine love object is unfair
Define the air
It walks in.

Imagine this as lyric poetry.¹⁵¹

This section seems to make two competing historical arguments. If we take each dash as defining a cohesive speech act, then the poem works against notions of a divine or human love object. However, if we take each dash to represent a moment of dialogue, then the poem rebukes these very claims, first with aggression, and then with an ambiguous interrogation that somehow seems to be a statement of belief insofar as it implies that something exists that walks on air. Claiming and declaiming love, the section states that this argument “goes on with the rhymes to show/that it still goes on. A stiffening in time as puns are a stiffening/in meaning.” The rhymes and puns of arguments about love—a.k.a. love poetry—go on to show that they go on. Love poetry is an ontological proof of itself, “[e]ven when we are talking of ghosts[,]” whether the subject/object is dressed or no, no matter the form of the poem or how it pertains to the extra-poetic. When the section concludes, “Imagine this as lyric poetry[,]” it both asks us to reconsider our sense of what poetry is for (where “this” refers to section 17) and poses the question of whether *A Textbook of Poetry*, with its utter inclusivity of language and meaning, might be a new, a fitting, an unexpected, or even a more effective way to approach some of the love-object-oriented concerns of “lyric poetry.” In this way, an anomaly of lineation introduces a meditation on

the lyric into the last book of an epic intertext. In addition to providing a self-reflexive critique of the work of this long poem, the dramatized lineation of section 17 highlights by contrast the formal congruency of a linguistic heaven in which incongruent elements are combined.

In *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, lineation is a symbol of delineation, of difference. Looking at patterns and changes in the line over the course of this three-section long poem can help us to understand how Spicer exaggerates and thereby deconstructs this sharp distance—and the isolation it implies—with the ultimate aim of creating a linguistic space in which “From the top to bottom there is a universe. Extended past/what the words mean and below, God damn it, what the words/are. A vessel, a vesicle of truth.”¹⁵² Circumventing the breaks of vertical poetry and poetic criticism (as in *Homage to Creeley/Explanatory Notes*) and the uneasy movement of a “Fake Novel,” Spicer’s linguistic paradise brings poetic lines together in a space of candid, shifting meaning.

V. *Ghosts of Departed Quantities*

It is at the level of the line, and in the flow of line upon line, that this sampling of long poems works out notions of epicity, postulations of self and other, and poetic processes of making meaning, knowledge, and belief. Just as the lines are in the poem, so too is the poem in the lines. Examining the role of the line in the long poem allows us to theorize the extent to which acts of counting may contain infinity and to which the long poem functions as an enumerative object of verbal art. Attending to the ways in which poetry

counts may elucidate the links between form and affect, aesthetic detail and intellectual intervention.

Such a final chapter, with its set of formal concerns and hypotheses, may accidentally smudge the fine lines of influence drawn earlier in the project between such historical points of interest as Newtonian calculus and Romantic aesthetics, theories of infinity and theories of sublimity, proof and poem. But it is my hope that concluding with form will do more. Newton's critics called his fluxions "ghosts of departed quantities" for the ways in which they flickered in and out of the mathematician's field of vision. They represented the mechanisms of a set of mathematical laws that Newton could not have known. Although they served as a faulty foundation, they served something of value. When Cantor devised a strong definition of infinity, what happened to Newton's original system? Did it cease to be meaningful? Did it cease to be beautiful?

It is one thing to examine the extent to which Romantic and post-Romantic poetry takes up Enlightenment formulations of infinity and the extent to which articulating this context proves a useful resource for rereading certain poetic projects. It is another thing to ask why this metempsychosis took place, and what it can tell us about poetry broadly conceived. Perhaps beyond the obvious cause, aesthetic theory, we find some of the most basic mechanics of poetry and some of the simplest truths about how poetry works. Thus, learning the poetics of infinity means not only rereading infinity in Romantic and post-Romantic poems but also attending to the formal capacities that make such a rereading possible.

Conclusion

Forms of Inheritance

I. Summation & Further Iterations

The Crisis of Infinity: Mathematics, Philosophy, and Nineteenth-Century Poetry has sought to provide a framework for re-reading the nineteenth-century poetic canon, a framework that can also generate and structure critical innovations stressing the interconnections between literature and mathematics. It is my hope that infinity will come to be understood as an aesthetic and philosophical category, like the sublime, that can be called upon to clarify or complicate a poem. Like the sublime, Romantic infinity is a concept neither monolithic nor stable; like the sublime, infinity proves an historically-grounded point of reference that can facilitate readings of poetic forms and formulations. If the work at hand has established the application of Enlightenment and Romantic formulations of infinity to poetic texts as a useful exegetical tool, then it has fulfilled its most tangible goal.

