

“POISONED VESTMENTS”: ROMANTICISM, RHETORIC, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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“POISONED VESTMENTS”: ROMANTICISM, RHETORIC, AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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“Poisoned Vestments” traces the afterlife of classical rhetoric in key works of prose, poetry, and drama in the long eighteenth century, contending that Milton, Rousseau, Wordsworth and Byron engaged in meaningful dialogue with the rhetorical tradition through recurring figures of dress and nakedness. As dress, like language, was a critical feature of organized society, the comparison of rhetorical language to dress in the classical tradition gave expression to some of the ways in which figures of speech served as ordering principles giving legible shape to ideas, but at the same time entailed a host of ideological implications that the Romantics were not the first to find troubling. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Rousseau and Wordsworth amplified the arguments of earlier pastoral and primitivist traditions by insisting that the social order that dress and eloquence represented was inherently corrupt and disfiguring. Yet in spite of their apparently anti-rhetorical stance, they did not abandon the classical tradition: by reacting against the specific comparison of language to the dress of thought, they actually entered an ongoing, trans-historical conversation about the relationship between meaning and expression, and the ways in which this relationship developed in the inescapable context of social determination. In another turn of the wheel in Romantic debates about rhetoric, Byron reacted against Wordsworthian and Rousseauian “primitivism” and set the agenda of re-instating the civilizing “law” of literature in the realm of English letters. However, his efforts remained inconsistent because he sought to

restore the “rules” while at the same time harnessing the sublime and the illimitable and embracing the protean transformations that fashion permitted. Informed by the critical discourses of the history of rhetoric, deconstruction, and cultural studies, *“Poisoned Vestments”* maps how these leading writers brought the material conditions of life at the turn of the nineteenth century to bear on long-standing questions of rhetorical form.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mariam Wassif was born in Egypt and immigrated to the United States at the age of eight. A scholar of English literature of the long eighteenth century, from Milton to the English Romantics, she received her Bachelor of Arts in English, French, and Comparative Literature at the University of Georgia in 2007, and her Master of Arts and Ph.D. at Cornell University. Her research focuses on the relationship between classical rhetoric and material culture in British and French prose, poetry, and drama in the era of the French Revolution. She has taught courses in language and literature at Cornell University, the École Normale Supérieure in Lyon, France, and the Sorbonne–Paris 1. Her first article, “Polidori’s *The Vampyre* and Byron’s Portraits,” recently appeared in the *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Winter 2018).

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INTRODUCTION

Romanticism and the History of Rhetoric

Although the old radical divide between Classic and Romantic no longer holds the same critical sway, Romanticism continues to be defined by its difference from the classical tradition and seen to embrace revolutions in style as well as in politics. The emergence of nationalism, rejection of rules, and valorization of originality are all thought to be Romantic values inimical to the rhetorical tradition (Abbott 106). This dissertation argues, by contrast, that classical rhetoric remained a powerful influence on the Romantics, which they continued to evoke in the recurring and fraught analogy of language as the “dress” of thought. In classical rhetoric this analogy was one of several important comparisons by which philosophers and rhetors sought to manage the vexed problem of the relationship between meaning and expression. As dress, like language, was a critical feature of organized society, the comparison of rhetorical language to dress gave expression to some of the ways in which figures of speech served as ordering principles giving legible shape to ideas. At the same time, this comparison entailed a host of political and economic implications that the Romantics were not the first to find problematic. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Rousseau and Wordsworth amplified the arguments of earlier pastoral and primitivist traditions by insisting that the social order that dress and eloquence represented was inherently corrupt and disfiguring. However, this did not mean that they abandoned the rhetorical tradition: by reacting against the specific comparison of language to the dress of thought, they actually entered an ongoing, trans-historical conversation about the relationship

between meaning and expression, and the ways in which this relationship developed in the inescapable context of social determination.

The dichotomy of Classic and Romantic is partly corroborated by the theories of poetic expression that Wordsworth promulgated and practiced, in varying ways, in early texts like the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and its later “Preface” (1802), the *Prelude* of 1805, and the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (1810). In the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth’s discontent with classical rhetoric *seems* evident in the grisly image he borrows from the classical tale of Hercules and Nessus told in Sophocles’s play *The Women of Trachis* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Alluding to the episode in which Hercules is destroyed by a poisoned coat, Wordsworth proclaims that if words are not an incarnation of thought but only a clothing for it, then they become “poisoned vestments” with the power to “consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on” (*Selected Prose* 361).

Wordsworth here wants to distinguish language as embodied thought from language as only the dress of thought, but as Paul de Man points out in his influential reading, this opposition between body and garment quickly unravels. The poisoned coat, de Man argues, represents not just arbitrary figures as opposed to organic ones, but rhetorical language itself and language-as-trope. In making the unknown accessible to the senses language as figure (whether as body or as dress) becomes disfiguring because it is only a representation—the picture of the thing—and as such is always privative (“Autobiography as Defacement” 80-81).

De Man’s reading opens up a fundamental aspect of the passage that I pursue throughout this project: how Wordsworth’s figure of poisoned vestments inscribes itself

within a broader tradition of classical rhetoric. The full force of the Hercules and Nessus allusion can only be grasped in the context of the long-standing classical precept that language is to thought as clothes are to the body. Metaphor must be fitting, Aristotle wrote in his *Rhetoric*, and must correspond to the thing signified, just as the “purple garment” of a young man would not suit an old one (210-211). Nor is Wordsworth’s remonstrance against language as mere outer garment original, since writers on rhetoric had long warned of using figures superfluously. The German Renaissance humanist Johann Sturm recalled that in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, “it is prescribed that we should not imitate only the likeness of the form, as if only the skin, but that the blood and veins and sinews and muscles should stand forth and be seen” (Spitz and Tinsley 171). This incarnational analogy is similar to Wordsworth’s, but contains no threat of disfiguration and death. Wordsworth’s striking allusion to the coat of Nessus, then, is a repetition of a commonplace about style, with the crucial difference that Wordsworth invokes the analogy to suggest and invite a dramatic break with this traditional view of language. He therefore appears to reject classical rhetoric performatively, by deploying the common comparison and turning it deadly.

Yet as Douglas Kneale argues, the Romantics’ aversion to classical rhetoric (from the rhetorical term *aversio*, a turning away) is also an *occupatio* or *preterition*, a dwelling upon the very thing one claims to pass by. Kneale offers the example of a congressman declaring, “Mr Speaker, I will not even mention my opponent’s lengthy criminal record...” (3). Wordsworth’s coat of Nessus reference makes a similar double move of turning away from and dwelling upon the classical rhetorical tradition, an example of

what Kneale calls “the duplicity of aversion” (5). To minimize Wordsworth’s indebtedness to the classical tradition is to forget the strong classical core of Romantic-era education, where children were taught Latin in childhood and Greek in adolescence before studying classical authors at university, if they had the means (Graver 73). As Richard Clancy has demonstrated, Wordsworth’s uniquely talented teachers at Hawkshead School trained him in a standard classical curriculum focusing on the likes of Cicero and Demosthenes, but provided a structure free of the artificial constraints typically placed on classical education. When Wordsworth went up to Cambridge to continue his training, there was a renewed zeal in classical study at his college of St Johns, but Wordsworth rebelled against what he saw as the narrowness of eighteenth-century Cambridge. Under these influences, Clancy argues, Wordsworth developed into both a revolutionary and a classically rhetorical poet, revolting against an ossified eighteenth-century neoclassicism while allowing what Clancy calls a “classical undersong” to stream through his poetry (xiv-xvii). Certainly Pope seems to be the most immediate target of Wordsworth’s ire in the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, but Wordsworth’s ideal of an embodied, naked language in early texts like the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* doesn’t just set itself against moribund eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Instead, this writing betrays a more broadly anti-rhetorical stance that seeks to reinvent poetic language even as it re-enacts older debates about rhetoric. There is a more savage struggle between rhetoric and revolution than Clancy’s “classical undersong” admits, for as my brief history will suggest, rhetoric does not easily accommodate revolution.

Tracking Wordsworth's reference in the coat of Nessus passage leads back to Pope's neoclassical writing with its "tissue of false thoughts," as Wordsworth calls it, then further still to Milton's blank verse poetics and their post-Civil-War context, and finally to classical rhetoric and its translation into an English art of discourse in the early modern period (Wordsworth, *Selected Prose* 356; Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 11). In its iterations across the English tradition, the classical analogy is not just a pedagogical tool for the study of style, but also a site for thinking through the relationship between body and soul, between word and idea, and between the individual and his or her social context. As such, it discloses much about an era's linguistic, cultural, and metaphysical preoccupations, as well as its relationship to literary tradition. The comparison of reason to a body that is then dressed in pleasing language emerges from the often inimical but ultimately entwined traditions of philosophy, the study of wisdom, and rhetoric, the study of eloquence. The first use of "rhetoric" as a disciplinary term appears in Plato's dialogues, as a name he gives to what Gorgias had described as the magical or drug-like power of persuasive speech to enthrall the listener's will, much as Coleridge's ancient mariner transfixes the Wedding-Guest with his tale (Walker 4-5). The sophist Gorgias had stressed the irresistible force of *logos*, speech or reason, when organized by *kosmos*, a term referring to the order and arrangement of words or things. From the Greek *Kosmos* is derived both the concept of an ordered world (the cosmos) and the idea of ornament and the "cosmetic," indicating the beauty of orderly form but also an artificial or imposed arrangement (Marrow 90-91). Here lie some of the seeds of Wordsworth's anxiety that what makes poetic language distinct from ordinary expression—its arrangement and

figures of speech—also threatens its claims to truth. Wordsworth expresses a version of this old fear when he worries that Lord Lyttleton in the epitaph to his daughter “had been seduced by the example of Pope, whose sparkling and tuneful manner had bewitched the men of letters his contemporaries, and corrupted the judgment of the nation through all ranks of society” (*Selected Prose* 351).

If *Kosmos* presents a threat, then so does its opposite, *akosma*, disorder or chaos, and it is often in terms of the tension between *kosmos* and chaos that debates about rhetoric take place. Cicero and Quintilian credited eloquent orators with founding civil culture, aligning rhetoric, as Jenny C. Mann asserts, “with civilization, gentility, law, and urban culture, [while] opposing it to the barbarism, savagery, and provincial obscurity of ungoverned people and ungoverned speech” (*Outlaw Rhetoric* 202). In vernacular retellings of these origin myths, Mann argues, rhetoric’s civilizing mission acquired the specific purpose of transforming the lawless and vagrant English people into “a settled and orderly community, clothed and housed by the art of rhetoric” (*Outlaw Rhetoric* 204). However, in the turn against rhetoric in the period of the English Civil War, eloquence, which once had been seen to function as an ordering principle, was believed to engender Babel-like confusion and was repudiated in favor of plain and naked forms of expression. “Nakedness” of speech no longer signified barbarity in the negative sense but rather prelapsarian innocence as well as scientific clarity (*Outlaw Rhetoric* 206-207). The values of the Protestant Reformation also favored an idea of scriptural language as embodiment in the tradition of Christ as the word-made-flesh. The carefully interpreted grammar of the

Bible was identified with the salvific body of Christ, whereas elaborate ritual and abstruse allegory were seen as satanic enticements set to confuse believers.

It was in this post-Reformation, anti-rhetorical context that Milton developed the blank-verse poetics of *Paradise Lost* that Wordsworth would imitate in his longer poems. Milton's choice to write unrhymed verse was deliberate, and when he heard that Dryden would be adapting *Paradise Lost* as an operatic libretto in rhyming couplets, he gave only reluctant consent. Comparing Dryden's rhymes to fashionable metal corsets or "tags," Milton gently mocked the changing poetic trends that influenced Dryden, as well as self-deprecatingly suggested that his poetry was too old-fashioned for such trimmings. In fact, the choice to write in blank verse had been a deliberate effort on Milton's part to recover the "ancient liberty" of Homeric poetry and free English poetry from the "modern bondage of Rhyming," as he wrote in the 1669 prefatory note to *Paradise Lost* (Orgel and Goldberg x; Milton, *Major Works* 355). Rhyme, Milton proposes in this note, is "no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse...but the invention of a barbarous age" which modern poets use to their own vexation (355).

As I argue in Chapter 1, the difference between "true" and false ornament or "necessary" and unnecessary adjunct is at the heart of much of the conflict in *Paradise Lost*. The early books of Milton's epic see God creating the world not *ex-nihilo*, from nothing, but *ex-materia*, from matter, a significant divergence from orthodoxy because creation then becomes primarily an act of adornment. Milton explains in his *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* that the primal chaotic matter that emanated from God was "afterwards adorned and digested [meaning broken down or arranged] into order" by his

hand (239). This phase of the creation forms the subject of *Paradise Lost*, which sets out to relate how “the heavens and earth/ Rose out of chaos...” to form a knowable universe (1.9-10). In Book 4 earth is compared to a naked newborn that is then “dressed” by God’s voice. Milton describes how the formerly “[d]esert, bare, unsightly, unadorned” planet is “clad” with grass, “gemmed” with blossoms, and “crowned” with high woods, emphasizing creation as an act of investiture, and investiture as the giving of form and, consequently, legibility and beauty (7.313-26). At the same time, the acts of investiture that form the world into something like a structured language also admit the danger of the cosmos relapsing into chaos. The pliancy of form implied by adornment allows for the possibility that the created world and its inhabitants can mutate, a threat personified by Satan. Depicted as a sophist orator, Satan embodies the cosmetic as false and arbitrary ornament through his ability to appear in different forms—a perversion of messianic incarnation. Yet, since Satan merely dramatizes the mutable aspects of Milton’s humans and the consequence of divine creation as adornment, the threat he represents as a figure for ornament cannot be fully exiled from Paradise.

Milton, along with Rousseau, transmitted these concerns about poetic ornament to his Romantic heirs, with Wordsworth and Byron taking antipodal approaches to their shared legacy. As I have explained, in the period of civil conflict that produced *Paradise Lost*, eloquence came to be associated with chaos and nakedness of speech with Adamic innocence and clarity. In the late-eighteenth-and-early nineteenth century era of revolution, Rousseau and Wordsworth intensified the arguments of earlier pastoral and primitivist movements in insisting that the social order that dress and eloquence

represented was artificial, arbitrary, and disfiguring. Yet, however naively it was later interpreted, their aesthetic of transparency and simplicity did not promise the return to a lost past. In Chapter 2 I analyze key passages from Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, *Émile, ou de l'Éducation* and *Les Confessions*, contending that Rousseau encounters and displays in his rhetoric the difficulty of extrapolating a theoretical fiction of paradise when writing from within the social paradigms he seeks to examine and undermine. He displays this difficulty through complex metaphors of "unveiling" that, contrary to the overt claim of transparency, dramatize the impossibility of undoing or stabilizing the changeable structures that give language and society their legible form. Rousseau developed his theory and rhetoric in the context of an emerging commercial and fashion system as well as the backlash it provoked in the form of philosophical critiques of luxury. In this context, fashion became for Rousseau the pernicious emblem of modernity, in reaction against which he adopted simpler habits of dress and created the fictional Sophie in *Émile* as the model of understated female adornment. However, the problem of arbitrary social determination that Rousseau displays in his rhetoric comes to claim his aesthetic and ideas, disfiguring and re-inscribing them within the realm of *ancien régime* feudalism as well as the realms of fashion and commerce. Furthermore, during the Revolution Rousseau's discourse of transparency became the trigger for ideologies that policed thought and behavior. By examining engravings from the French National Library's de Vinck collection and tracing the fate of revolutionary items of dress like the cockade and the liberty cap, I demonstrate how Rousseau's figures

of transparency both hardened into icons that foreclosed discourse, and mutated in excess of their designated meanings.

Following Milton and Rousseau, Wordsworth adopted a version of the argument the organizing structures of rhetoric and society produced chaos in their continual mutations in time. In Chapter 3 I contend that Wordsworth, writing in the wake of the Revolution and the Terror, confronted an even more acute sense of cultural acceleration and of the threat that the disfiguring realm of fashion and commerce posed to the poet's ability to make sense of the world. In the well-known language of the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth refused to "break in upon the sanctity and truth of his pictures by transitory and accidental ornaments" and adopted a "naked and simple style" intended to pay homage to "the native and naked dignity of man" (*Major Works* 607; 609; 605). Wordsworth was not the first to articulate this aesthetic of simplicity, and in some ways the literary experiment of the "Preface" and the *Lyrical Ballads* (for the "naked and simple" style was his experiment more than Coleridge's) is perfectly consistent with the tendency of European art after 1750 to "reject the ephemeral in favour of the essential," to evoke primitive and pre-social conditions of society, and to write in a language "of the people" that was accessible to a wider audience (Butler 16; 59; 57). Wordsworth is original, however, in the thoroughness and consistency with which he applies these principles in the *Lyrical Ballads*, in his more "extreme" attitude where language was concerned, and in the accessibility that brought out the "primitivist" movement's subversive potential (Butler 60-61). Hazlitt stressed both Wordsworth's engagement with contemporary movements and the novelty with which he applied their principles, calling *Lyrical Ballads*

“one of the innovations of our time. It partakes of, and is carried along with, the revolutionary movement of our age: the political changes of the day were the model on which he formed and conducted his poetical experiment” (167). In his lecture “On the Living Poets” Hazlitt connected the “naked” style to political revolution

The change in the belles-lettres was as complete, and to many persons as startling, as the change in politics, with which it went hand in hand. There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings and people. According to the prevailing notions, all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the commonplace figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered as a piece of antiquated foppery...kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic, as they were decapitated elsewhere: rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government. Authority and fashion, elegance or arrangement, were hooted out of countenance as pedantry and prejudice...The object was to reduce all things to an absolute level; and a singularly affected and outrageous simplicity prevailed in dress and manners, in style and sentiment....The world was to be turned topsy-turvy; and poetry, by the good-will of Adam-wits, was to share its fate and begin *de novo*....