The list of poems read through this intellectual-historical lens has by no means been exhaustive, and it is my hope that an understanding of Romantic infinity will facilitate further critical investigations. In this project, I have focused on William and Dorothy Wordsworth, but applying an understanding of Romantic reformulations of Enlightenment

understandings of infinity would likely shed light on the works of other canonical poets as well. In the footnotes to Chapter One, I briefly addressed the critical discussion of Blake's reaction to Newton, and suggested that Newton's fluxion theory provides a productive intellectual-historical lens through which to read Blake's treatments of infinity. Other texts beyond the scope of this project would likely benefit from being read in the context of the crisis of infinity; examples include the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Understanding the links between poetry and infinity at the turn of the nineteenth century provides a productive framework for rereading the Romantic canon, and the readings performed here have only been the start.

Furthermore, the project's methodology has taken as axiomatic the premise that effective interdisciplinarity requires a willingness to cross scholarly boundaries delimiting not only discipline but also historical period. In this way, *The Crisis of Infinity* shows that trans-historical considerations of poetry can in some cases be deeply historicist insofar as they recuperate genealogies of ideas, concepts, and debates as they resurface in verbal art. In this vein, *The Crisis of Infinity* has attempted to gesture towards and contribute to a much broader project—that of destabilizing the particularly forceful period division between the Enlightenment and Romantic periods by showing how aspects of Romantic aesthetics, such as the Romantic sublime, actually come out of a prior discourse. The subject experiencing the Romantic sublime does not turn away from Enlightenment rationality in the throes of affect and individuality; rather, this subject participates in a debate that reaches back at least as far as Newton.

Another ambition of the project is to assist the establishment of a critical field focused on the intersections between mathematical and literary history. *The Crisis of Infinity* has sought to illuminate an historical moment at which literary discourse participated in mathematical history, a moment the understanding of which can situate, historicize, and to some extent change critical investigations of the intersections among mathematical and literary projects. To the critical field focused on literature and mathematics, the crisis of infinity represents a moment of historical interdisciplinarity, that is, an early nineteenth-century moment at which no external critical apparatus needs to be applied in order to bring mathematics and literature together. Mathematical and literary history intersect at the turn of the nineteenth century, and the existence of this sort of phenomenon—what I might call genuine or historical interdisciplinarity—insists that critical approaches to mathematics and literature are more than one facet of a larger critical trend towards interdisciplinarity and science studies in the humanities, but are actually necessary if we are to understand nineteenth-century literature in its intellectual-historical context.

Beyond the nineteenth-century poetic canon, *The Crisis of Infinity* has sought to rethink the Romantic archive. Taking into account poetic treatments of enumeration and infinity can facilitate new perspectives on nineteenth-century daily and women's writing. In our discussion of Dorothy Wordsworth, we saw how Wordsworth elevates the concept of the quotidian across genres, blurring the lines between poetic and daily writing and between literary and material forms. A future application of this project is to look at the connections between daily and poetic writing in a range of nineteenth-century archives. In particular, it may be possible to pick up on questions of book history and ask how the forms of nineteenth-century daily writing are related to poetic form. What might we make, for

example, of Charlotte Brontë's inclusion of diary entries and poems in *The Roe-Head Journal*? How might we understand Dora Wordsworth's collection of inscriptions and doggerel in her commonplace book? How might these projects of daily writing relate to more formal poetic projects, both in their constructions of the book form and in their formal attention to the passage of time?

I will close the project with a brief coda considering how the early nineteenth-century link between poetry and infinity might facilitate alternate understandings of the nineteenth-century inheritance in twentieth-century poetry. Critical oversimplifications of the Romantic inheritance in later nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century poetry must be countered, not by re-simplifications, but by complications. It is necessary to recognize that multiple and perhaps infinite understandings of the Romantic inheritance are possible. It is my hope that a brief exploration of the afterlives of Romantic infinity will contribute to a critical perspective on modernism that accounts for an ever-expanding understanding of modernism's nineteenth-century inheritance.