(214-15)

Through the symmetry of his phrases, Hazlitt couples political and poetic ferment; links the decapitation of kings and queens in political revolution with their dethroning in

tragedy and epic; and identifies the abolition of regular government with that of regular meter. In this way, he echoes the Ciceronian myth that eloquence and social order are twinned phenomena. Though written with more than a touch of irony, Hazlitt's lecture usefully identifies how literary convention represented for the early Wordsworth an *ancien régime* relying on linguistic and social difference. At the same time, Wordsworth, like Rousseau, did not simply harken back to a happier state of nature. As I demonstrate in readings of key passages of the 1805 *Prelude* and the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, he confronts through the figure of the "poisoned" or "possessed" vestment the perplexities involved in making sense of a world in which modern commercialism has taken over the poetic acts of comparison that permit meaning-making.

In Chapter 4 I trace how, in another turn of the wheel in debates about rhetoric, Byron set the agenda of re-instating the civilizing laws of literature in the realm of English letters. Viewing Wordsworth's project to "reduce all things to an absolute level" (in Hazlitt's words) as a destructive one, Byron expressed hostility to Wordsworth's seamless blank verse as part esteem for what Gavin Sourgen calls a "tangibly rhetorical poetics" continuous with the classical and English tradition (1-3). In his denunciations of the Lake Poets, Byron takes up and redirects Wordsworth's figures of dress and ornament, punning on "blank verse" when he refers to Wordsworth and company as "blank pretenders" and regrets that "Blank verse...became the order of the day, or else such rhyme as looked still blanker than the verse without it" (Byron, *Complete Miscellaneous Prose* 158; qtd. in Sourgen 1). In these remarks Byron extrapolates an important aspect of Milton's blank verse, its purposeful plainness and avoidance of rhyme as unnecessary

ornament. For Byron, Milton's blank verse was a successful experiment, but one whose results could not be replicated. Though unwilling to say that *Paradise Lost* would not have been better served by the Spenserian stanza or Dantean *terza rima*, Byron concedes that the Milton made an anomalous triumph of blank verse thanks to his strong syntax (Sourgen 1). Wordsworth's blank verse, on the other hand, derailed poetry by abandoning the discipline of Milton's syntax and structure in favor, as Sourgen puts it, of a "copious language and seamless meter," in which sense continually spills over the line breaks in a "feeling of interminable drift" (Sourgen 4). Such strategies in Byron's view create a "chaotic uniformity," or "reduce all things to an absolute level" to return to Hazlitt's phrase (Sourgen 7). In his 1821 *Letter to John Murray on Pope and Bowles*, Byron uses the opposition of clothed and naked speech to defend classical and neoclassical poetics against Lake School "primitivism." In response to William Lisle Bowles's claim that the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Illiad* derives its interest primarily from nature rather than artifice, Byron countered that if the interest of Achilles' armor stemmed only from the naked body it enclosed, then it would have been better for Homer to depict the Greeks and Trojans fighting naked like two savage tribes (*CMP* 135). As the history of rhetoric suggests, in referring to the armor of Achilles Byron isn't simply concerned with what Homer's epic heroes were wearing or even with the most obvious implication that armor protects soldiers from death; instead, Byron deploys the allusion as an echo of the classical practice of equating poetic language with outer apparel. Indeed, the classical concept of *ornamentum* compared rhetorical figures to the arms of a soldier by casting them as the verbal equipment or "accouterments" of an argument.

Offering a host of such sartorial examples, Byron asserts that “A highlander’s plaid- a Mussulman’s turban and a Roman’s toga- are more poetical than the tattooed or un- tattoo-ed buttocks of a New Sandwich Savage, although they were described by William Wordsworth himself- like the “idiot of his glory” (*CMP* 138-9). The disparaging allusion is to Wordsworth’s “Idiot Boy” of the Lyrical Ballads, who gestures and burrs in the place of articulate speech. Identifying Wordsworth with the “idiot” of his creation, Byron here suggests that discarding the garment of classical rhetoric results not simply in an unappealing style, but in unintelligibility. He later equates formlessness with death and burial: without the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Obelisk, and the Sphinx, Byron argues, “the Spots of earth would be unnoticed and unknown—buried like Babylon and Nineveh in indistinct confusion—without poetry—as without existence...such is the Poetry of Art” (*CMP* 133). In this iteration of the *ex-materia* doctrine of creation that Milton adopts in *Paradise Lost*, formlessness is like non-existence. For Byron casting off the veil of eloquence re-creates the Babel story (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 206-7). He therefore dismisses the “[b]abble of green fields and of bare nature,” and describes poetic innovators as the “builders of this Babel attended by a confusion of tongues.” They “have raised a mosque by the side of a Grecian temple and tried to destroy the prior and purely beautiful fabric which preceded them” (*CMP* 148). The “Grecian temple” he describes is the sacred edifice of classical eloquence, whose displacement by a new place of worship—in an Orientalizing gesture referred to as a heretical “mosque”—ruptures tradition and produces incoherence. Guided by these principles, Byron composed his 1821 play *Sardanapalus* using the framework of the three unities, and restored the king to his

legitimate place as the hero of tragedy. Yet Byron's efforts to re-instate the civilizing law of literature remain inconsistent because he seeks to restore the "rules" while at the same time harnessing the sublime and the illimitable and embracing the protean transformations that fashion permitted. By reading the *Letter to Murray* alongside three of Byron's dramas—*Cain*, *The Deformed Transformed*, and *Sardanapalus*—I map the ways in which Byron's Lucretian materialism and polarizing view of history informed a poetics in which chaos and *kosmos* are locked in a perpetual struggle.

Wordsworth and Byron's arguments about rhetoric in an era thought to be living in its aftermath confirm Roland Barthes's spooky pronouncement that rhetoric, "moribund since the Renaissance, ...has taken three centuries to die; and it is not dead for sure even now" (qtd. in Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 8). In the chapters that follow, I trace the afterlife of classical rhetoric in key works of prose, poetry, and drama from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, emphasizing how Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Byron engaged in meaningful dialogue with the rhetorical tradition—in Wordsworth and Byron's case, with Milton as an intervening figure. Informed by the critical discourses of the history of rhetoric, deconstruction, and cultural studies, I map the ways in which these writers brought the material conditions of life at the turn of the nineteenth century to bear on questions of rhetorical form. Trope signifies a turn, and as my readings will illustrate, the turns and returns of classical tropes chart a deviant path across Romantic writing.

CHAPTER I

Paradise Lost and Romantic Rhetoric

While the Romantics' readings of *Paradise Lost* are said to have revived a satanic, revolutionary Milton in contradistinction to the sanitized and puritanical eighteenth-century version of the poet, critics tend to agree that this Romantic satanism was an aesthetic rather than a moral or theological endorsement of Milton's Satan (Kolbrener 200). When Blake wrote that "Milton was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it," he was not attributing Satan's opinions to Milton but rather tracking *Paradise Lost's* creative energy (Wittreich 35; Bloom 180). In that vein, this chapter argues that the Romantic fascination with Satan arises not just from the pathos and grandeur of his suffering or the "sublimity" of his "ruined splendor," as Coleridge put it, but also from his status as a figure for rhetoric and the plasticity of form (Wittreich 244). Through a reading of the temptation scene, I contend that in the infernal powers rather than in the human or divine, Milton could more fully and freely work through the paradox of ornament in ways that resonated with Romantic uncertainties about the possibility of stable meaning. Because they are disembodied and less liable to theological scrutiny than his angels or his God, it is Milton's devils who best crystallize the contradictions contained within the intricate analogy of language as the dress or ornament of thought. This analogy calls into question the relationship between style and substance and the visible and the invisible, as well as identifies rhetoric both as an ordering principle and a source of excess leading to confusion. Furthermore, the analogy engages the cultural system of dress as it both bolstered and disrupted the social order that made the world

intelligible. Through his representation of demons that can “wear” whatever form they choose, Milton makes his epic poem a site of encounter with these difficulties.

The analogy that language is to reason what dress and adornment are to the body emerges from the classical traditions of philosophy, the study of wisdom, and rhetoric, the study of eloquence. While philosophy and rhetoric are often seen as inimical discourses, in fact they have a history of significant interchange. As the German humanist Johann Sturm pointed out, the Greek philosophers adopted many of their opponents’ ideas regarding rhetoric, just as those opponents, the sophists, absorbed and taught philosophical principles (Spitz and Tinsley 126-7). With the revival of the classical tradition in the early modern period, intellectuals looked to Cicero as an exemplary thinker who reconciled wisdom and eloquence. It was in this Ciceronean context that Milton received his classical education at St. Paul’s School and Cambridge, where he was instructed in the overlapping arts of the *trivium*: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. While grammar taught correct speech and writing, logic or dialectic was the study of effective argumentation, and rhetoric was the art of persuasion through verbal eloquence (Haas 48). Under the influence of the French philosopher Peter Ramus, and as a result of the increasing stress on eloquence (*elocutio*) in Renaissance learning, those educated during this period were taught rhetoric as the study of figures and tropes rather than the whole art of argumentation.¹ The writers of early modern rhetorical manuals often rehearse the

¹ When the educational reforms of the Renaissance placed rhetoric at the center of learning, they stressed the mastery of *elocutio* (style) as the study of figures and tropes (Gibson 11). This emphasis on style adapted the classical five-part scheme of rhetoric, which divided rhetoric into *inventio* (discovery), *dispositio* (arrangement), *elocutio* (style), *pronuntiatio* (delivery), and *memoria* (memory). Often translated as “invention,” *inventio* is more accurately a form of

classical analogy that rhetoric was the dress and ornament of reason, but this analogy did not trivialize the role of eloquence; instead, figurative language was thought to give shape to ideas, to illuminate and instruct, and to make truth palatable to the intellect. For Sturm, for instance, style provides not just beauty and persuasive power, but understanding itself: substance, he writes, “cannot be understood unless it is expressed in speech, which must be fashioned not only by the choice of words, but also by their arrangement” (qtd in Pallister 53).

This word “fashion” is a hinge upon which the comparison of rhetoric to dress turns: its naturalized referent is the act of making as well as the enduring manners or customs of a society, but by at the end of the sixteenth century it had also acquired the sense of “to counterfeit or pervert” (Jones and Stallybrass 1). The preeminence of rhetorical “adornment” in writing paralleled the importance of dress in early modern Europe, where public appearance and behavior established and maintained social identity (Rublack 7). At the inception of the economic practices whose acceleration around 1800 Wordsworth and Rousseau would bemoan, the shift from a feudal to an emerging capitalist economy gave greater access to a greater variety of luxury fabrics, and thus more freedom for individual self-fashioning through dress (Joyce 53). In rhetorical theory, the idea that the ornament of figurative language gave “shape” to ideas was compared to

discovery, as the first stage of preparing a speech was looking for already existing persuasive arguments, whether among rhetorical *topoi* or commonplaces, such as comparison and contrast or cause and effect; in the knowledge produced by demonstration and dialectic; or by drawing on fields of study outside of rhetoric, such as history or philosophy (Clark 10; Bizzell and Herzberg 4-5). The rhetor then organizes these arguments (*dispositio*); articulates them in proper and appealing language (*elocutio*); uses mnemonics and practice to memorize the speech (*memoria*); and presents the speech with gestures and vocal modulation (*pronuntiatio*) (Bizzell and Herzberg 3-4). Ramus reformed this system by annexing invention and disposition to the study of logic, and reducing rhetoric to style and, to a much lesser extent, delivery (Bizzell and Herzberg 9-10; 475)

the ways in which dress gave “shape” to individuals and to civilization more generally. The early modern critic George Puttenham wrote that through his writing on poetic ornament, he hoped to outfit the poet in “gorgeous habiliments” worthy of a place of honor in Queen Elizabeth’s court (378). Similarly, in his 1553 *Arte of Rhetorique*, Thomas Wilson writes that “[e]locucion getteth wordes to set furth invencion, and with such beautie commendeth the matter, that reason semeth to bee clad in purple, walking afore, bothe bare and naked” (615). In this metaphor of reason being “clad in purple” by elocution, Wilson adduces the association of purple with royalty. As capitalism and global trade developed in early modern England, sumptuary laws sought to limit consumption and preserve class distinctions, with some laws stating that only members of the immediate royal family could wear purple cloth or purple silk (Joyce 53; Philips 36). In this and other ways, acts of investiture or the putting on of clothes were a “means by which a person was given a form, a shape, a social function” (Jones and Stallybrass 2). Thus when Thomas Wilson claims that *elocutio* makes reason seem to “bee clad in purple,” he compares style to a garment that elevates an individual from complete social insignificance (“bare and naked”) to the utmost significance: to royalty. By analogy, style clads reason in purple in the sense that it gives expression to something hitherto illegible.

At the same time that fashion was understood as a sign of civilization, it could also be unruly, as the need for sumptuary laws suggests. In the sixteenth century the word “fashion” began to take on the sense of restless change, leading to its modern meaning as dress whose essential feature is rapid transformation (Jones and Stallybrass 1). It was also regarded as too luxurious, abundant, and hybrid, and in early modern England came to

signify “the world of expensive imports” tainting a native simplicity (Rublack 12; Jones and Stallybrass 1). Such was the case in rhetoric, too, where the very thing that gave shape to ideas—ornament—could also produce chaos through overabundance and instability of reference. In the fifteenth century Erasmus counseled the use of *copia*—variety and abundance—so that the student of rhetoric might draw upon the rich wardrobe of language to “give different form or shape to the thought” and so avoid “croak[ing]” the same words like a cuckoo (16). At the same time, he warned that, like tautology, too much *copia* could lead to incoherence, causing the rhetor to “fall into a kind of futile and amorphous locquacity” (11). Milton’s era of civil war witnessed a turn against rhetoric that dovetailed with the Cromwellian rejection of courtly excess, symbolized in the unfashionably short hairstyle of the Roundheads (Dobronski 337).² In the realm of rhetoric, eloquence was believed to engender Babel-like confusion and was repudiated in favor of plain and naked forms of expression—an aesthetic that Wordsworth and Rousseau would later claim to adopt (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 206-7). John Locke’s famous harangue against rhetoric in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) is seen as a pivotal moment in rhetoric’s loss of prestige, and the art of eloquence is thought to have died thereafter because of its incompatibility with Enlightenment science’s emphasis on transparency and with Romantic theories of individual genius (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric*, 215-16). Their revolutionary moment was another impetus propelling the Romantics to look to Milton as the exemplar of a poetic style consistent with republican values, with

² Although, as Linda Levy Peck argues, consumption continued apace even among Parliamentarians.

Wordsworth praising Milton's sonnets as "distinguished by simplicity..., and undisfigured by false or vicious ornaments" (Wittreich 110).

Importantly, Wordsworth condemns not all ornaments but only "false or vicious" ones, yet this apparently clear standard presents the problem that there can be considerable disagreement as to which ornaments are "false and vicious" and which are necessary and appropriate. Milton and Dryden's disagreement over rhyme is a good example of this. When Milton learned that Dryden would be adapting the blank verse *Paradise Lost* as an operatic libretto in rhyming couplets, he reluctantly gave Dryden leave to "tag [his] points," comparing Dryden's superfluous and constraining rhymes to fashionable metal corsets (Orgel and Goldberg, "Introduction" ix). Dryden, for his part, found blank verse too "luxuriant" because it lacked the discipline of rhyme, and insisted that rhyme was no mere "embroidery of sense, to make that which is ordinary in itself pass for excellent with less examination." Instead, rhyme disciplines the poet's "wild and lawless" imagination, for without it, "[t]he great easiness of blank verse renders the poet too luxuriant" (Dryden 3-4). Thus what Milton found an ornament too much Dryden deemed, on the contrary, a means of disciplining unruly verse. Wordsworth and Byron would later reenact this rhetorical debate, with Wordsworth imitating Milton's blank verse in his *Prelude* and Byron finding Wordsworth's verse truly "blank" both in the sense of "unadorned" and in the sense of without expression because of the unmarked way in which one line glided into the next. Wordsworth, for his part, rejected overtly rhetorical language as false and vicious ornament in the *Lyrical Ballads*, arguing in the "Preface" that poetry should differ from ordinary language only in being metrical. Having said this,

however, he anticipates the objections of those who will consider even meter an unnecessary embellishment inconsistent with Wordsworth's "naked and simple" style (*Major Works* 295). For this reason, since the opposition of "dressed" versus "naked" speech is an uncertain guideline, a more fruitful approach is to map the figures of dress and nakedness themselves, and thus to examine rhetoric's ideologically-inflected, self-reflective language. *Paradise Lost* and its Romantic-era retellings lend themselves to this kind of analysis because they thematize the relationship between the body and its ornaments and specifically invoke the adorned or unadorned body as a reflection on their own style. A reading of meta-rhetorical tropes has its limits, but it reveals that what is at stake in the long-standing debates about style is not just the question of pleasure and beauty, but also the question of whether and to what extent words have a reliable relationship to the world, and in what ways they might *deform* truth through their shaping power.³