II. Coda: *Neo-Romantic Infinity*

According to linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, when a verbal message becomes portable text it encodes some of its history within it, incorporating an imperfect version of its original and perhaps subsequent contexts into its form and content. This phenomenon, which Bauman and Briggs term "entextualization,"¹⁵³ may suggest that this dissertation contains traces of having been written—or, at least, of having been thought—backwards. My investigation of mathematics, philosophy, and nineteenth-

century poetry is thus marked, not only by an interest in nineteenth-century literature and intellectual history, but also by a commitment to developing a capacious understanding of the legacy of Romanticism in later nineteenth-century, twentieth-century, and contemporary poetry.

Romantic infinity is a neglected aspect of the Romantic inheritance in later modern poetry. Oren Izenberg sums up the “nearly unanimous literary-historical consensus that would divide poetry into two warring camps—post-Romantic and postmodern; symbolist and constructivist; traditionalist and avant-garde—camps that would pit form against form on grounds at once aesthetic and ethical.”¹⁵⁴ Albert Gelpi has summarized and defended this dominant position on the Romantic inheritance in twentieth-century poetics, arguing that “[j]ust as American poetry in the first half of this century turns on the dialectic, within the period and within the poets, between Modernism and the Romanticism it masked, so the poetry of the second half of the century can be read as the even more complicated dialectic between Neoromanticism and Postmodernism [...] the history of American poetry since the forties can most incisively be told in terms of that dialectic.”¹⁵⁵ Whether or not the story promoted by Gelpi and rejected by Izenberg is true or useful, it is certainly limited in its definition of the Romantic inheritance in twentieth-century poetry. When critics understand the Romantic legacy as an attitude towards selfhood, the map of modernist poetics becomes divided by lines of influence and opposition that fail to account for the many diverse elements of nineteenth-century poetry adopted and adapted in later poetic experiments. Nineteenth-century poetic responses to Enlightenment debates about the nature and reality of infinity are a case in point. Looking at infinity in twentieth-century poetry can serve as a challenge to oversimplifications of what it means to be neo-Romantic, highlighting the

extent to which perhaps unexpected modernist and postmodern writings take up their Romantic inheritance. Expanding our definition of what a Romantic inheritance might look like allows us to read even the most stoic modernist and postmodern poetics within a broader literary-critical frame. For example, George Oppen's 1968 long poem, *Of Being Numerous*, engages not only its historical moment but also the tradition of thinking through the poetics of infinity. Charles Bernstein argues that "in *Of Being Numerous*, the loss of the 'transcendent signified' does not necessitate the abandonment, or absence, of knowledge but its *location* in history, in 'people[,]'" stating that "[t]his view entails both a rejection of the crude materialism of things without history and the crude idealism of history without things."¹⁵⁶ One might apply this perspective to critical practice and argue that even postmodern poems require their historicist engagements.

Critics tend to focus on Oppen's work in its immediate social, political, literary and intellectual contexts. Referring to these points of focus, Stephen Burt has explained Oppen's contemporary appeal:

It's a good time—a good decade [2000-2010]—to think about Oppen. On the one hand, we have learned—perhaps too well—to suspect any claims that the superior invention in a work of art gives a modern artist superior access to truths about social or individual life. On the other hand, we have learned—perhaps too thoroughly—to seek, in the writers we study, signs of commitment to ethical desiderata, support for programs of social justice, and an awareness, if not indeed a kind of guilt, about the conditions of privilege which helped many modernists learn to write as they did.

Oppen and his poems thus seem made for us. A clear inheritor, like the other Objectivists (Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker), of goals associated with William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, but also a man of the left—and, for most of the 1930s, a committed communist—Oppen gave up writing for twenty-odd years rather than subordinate his poetic goals to Party aims. In his heyday, from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, he managed to react to public history, to meditate in verse on political responsibility, while doing justice to his own reserve. Oppen innovated while striving for

humility, and pursued claims about ethics and obligation, without ever seeming to tell his readers (often, without even seeming to know himself) what we ought, as citizens or as human beings, to do. His poems pursued both ethics and ontology, along with American and Jewish history: what must we say, what must we never say, living and writing, for example, during the Vietnam War, and after the Holocaust?¹⁵⁷

I tend to agree with Eliot Weinberger's claim that "Objectivism as a topic, or as an approach to Oppen, could be permanently retired" and that "[o]f the four poets now known as 'Objectivists,' [Oppen, Rekosi, Reznikoff, and Zukofsky] there is only one statement (biographical or aesthetic) which is applicable to all: They were Jewish, and they were obscure at the time."¹⁵⁸ This quibble aside, Burt's description of Oppen's early twenty-first-century reception touches on an important point—that the second-generation American modernists have been invested with a sort of ethical appeal. Indeed, when Burt asks, "what must we say, what must we never say...after the Holocaust[,]" he invokes Adorno's famous claim that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."¹⁵⁹ Those obscure Jews that we call the Objectivists, then, have come to symbolize a less-barbaric modernism, though, as Burt points out, their works are read as "inherit[ing] [...] goals associated with William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound."

Focusing on this idea of multiple modernisms, John Lowney sums up the dominant reading of *Of Being Numerous* as follows:

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Nicholls, among others, have argued, *Of Being Numerous* enacts a critique of the ethics as well as the aesthetics of the "ego system" that structured Pound's *Cantos* and subsequent long poems such as *Paterson* and *The Maximus Poems*. Oppen himself said in his interview with Dembo: "Pound's ego system, Pound's organization of the world around a character, a kind of masculine energy, is extremely foreign to me" [...] And while *Of Being Numerous* posits, at times, an agonistic relation between the poet and the world, it critiques this relation through its dialogic structure, through its rhetorical strategies of self-questioning as well as

through its extensive quotation, whether implicit or explicit, of voices and texts.¹⁶⁰

Nicholls' argument, we should note, engages not only modernism but also a variety of textual and historical contexts to make this claim:

As we have seen, while Oppen was certainly drawn to various aspects of existentialism, he was not inclined to use it as a stick with which to beat the Marxist thinking that had always been so important to him. Indeed, he was fascinated by and in many ways drawn to the New Left which seemed to offer the only credible opposition to the escalating conflict in Vietnam. What would make 'Of Being Numerous' a complex and difficult poem was Oppen's attempt to articulate these different tendencies together.¹⁶¹

Building on these contexts, Nicholls claims:

The passage beyond the self is toward something we might call 'humanity' or 'numerousness' which not only includes the self but which also offers an horizon exceeding that of the individual life.¹⁶²

Speaking to the poem as representing a shift in Oppen's career, Forrest Gander refers to similar aspects of the poem:

[...] *Of Being Numerous*, with its more meditative investigation into intersubjectivity, with its query into how it might be possible to come to terms with existence among others, human and inhuman, in a place awash with preconceptions and logocentrism.¹⁶³

For the philosophical, political, and formal reasons mentioned above, Oppen's long poem devoted to the "madness in the number/Of the living" is, in many ways, decidedly modernist; even its closing citation from Whitman's journals could be read as an homage to Williams. Yet, *Of Being Numerous* is also a poem of preconditions and inherited modes of being and thinking. Perhaps the poem's attitude to its nineteenth-century inheritance is most clearly addressed in the following lines: "I should have written, not the rain/Of a

nineteenth century day, but the motes/In the air the dust//Here still” (sect. 37).¹⁶⁴ While, in true modernist fashion, *Of Being Numerous* avoids the nature and sentiment invoked by “the rain/Of a nineteenth century day,” the very air the poet breathes is infused with “dust//Here still”; this is to say that the various inheritances of literary history permeate the poetic project. Whether Oppen applies Romantic understandings of infinity self-consciously or whether he simply breathes them in along with so many other tropes floating in the air, it is fascinating that Oppen figures the nineteenth-century influence as dust motes, intrinsically numerous and uncountable, ephemeral objects that inflect the boundless and expansive air.

In a similar construction, Oppen writes:

There can be a brick
In a brick wall
The eye picks

So quiet of a Sunday
Here is the brick, it was waiting
Here when you were born

Mary-Anne.
(sect. 21)

Oppen thus emphasizes the preconditions of being and of writing; his long poetic treatment of “inevitable” “infiniteness” and the tension between multiplicity and singularity activates Romantic formulations of infinity.²⁸

²⁸ Writing on *Of Being Numerous*, Mary Esteve argues that “Oppen plants himself squarely in the aesthetic and philosophical tradition of the sublime[.]” stating that “Oppen brings his dual senses of sublime shipwreck and autonomous poet-spectatorship to bear not only on the world of the sixties but on the longer span of American generational history.” [Mary Esteve, “Shipwreck and Autonomy: Rawls, Riesman, and Oppen in the 1960s,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 18, no 2, Fall 2005: 343-4.] I agree that Oppen uses Romantic aesthetics, and focus here on the extent to which *Of Being Numerous* relies on Romantic formulations of infinity.