Milton's questioning of the status of ornament emerges in his engagement with Aristotelian thought in the humorous early poem "At a Vacation Exercise," whose analysis leads N.K. Sugimura to the conclusion that for Milton "being is detachable from the nexus of worldly relationships that define it" and that "thought transcends the material

³ As Derrida contends in "White Mythology," even the tutelary meta-tropes or founding concepts of metaphysics are structured by philosophical oppositions of sensual/spiritual, sensible/intelligible, sensory/sense, and so cannot escape the tropic movements they seek to master. At the same time, "the extra term of speech becomes the missing term of speech" because these "tutelary" tropes cannot dominate themselves, and so remain outside the system. Meta-tropes, therefore, are both ineluctably subject to, and elusively outside of, the laws of metaphoricity they establish. This, for Derrida, constitutes the condition of "impossibility" for a philosophy of metaphors, and the "irreducible effect of both profit and loss" that accompanies philosophy as a system of metaphorization (Derrida 219-220; Bass 209 n.2).

vestments of language” (Sugimura 23-24). Without overemphasizing his materialism, I would argue instead that in this poem Milton does not neatly resolve the relationship between transcendent thought and material language. In the address to the English language in the first part of “Vacation Exercise,” Milton hails his native tongue as the power that first drove away “dumb silence” and gave his younger self imperfect expression (“childish tripps,”), then asks that tongue to gift him with the rich attire of eloquence (5; 3). He says he desires “Not those new fangled toys, and trimmings slight/ Which takes our late fantasticks with delight”—rejecting fashion in its association with the trivial, the needlessly innovative, and the extravagant (or “fantastic”)—, but nevertheless invokes the sumptuousness of the English language:

But cull thy richest Robes, and gay'st attire
Which deepest Spirits, and choisest Wits desire:
I have some naked thoughts that rove about
And loudly knock to have their passage out. (21-4) ⁴

While it is true, as Sugimura notes, that the “naked” thoughts pre-exist language, Milton suggests that they are mere noise—they “loudly knock”—raising the question of how thought can exist in coherent, much less communicable, form before linguistic expression. The second part of the poem further examines this question through a farce playing on Aristotle’s distinction between substance and accident. In the *Categories*, Aristotle divides being into ten kinds of “things,” where substance is the primary and

⁴ A “fantastic” is “one who has fanciful ideas or indulges in wild notions” or “one given to fine or showy dress; a fop.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Milton’s “late fantasticks” line as an example of the use of the word in the latter sense of a flashy dresser (“Fantastic, adj. and n.”).

fundamental thing on which the nine others are dependent or predicated (Aristotle 17-23; Sugimura 18; Lawson-Tancred xxiv). In the *Metaphysics*, meanwhile, Aristotle differentiates between being itself and “accidental” being, where the accidental properties of a thing come into being with it but are not necessary for its existence: the whiteness of a man, for instance, is an accidental property “for men are not always or for the most part white” (Aristotle 91-2). Drawing upon this idea, Milton imagines himself as *Ens* (Being) and addresses his ten sons, the Praedicaments, so named because they are “predicated” on Substance but also because they raise a philosophical quandary or “Gordian knot” (90). Milton, as *Ens*, addresses his son, Substance:

Good luck befriend thee Son; for at thy birth
The Faiery Ladies daunc't upon the hearth;
The drowsie Nurse hath sworn she did them spie
Come tripping to the Room where thou didst lie;
[...]
She heard them give thee this, that thou should'st still
From eyes of mortals walk invisible, (59-66)

Although Substance initially has priority over his brothers, a Sybil predicts the reversal of this dynamic:

Your Son, said she, (nor can you it prevent)
Shall subject be to many an Accident
Yet every one shall make him underling
And those that cannot live from him asunder,

Ungratefully shall strive to keep him under,

[...]

From others he shall stand in need of nothing,

Yet on his Brothers shall depend for Cloathing. (73-82).

In this way, as Sugimura points out, the hierarchy of Aristotle's categories is turned upside down, and Substance seen to be predicated on the secondary qualities that make it "apprehensible (to us)" (Sugimura 20). While Sugimura concludes that here metaphor figured as clothing, "may provide for the description but not for the definition" and that "[w]ords, insofar as they are material coverings, are dispensable to 'naked thoughts,'" I want to stress the "predicament" that Milton identifies in Aristotelian thought: while substance is primary and independent ("in need of nothing"), it nevertheless must have *some* qualities to define it ("Yet on his Brothers shall depend for Cloathing") (Sugimura 24).⁵ In this way, while Milton does not necessarily assert the primacy of this "cloathing," he uses these paradoxical lines to mock a potential limitation of Aristotle's theory, and confronts the relationship between substance and accident as a dilemma. William Blake would take this line of thinking a step further, stating with typically Blakean assuredness:

Deduct from a rose its redness, from a lilly its whiteness, from a diamond its

hardness, from a sponge its softness, from an oak its heighth, from a daisy its

⁵ Hugh Lawson-Tancred evokes this possible counter-argument to Aristotle in his introduction to the *Metaphysics*: if, for instance, the quality of being musical (accident) is non-reciprocally dependent upon Socrates (substance), "it can be rejoined that Socrates must, presumably, have some qualities, and it is far from obvious that Aristotle can have any ultimately persuasive response to this objection to his picture of the ontological dependency of qualities on substance" (xxiv-xxv).

lowness, & rectify every thing in Nature as the Philosophers do, & we shall return to Chaos, & God will be compell'd to be Eccentric if he Creates, O happy Philosopher. (Wittreich 34)

In an echo of Milton and Luther's account of creation as the "investing" of chaos with form by giving outward qualities to otherwise undefined things—which I will discuss below—Blake, as Joseph Anthony Wittreich notes, "raises the question of how we can know that an object composed only of the primary qualities really exists, since we experience only the secondary. For Blake, this raises the question of whether God's creation as we experience it is, under Locke's system, possible at all; for all that is left is a chaos of jostling particles" (Wittreich 14). While Milton is not so definite, he nevertheless engages with the same difficulty in his iterations of the analogy that language is the dress of thought.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton encounters this difficulty in his depiction of the rebel angels and especially Satan, bedeviling readers in the account of the war between heaven and hell as literal armed warfare such as that taking place on earth in his own time. For Samuel Johnson and later Wordsworth, this choice led Milton to be inconsistent in his depiction of the spirits, whom he alternately embodies and disembodies. Johnson complains:

Another inconvenience of Milton's design is that it requires the description of what cannot be described, the agency of spirits. He saw that immateriality supplied no images, and that he could not show angels acting but by instruments of action; he therefore invested them with form and matter. This being necessary

was therefore defensible; and he should have secured the consistency of his system by keeping immateriality out of sight, and enticing his reader to drop it from his thoughts. But he has unhappily perplexed his poetry with his philosophy. His infernal and celestial powers are sometimes pure spirit and sometimes animated body. (Shawcross 305)

Wordsworth likewise remarks that “Milton is perpetually entangled in difficulties respecting the armour he has chosen to give his Angels. Satan when from a toad he starts up in his own shape is thus described [“] nor wanted in his grasp what seemed both spear & shield...[”] (Wittreich 107). Yet these depictions of spirits nevertheless engender a productive indeterminacy: they allow Milton to keep “immateriality” in sight and in tension with its poetic representation, and thus permit him to reflect on rhetorical language. What Wordsworth calls Milton’s distrust of “anthropomorphitism” informs an aesthetic of slippery and shifting form that is evident most clearly in Milton’s devils and specifically linked to rhetoric and the question of ornament (Wittreich 130). From the rich classical vocabulary of stylistic figures, Renaissance rhetors appropriated the term *ornamentum*, meaning “ornament” or “adornment” but also referring to the equipment or arms (accouterments) of a soldier. It is appropriate, then, that Milton uses scenes of the demons’ arming as occasions for questioning the ontic status of ornament. What readers find both frustrating and fascinating about the demonic passages—the way in which they alternately embody and disembody the demons—is precisely the quality that allows Milton to explore ornament as both the giving of definite form to things that otherwise cannot be assimilated to sense experience, and the mutability and plasticity implied by an

idea of form as constructed through outward qualities rather than inherent. Although the alignment of ornament with the demonic may be read as an anti-rhetorical gesture, I will demonstrate how Milton's devils dramatize aspects of his human characters, and how their excesses can be seen as a consequence of Milton's concept of divine creation.