Of Being Numerous is a straightforward poem to read—sparse, direct: “Speak//If you can//Speak” (sect. 11). Yet it is a poem that resists intervention, and thus resists critique: “the rain falls/that had not been falling/and it is the same world” (sect. 12). It is a poem that questions itself, that makes the critic question herself:

How forget that? How talk
Distantly of ‘The People’

Who are that force
Within the walls
Of cities

Wherein their cars

Echo like history
Down walled avenues
In which one cannot speak.
(sect. 14)

The form and focus of *Of Being Numerous* is enumerative. Staged in 40 sections and obsessed with the interplay between singularity and plurality, the poem meditates on the claim that “Surely infiniteness is the most evident thing in the world” (sect. 34), and examines a world in which “We want to defend/Limitation/And do not know how” (sect. 26). The poem activates a sprawling calculus of modern life, a calculus in which “The shuffling of a crowd is nothing—/well, nothing but the many that we are, but nothing” (sect. 10), and in which “we know that lives/Are single” (sect. 26). Paired, these two quotes from the poem evoke a variety of Enlightenment and Romantic understandings of infinity. That the crowd is “nothing but the many that we are” evokes not only Newton’s interrelated treatments of zero and infinity but also Burke’s artificial infinite, the idea that infinity is sometimes no more than a feeling that arises from the perception of finite forms. The idea that “we know that lives/Are single” simultaneously evokes, both Locke’s and the Wordsworths’ insistence

on the infinity of singular identities, and Hume's rejection of the idea that infinity has or should have anything to do with human life.

Two of the poem's most famous passages take the shipwrecked man as an emblem of the heroic, fantastic, terrifying singularity against which society strives:

[...]Crusoe

We say was
'Rescued'.
So we have chosen.

7

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous.
(sect. 6-7)

And:

The absolute singular

The unearthly bonds
Of the singular

Which is the bright light of shipwreck
(sect. 9)

In the former excerpt, the numeral separating the sections provides a sort of linguistic recursion if read out loud: "chosen/'seven'/obsessed." Indeed, the word "chosen" picks up the phonemes of "Crusoe," so that Crusoe is not only "Rescued" but also linguistically

reintegrated into multiplicity. On the level of letter and sound, Crusoe becomes the “chosen” state of being numerous, which becomes the multiple and symbolically lucky number “seven,” a process that both creates and counters the human obsession with the “shipwreck,” the disaster, “of the singular.” The latter excerpt picks up on this obsession, describing singularity as icon and other—“absolute,” “unearthly,” a “bright light.” In an inverse of Lockean and other formulations of infinity, here it is not infinity, but rather its opposite, singularity, that is the transcendent, divine, and perhaps impossible concept towards and for which one counts.

In *Of Being Numerous*, the Lockean/Kantian formulation by which one counts towards infinity or sublimity is refigured as the practice by which one creates art:

One must not come to feel that he has a thousand threads
in his hands,
He must somehow see the one thing;
This is the level of art
There are other levels
But there is no other level of art.
(sect. 27)

For Oppen, the “level of art” is the level of perception at which one can perceive how the many become one. In addition to invoking Whitman, a poet addressed and quoted by Oppen elsewhere in the poem, this passage seems to echo a Spinozist spirituality, as well as Coleridge’s response to Spinoza in his journals:

Poem on Spirit – or on Spinoza – I would make a pilgrimage to the Deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make [me] understand how the *one can be many!* Eternal universal mystery! It seems as if it were impossible; yet it *is*-& it is every where! – It is indeed a contradiction *in Terms*: and only in Terms! – It is the copresence of Feeling & Life, limitless by their very essence, with Form, by its very essence limited – determinate – definite. –¹⁶⁵

Taken part by part, however, Oppen's definition of the "level of art" mirrors Locke's formulation by which one progresses from enumerative, sensory experience to a belief in infinity—one "must not come to feel" a thousand things, but must somehow "see the one thing." Here, "feeling" gives way to "seeing"—perhaps, thinking of Blake, we could argue that the doors of perception are cleansed and infinity is revealed, or that "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows."¹⁶⁶ In *Of Being Numerous*, it is not infinity as such, but a comprehension that all multiple things are part of a greater whole, that constitutes the "level of art." In this way, both the singular and the multiple are infinite. Oppen's rejection of the singular self, society's rejection of the single self, is not a rejection of Romanticism.