The meta-rhetorical figure of dress appears most clearly in a negative context in reference to Belial, whose name contains the word "belie" and who during the council in Pandaeonium urges against war with heaven in a speech Wordsworth might have characterized as a "tissue of false thoughts" (*Selected Prose* 356). Milton frames Belial's speech with reminders to mistrust him that take the form of an emphasis on the falseness of appearance. He associates this over-determined outside with the implicit effeminacy of Belial, which is particularly evident in contrast with the fierce militancy of the preceding speaker, Moloch. Belial counters Moloch by arguing against war with Heaven, and Milton consequently depicts him as the slothful proponent of "ignoble ease," much as Byron would do for his unwarlike king Sardanapalus, whose relationship to rhetoric I examine in Chapter 4. In thus characterizing Belial, Milton conforms to an ancient discourse of heroic masculinity that linked this ideal with a "manly" writing style distinct from a lax, effeminate one favoring words over things (2.227; Mann, "Slack Muse" 53). The description of Belial as he rises to deliver his rebuttal to Moloch highlights his physical grace, then links this beauty to his honeyed tongue:

A fairer person lost not heaven; he seemed
For dignity composed and high exploit:
But all was false and hollow; though his tongue

Dropped manna, and could make the worse appear

The better reason, to perplex and dash

Maturest counsels: for his thoughts were low (2.111-117)

Once Belial has spoken, Milton sums up his speech as “words clothed in reason’s garb,” invoking the classical understanding of oratory as eloquence clothing a body of reason, as well as evoking the danger that this clothing can become a disguise or disfigurement (2.226). In framing Belial’s speech, Milton makes another allusion to the hazards of the rhetorical tradition. The accusation that Belial “could make the worse appear/ The better reason” echoes almost exactly Quintillian’s summary of the charge against Socrates, whom Aristophanes accused of teaching “how to make the worse reason appear the better” (Bizzell and Herzberg 323). In *The Clouds* Aristophanes conflates Socrates with the sophists against whom Socrates had spent his life fighting (Church xvii). Encapsulated by Protagoras’s proverb that “of all things the measure is man,” sophism propounded a doctrine of relativism and “radical phenomenality,” in which things are only what they appear to each individual, depending on circumstance and the person’s perceptual apparatus (Barilli 4; Bizzell and Herzberg 23). Denying the possibility of stable, non-contingent truth, sophist rhetoric taught the art of “making the weaker argument stronger,” so that one could argue both sides of a question (Sprague 13). In highlighting Belial’s ability to “make the worse appear/ The better reason,” Milton aligns him with the sophist practice of bolstering the logically weaker position. Indeed, F. J. Church quotes this line in summing up Aristophanes’ account of Socrates as a sophist: “He [Socrates] professes to have Belial’s power to ‘make the worse Appear the better reason’” (Church

xviii). In contrast to Quintillian's statement ("that he taught how to make the worse reason appear the better"), Milton's syntax emphasizes "appear": the stress of the iambic foot falls on the second syllable, and the word receives additional pressure by coming at the end of an enjambed line whose syntax carries over into the next verse-line. In this way, Milton denounces through Belial the rhetorical practice of enriching the weaker cause as well as stresses its origin in the philosophical equation of truth with appearance. For one consequence of Protagoras's maxim, at least according to the anti-sophists, is that truth as a construct of individual perception can be subject to rhetorical manipulation (Pallister 210). Yet Milton condemns the sophist origins of the rhetorical tradition precisely in one of the moments in which he most flagrantly distorts language: that is, in when he engages in what Johnson and Wordsworth consider the absurdity of describing the "agency of spirits." Through catachresis—an "abuse" in which a word is applied to a concept for which no word exists—Milton applies the terms fair "person" and honeyed "tongue" to Belial, a spirit without a foundation of flesh and bone (Erasmus 30). In this sense, Belial's "false and hollow" language is also Milton's language, in which a figure of speech works as a kind of "possessed vestment" with no body beneath (Wordsworth, *Prose Works* 177). This figurative language gives shape to something otherwise unassimilable to sense experience but also entails the possibility of a false and deceptive image liable to manipulation.

Milton thus manifests contradictions of poetic ornament in Belial that he then explores more fully in the portrayal of Satan, whose classical eloquence is a catalyst for the fall. In Satan's journey to Paradise and temptation of Eve, as in Belial's speech,

ornament delimits and makes things knowable while also tending to excess; rhetoric makes thought visible but allows it to mutate. What Johnson finds annoying or illogical in Satan, the fact that he at some times has a “determined form” and at others seems to be “mere spirit that can penetrate matter at pleasure,” is what makes him an embodiment of speech itself (Shawcross 305). Satan is the sophist orator *par excellence* whose power to manipulate truth is figured as the ability to change his outward shape.

Because Satan represents a remnant of the chaotic, pre-formed universe and an excess of the created one, Milton’s doctrine of creation is key to understanding Satan’s troubling presence. This doctrine was not the orthodox one of generation from nothing (*ex nihilo*), but rather the belief that God made the universe *ex-materia* (from matter) and *ex-deo* (out of himself) (Lowenstein 25). In Milton’s universe things come into being precisely through a divine act of “adornment,” the work of forming the world by dividing matter into identifiable shapes. Like the hybrid account of creation in Genesis, Milton’s version shows God both acting on the world, like pagan deities, as well as creating the universe through his speech. Two related models emerge from this dual account: on the one hand, God is a surgeon or sculptor who works with his hand to shape the things of the world; and on the other, he is an orator who shapes these things through language, with the account of creation recorded in Genesis as the exemplary rhetorical act. In the first book of his *Art of English Poesy*, Puttenham even compares poets to God through the Greek etymon *poeta*, maker (1.1.93).⁶ While Puttenham’s *ex-nihilo* poet invents things “from nought,” Milton’s *ex-materia* God produces things by adorning unformed matter. In

⁶ God as orator also provides the model for preachers, whom Calvin describes as mouthpieces for Christ’s regeneration of men.

Christian Doctrine's interpretation of Genesis 1-3, Milton relies on the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin verbs meaning "to create" for his premise that the universe was not created out of nothing but out of a primal chaotic material. Emanating from God, this initially "confused" and "formless" matter was "afterwards adorned and digested [broken down or arranged] into order" by his hand (239). It is this phase of the creation that forms the subject of *Paradise Lost*, and one implication of the *ex-materia* doctrine is that the poem's energies are devoted to describing the "adornment" and ordering of chaotic matter rather than the generation of matter from nothing. Thus *Paradise Lost* sets out to relate how "the heavens and earth/ Rose out of chaos," and in the more detailed account of Book 7, deploys gestational metaphors favoring the organic model of creation Milton offers in the *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, in which God passes on his "corporeal" element to the created world before shaping it with his voice and hand (*PL* 1.9-10; Orgel and Goldberg 853; *Christian Doctrine* 240-1).

In thus describing the shaping and adornment of the universe, Milton remains consonant with both patristic and protestant accounts of creation. In his commentary on Genesis, Martin Luther recounts that God first created a kind of "mud," "which was not yet distributed nor adorned with its proper form" (43). The expression "adorned with its proper form" sheds light on Milton's use of "adorn" in *Christian Doctrine*, suggesting that this word, which in its primary sense means to beautify or embellish, is here used to denote giving shape as a necessary part of bringing into being. The pivotal role of adornment is even clearer when Luther describes the destruction of the earth as a plummeting into original chaos, confusion, and emptiness. By contrast with this state, he

reminds readers, “You now behold the earth standing out of the waters, the heavens adorned with stars, the fields with trees, and cities with horses; but should these things be taken away and hurled into confusion and into one chaotic heap, the state of things thus produced would be what Moses calls TOHU and BOHU [“empty” or “waste”]” (44). Though matter would still exist—in “one chaotic heap,”—this apocalyptic world would be empty and waste because unadorned by distinct objects.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton similarly contrasts the “chaotic heap” of the pre-formed world with the ordered and ornamented spheres of heaven and the created universe. The poem’s various netherworlds, presided over by anarchic figures like Chaos and Night, are remnants of the pre-created universe. At the end of the second and beginning of the third book, Satan makes his way from these desert lands to Earth and ultimately to Paradise, and as Satan passes the “nethermost abyss” (2.969), Chaos explains how he must defend his frontiers against encroaching lands:

... first hell

Your dungeon stretching far and wide beneath;

Now lately heaven and earth, another world

Hung o’er my realm, linked in a golden chain

To that side of heaven from whence your legions fell: (2. 1002-6)

This image of the world linked to heaven by a golden chain is revived as Satan continues along his journey,

at leisure to behold

Far off the empyreal heaven, extended wide

In circuit, undetermined square or round.
With opal towers and battlements adorned
Of living sapphire, once his native seat;
And fast by hanging in a golden chain
This pendent world.... (2.1046-1052)

Heaven is here “adorned” with objects that are more than decorative: opal towers and sapphire battlements that give heaven its discernible form and protect its boundaries. Earth, meanwhile, is compared to a jewel hanging on a golden chain, pendent not only in the literal sense but because it hangs in the moral balance, caught between ordered heaven and chaotic hell. As Book 3 opens, the Hymn to Light, a song of praise to God the Son, explains how this universe was created out of chaos through the graphic image of dress. Milton addresses the Son:

...before the sun,
Before the heavens thou wert, and at the voice
Of God, as with a mantle didst invest
The rising world of waters dark and deep,
Won from the void and formless infinite. (3.1-12)

In the final four lines Milton lays stress on God’s “voice,” which alliterates with “invest” and resonates several lines later with the “void” which the voice fills and banishes. Where Luther uses apocalyptic imagery to dramatize the contrast between form and chaos, Milton registers the emptiness of the pre-formed world in the echoing effect created by the assonance and alliteration of “world...waters...won” and “dark and deep” of lines 11-12,

as well as by the long vowels, many of them rounded, accented by the iambic meter: “The rising world of waters *dark* and *deep*,/ Won from the *void* and *formless* infinite” (emphasis added). These resonances, creating the effect of a voice echoing in emptiness, emphasize the abyssal quality of the “unadorned” world as a contrast with fully formed and “invested” or enveloped one that springs into being at the sound of God’s voice.

Milton describes this world in more detail in Book 4, in which he embodies God as father of the corporeal world and earth as a child “in the womb.../ Of waters” (276-7).

Once born, the naked earth is dressed by God’s voice:

He scarce had said, when the bare earth, till then
Desert and bare, unsightly, unadorned,
Brought forth the tender grass whose verdure clad
Her universal face with pleasant green,
Then herbs of every leaf, that sudden flowered
Opening their various colours, and made gay
Her bosom smelling sweet: and these scarce blown,
Forth flourished thick the clustering vine, forth crept
The swelling gourd, up stood the corny reed
Embattled in her field: and the humble shrub,
And bush with frizzled hair implicit: last
Rose as in dance the stately trees, and spread
Their branches hung with copious fruit; or gemmed
Their blossoms: with high woods the hills were crowned (7.313-26)

The image of a formerly “[d]esert, bare, unsightly, unadorned” earth that is now “clad” with grass, “gemmed” with blossoms, and “crowned” with high woods emphasizes creation as an act of investiture or a giving of form, with beauty as a consequence rather than a primary goal of this investiture. It is this forming and beautifying that makes earth resemble heaven as a fit habitation for gods: “That earth now/ Seemed like to heaven, a seat where gods might dwell” (7.328-29).

This account of Earth collapses the bodily and the geographical into a single category, in that the planet is given the body of a woman adorned with all the richness of clustering vine and copious fruit. Likewise, what constitutes Eden as a *locus amoenus* is its embodiment as a place, its segregation from the “boundless continent” on which Satan first alights. Etymologically the word “paradise” (Persian *pairidaeza*, park <*pairi*- around+ *daeza* wall>) refers to a walled park or garden, and the utopian qualities of Milton’s Paradise depend upon exclusion (Sauer and Smith 141). Satan’s journey to Paradise thus charts a course through concentric circles of enclosure: the “first convex” or outer shell of the created universe, which “enclosed/ From Chaos the inroad of darkness old” (3.419-420); the gate of heaven “With frontispiece of diamond and gold/ Embellished, thick with sparkling orient gems” (506-507); and finally the border of Eden itself,

...where delicious Paradise,

Now nearer, crowns with her enclosure green,

As with a rural mound the champaign head

Of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides

With thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,

Access denied.... (4.132-137)

From the perspective of the approaching Satan, the wilderness rises to form a “head” of open country (“champaign”), which is crowned by the “enclosure green” of Paradise. The first port of entry, the steep wilderness, is described as a hirsute body, “whose hairy sides/ With thicket overgrown” seem to be signposted with the message “Access denied.” The superimposition of fleshly qualities onto this landscape links the fate of enclosed land with enclosed but nonetheless permeable bodies, a connection reinforced by the post-lapsarian description of the clothed body as “fenced” just before it is cast out into a “fenceless world” (9.1119; 10.303).⁷ When Satan penetrates the walls of paradise, this is only the first step in a series of such violations that culminate in the penetration of Eve herself.

Thus the tension of ornament as delimiting form is that the distinct objects and, on a broader scale, bodies of land thus framed both overrun their own perimeters and remain vulnerable to penetration from the outside. The boundary markers themselves are either dilated or adorned to excess, like the gate of heaven “thick with sparkling orient gems”; the hairy sides of the wilderness, which deny access “[w]ith thicket overgrown”; or the clustering vine and copious fruit that give earth its form but threaten to overburden it. These bounded objects and bodies of land are unable not only to contain themselves,

⁷ The world is “fenceless” in the sense of defenseless (“Forfeit to death,” as the next line clarifies), but also with an implication of unfenced (Orgel and Goldberg 909). Adam and Eve, now “fenced,” are compared to Native Americans: “Such of late/ Columbus found the American so girt with feathered cincture, naked else and wild/ Among the trees on isles and woody shores” (1115-1118). Evoking the trope of the “naked savage” at home in nature, the description of the American girt with a “cincture” (literally an enclosure) but otherwise naked among the trees suggests a body hardly separate from the landscape, almost devoid of differentiating signifiers. As Scott Manning Stevens argues, the native body presented itself to Europeans as “an emblem of human corporal materiality.” See his “New World Contacts and the trope of the ‘Naked Savage’” in *Sensible Flesh*, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey, U of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, p. 128.

but also to keep the outside from coming in. Enter Satan, whose rhetoric, with its power to move listeners, is no respecter of physical boundaries. Satan's intrusion into Paradise foretells more such violations, and it is precisely his ability to enter and "wear" different bodies that allows him to access exclusionary spaces as well as makes him the poem's most effective rhetorician.

In order to breach Paradise, Satan first must hoodwink Uriel, and so he "casts to change his proper shape": he both casts about to change his shape and casts off his shape as though it were clothing (3.634; Orgel and Goldberg 876). Wishing to appear as a "stripling cherub," Satan dons this angelic costume with care, and the description of his outfitting is interspersed with ironic reflections on fit and fitness. Though Milton elsewhere describes spirits as mutable, here he attributes to Satan a "proper" shape, in the sense of intrinsic (proper to Satan) as well appropriate (proper for him). After casting off this "proper shape," whatever it may be after the fall, Satan infuses every limb of his cherubic form with "suitable grace"--grace conforming or fitted to the new shape. He completes the look with a set of wings ("...wings he wore") and makes the whole a "habit fit for speed succinct." Satan's cherubic costume is both fit for his purpose and fit for speed because "succinct," engirdled or efficient rather than voluminous (Orgel and Goldberg 876). The irony of this language of fit and compactness is not only that this costume is not "suitable" for its wearer, but also that satanic eloquence is always extravagantly bursting at the seams, traveling from place to place and from body to body. It thus defies the order implied by a division of matter into forms, or, in the literary sense of "fit," of a poem into sections. The image of Satan literally outfitting himself as a cherub

metaphorically represents or “makes visible” how his eloquence allows him to magic false images, and so to “clothe” himself in righteousness through the hypocrisy that language makes possible:

So spake the false dissembler unperceived;
For neither man nor angel can discern
Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks
Invisible, except to God alone. (681-4, emphasis mine)

Here Satan speaks “unperceived” in the sense of invisible as himself: his vestimentary and linguistic disguise goes undetected. This stress on invisibility (Satan is “unperceived” rather than misperceived) evokes the paradox that invisible speech can produce persuasive images. The sophist Gorgias wrote that speech is a great ruler, “which accomplishes divine deeds with the smallest and least apparent of bodies,” and here Milton represents this problem by depicting Satan as, in a sense, pure speech: himself invisible, he can stealthily “wear” many forms and create compelling images that invade the mind (Wardy 38). It’s in this way that Satan manages to fool Uriel:

And oft though wisdom wake, suspicion sleeps
At wisdom’s gate, and to simplicity
Resigns her charge, while goodness thinks no ill⁸
Where no ill seems.... (686-90)

⁸ The feminine pronoun can refer either to wisdom or to suspicion. Since “charge” means both the responsibility for something and the person or thing for which one is responsible, there are two possible readings: 1. Suspicion resigns suspicion’s charge (responsibility) to simplicity; or 2. Suspicion resigns wisdom’s charge (thing or person committed to care) to simplicity. The second reading is likely because in the temptation scene Eve calls wisdom “she”: “...thou open’st wisdom’s way,/And giv’st access, though secret she retire” (9.809-10).

This description of how Satan bypasses the guardian of the universe's outermost orb is an allegory of sense perception. Internalizing the situation of the passage, in which an interloper attempts to hoodwink a guard, the allegory personifies wisdom as the occupant of an estate or some enclosed space, with suspicion as the guardian of wisdom's gate. When a man or angel is "beguiled," it's because "suspicion sleeps," shutting its eyes to potential intruders on wisdom's domain. This allegorical representation of how one might be fooled by hypocrisy maps cognition spatially, figuring the mind as an enclosed space with wisdom vigilant within but suspicion sleeping at the gate. The implication of this spatial metaphor is that when Satan convinces Uriel to let him pass literally (allowing him to continue on to earth), he also lets him pass figuratively beyond wisdom's gate. In that sense, persuasive speech violates the boundaries of mind, and can do so precisely because it's "invisible" and so makes itself visible in various and shifting forms.