Perhaps this artistic apposition between singularity and multiplicity is most clearly expressed by a more distinctly neo-Romantic poet, Wallace Stevens, in *Metaphors of a Magnifico*. I quote that poem here in its entirety:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

This is an old song
That will not declare itself . . .

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are
Twenty men crossing a bridge
Into a village.

That will not declare itself
Yet is certain as meaning . . .

The boots of the men clump

On the boards of the bridge.
The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit-trees.
Of what was it I was thinking?
So the meaning escapes.

The first white wall of the village . . .
The fruit-trees . . .¹⁶⁷

Like Oppen, Stevens alludes to Whitman (in this case, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*). However, like Oppen, and unlike Whitman, Stevens examines the intrinsic connection of the individual and collective, not only as something to be celebrated, but also as something to be questioned and challenged—“Of what was it I was thinking?/So the meaning escapes” emphasizes the distinctly anti-Whitmanic sentiment that the interconnectivity of numerous people is not inherently meaningful. Stevens and Oppen theorize the leap from single to collective identity—which is, for them, a false leap—the shift of vision from the one to the incomprehensible many, or from the many to the artistic and elevated one. In so doing, their modernist experiments invoke and respond to a diverse Romantic poetics of infinity.

Notes

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- ³⁹ Locke, *Essay*, 198.
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- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.
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- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 299.
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- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 42.
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- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1.
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¹¹² Commonplace book copy of *Lines Intended for Edith Southey's Album*: DCMS 120.25; commonplace book copy of *Floating Island at Hawkshead*: DCMS 120.26.

¹¹³ DCMS 120.27.

¹¹⁴ DCMS 151.3.30.

¹¹⁵ Burke, *Enquiry*, 101.

¹¹⁶ Levin includes an image of this poem-in-palimpsest with the Introduction to the Revised Edition of *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*. Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism: Revised Edition* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), 0.

¹¹⁷ DCMS 118.3.

¹¹⁸ DCMS 118.1.

¹¹⁹ It may be worth noting that the title *Journal of a Tour on the Continent* may have been applied retroactively, and may not be Wordsworth's title for the piece. As opposed to *Recollections of a Tour in Scotland*, both volumes of Wordsworth's fair copy lack a title page, and the binding is labeled only "Journal of a Tour." (Both volumes of the fair copy of *Recollections of a Tour in Scotland* have an intricate title page, reading "*Recollections of a Tour in Scotland by D. Wordsworth Addressed to her Friends*." This fair copy is written in the hand of Catherine Clarkson; towards the end of the second volume, at the end of a paragraph discussing the task of copying over the journal, Clarkson thanks her husband for making the title page: "[...] and the title, on the first page of the work, which my Husband had the kindness to interrupt himself, when he was exceeding busy in his own work, to write for me" (DCMS 50).

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¹²¹ Wordsworth, *Longman*, 167.

¹²² Wordsworth, *Longman*, 145.

¹²³ DCMS 90.33 and 90.34, respectively.

¹²⁴ The first volume concludes with "End of First Part." followed by the footnote, "See extracts from Brockeden's Passes of the Alps at the end of 2nd Volume. DW." This is, in turn, followed by a table of contents and by the travelers' route. DCMS 90.

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¹²⁹ Hyman Eigerman, *The Poetry of Dorothy Wordsworth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), i.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

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- ¹⁴⁵ Ross Feld, "The Apostle's Grudge at the Persistence of Poetry," *Ironwood* 28 (1986): 191.
- ¹⁴⁶ Spicer, *Collected*, 144.
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- ¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.
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- ¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 93.
- ¹⁶³ Forrest Gander, "Finding the Phenomenal Oppen," in *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen*, ed. Steve Shoemaker (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 121.
- ¹⁶⁴ George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions Books, 2002), 163-188.
- ¹⁶⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37.
- ¹⁶⁶ Blake, *Complete Poetry and Prose (Visions of the Daughters of Albion)*, 5.
- ¹⁶⁷ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 19.

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