Once Satan has bypassed Uriel, his speech finally betrays him in an unexpected way. Soliloquizing at the beginning of Book 4, Satan moves his auditor (himself) to powerful feelings:

Thus while he spake, each passion dimmed his face
Thrice changed with pale, ire, envy, and despair,
Which marred his borrowed visage, and betrayed
Him counterfeit, if any eye beheld.
For heavenly minds from such distempers foul
Are ever clear. [...] (114-19)

Satan's expressions of regret ("Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell" [4.75]) are not overheard; rather their effects on Satan are seen from afar by "sharpest-sighted" Uriel. Just as a speech act (praising God's works) helps turn Satan into the convincing figure of a cherub, another speech act disfigures or takes away this "borrowed visage," reversing the transformation. Remarkably, Satan here is both persuader and persuaded, representative of the Aristotelian "accidents" and contraries of *poiein* (poetic making) and *paschein* (being acted upon). In the course of convincing himself that "reconcilement" between him and God is impossible, Satan undergoes a physiological reaction to each "passion" provoked by the speech. Ire, envy, and despair both darken ("dimmed his face") and lighten ("changed with pale," made pallid) his face. Or, in Milton's paradoxical language of light and dark, these passions make Satan's face pale by dimming its cherubic light—and this dimming of the light is what allows Uriel to "see" Satan for what he is. Thus marring Satan's visage, these passions are compared to "distempers foul," diseases caused by a disturbance in the body's humours ("distemper," n.1). It's not simply by remembering his damnation, but by speaking it ("Thus while he spake"), that Satan becomes thus marked by passion as a kind of disease, and finally visible as himself. In this moment of recognition the minute and invisible substance of speech serves to make visible and embody Satan by exciting passion. In thus showing how Satan conceals and reveals himself through speech acts, Milton evokes the paradox of speech as an invisible substance that gives body to things, and so contains the possibility for deception and manipulation.

As in his hoodwinking of Uriel, in the temptation of Eve Satan shifts shape in ways that figure how language can reveal and conceal through the manipulation of form. On entering the garden he seeks to change his “proper” shape to one more “proper” for his purpose, choosing the serpent, “Fit vessel, fittest imp of fraud, in whom/ To enter, and his dark suggestions hide” (9.89-90). Satan must lower himself to a brute beast, and

... thus wrapped in mist

Of midnight vapour glide obscure, and pry
In every bush and brake, where hap may find
The serpent sleeping, in whose mazy folds
To hide me, and the dark intent I bring.
O foul descent! that I who erst constrained
Into a beast, and mixed with bestial slime,
This essence to incarnate and imbrute,
That to the height of deity aspired. (9.158-167)

Echoing the incarnation of Christ as the word-made-flesh, Satan’s incarnation (“This essence to incarnate”) gives him the means to address Eve. A figure of rhetoric, he enters the serpent through the organ of speech—“in at his mouth/The devil entered”—and confers upon him precisely the power to speak, and to cite as the miraculous source of this power the fruit which gave “elocution to the mute, and taught/ The tongue not made for speech to speak thy [Eve’s] praise” (9.748-49). How this eloquence persuades and penetrates “[i]nto the heart of Eve” is the focus of the temptation scene (550).

Milton's depiction of how Satan persuades Eve resonates with Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, in which Gorgias compares Paris' persuasion of Helen to a rape and locates the cause of the Trojan War in persuasive speech. Much like Milton in his depiction of Eve, Gorgias links effective oratory with feminine beauty, but does not thereby empower the women in question. In the *Encomium* Gorgias first makes Helen of Troy a figure for *kosmos*, the "cosmetic" or harmonious arrangement of words or things, by comparing her overpowering beauty to eloquent speech, which exerts great power with the smallest of bodies. By the end of the *Encomium*, however, Gorgias absolves Helen of responsibility for the Trojan War by making her a victim of *kosmos* rather than its agent: she could no more resist Paris's persuasions, Gorgias contends, than she could resist a physical onslaught. Like Helen, Milton's Eve is a beautiful woman who is both the figure for persuasive speech (she convinces Adam to join her in disobedience) and its victim: she is persuaded by Satan's orations. The temptation scene begins by describing the powerful persuasion of a woman's divine beauty (Eve is "divinely fair"), as an awestruck Satan berates himself: "Thoughts, wither have ye led me, with what sweet/ Compulsion thus transported to forget/ What hither brought us" (489; 473-5). Reminiscent of Gorgias, Milton here collapses the force/persuasion dichotomy when Satan is led to forget his purpose by a "sweet Compulsion," a form of coercion that is all the more effective for not seeming like force. In fact, Eve's "heavenly form" robs Satan of his fierce intent "with rapine sweet," as though her soft looks and graceful movements were an act of seizure or plunder, the word "rapine" even suggesting the abduction and sexual violation of a woman (*PL* 9.457; 461; "rapine, n.;" "rape, n."). In other words, Eve is the masculine

component of this equation, and the balance of *poeien/paschein* is initially tipped in her favor. Her unconscious power to compel is the power to move: Satan asks his thoughts whither they have *led* him, and with what force *transported* him from what brought him hither. The figure of transport here suggests that to persuade is not simply to “move” to someone to great feeling but to cause him or her to act, to set someone or something in motion in a way that resonates with “rape” or “rapine” as abduction—the literal moving of a person from place to place.

As in the case of Helen, however, the persuasive force of the cosmetic is introduced in the figure of the woman, only to be turned against her. Once “enclosed/ In serpent, inmate bad,” Satan “toward Eve/ *Addressed* his way” (494-6, emphasis added). Satan *addresses* rather than *directs* his way towards Eve, with the word “addressed” combining the physical direction of Satan’s movement Eve-ward with the direction of his communication. He will tempt Eve through a mode of “address” that praises her and then reverses her understanding of God’s commandment through an apostrophe to the Tree of Life. Picking up on the earlier figure of transport, this description of Satan “addressing” his way foretells how Satan, in moving toward Eve, will eventually move her as she moved him. His “address” will set Eve in motion: “Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate” (9.781). The root of “address” is “dress,” derived from the Old French dresser, “to arrange,” and related to the Latin *dīrectus*, “direct.” In its early uses, “dress” meant to make straight, to order or arrange—later coming to mean to array or attire with suitable clothing, and eventually simply to clothe (“dress, v.”). Just before the encounter with Satan, Eve uses “dress” in the original sense of to arrange or order: “Adam, well may we

labor still to dress/ This garden, still to tend plant, herb and flower” (9.205). The prefix “ad,” meanwhile, contributes a sense of direction, meaning “to, towards, near, or at” (“ad-, prefix”). In addressing his way toward Eve, then, Satan rearranges and puts to rights the gendered dynamic of *poeien* and *paschein*, setting persuasion back on its proper course. Foretelling his linguistic misdirection—an address in which he speaks to the Tree of Life in order to persuade the woman who overhears—Satan approaches Eve “With tract oblique/ At first, as one who sought access, but feared/ To interrupt, sidelong he works his way” (510-512). The language of direction, redirection, and misdirection here emphasizes rhetorical movement, both in the sense that figures move and change and in the sense that they “move” the hearer.

The forces Satan directs towards Eve—like those that compel Helen—are initially the persuasive powers she herself seems to possess. Besides relying on the pleasing shape of the serpent, Satan attracts Eve’s attention with his sidelong movements, which “Curled many a wanton wreath in sight of Eve,/ To lure her eye” (9.517-518). There are distinct echoes here with the description of Eve’s ringlets, which she wears “Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved/ As the vine curls her tendrils” (4.304-307). In the prelude to the temptation, Satan uses these curled wreaths to “lure” Eve’s eye, to move or redirect her sight. Milton makes the movements of Satan’s borrowed body both a factor in his persuasive power (as delivery was part of effective orator) and a figure for it:

She scarce had said, though brief, when now more bold
The tempter, but with show of zeal and love
To man, and indignation at his wrong,

New parts puts on, and as to passion moved,
Fluctuates disturbed, yet comely and in act
Raised, as of some great matter to begin.
As when of old some orator renowned
In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence
Flourished, since mute, to some great cause addressed,
Stood in himself collected, while each part,
Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue,
Sometimes in height began, as no delay
Of preface brooking through his zeal of right.
So standing, moving, or to height upgrown
The tempter all impassioned thus began. (664-78)

Putting on the part of the impassioned orator, Satan appears moved by passion: “So standing, moving, or to height upgrown/ The tempter all impassioned thus began.” The purpose of these galvanic movements, of course, is to “move” Eve herself. The word “addressed” reappears in reference to a renowned orator who turns his attention to “some great cause,” but it also indirectly refers to apostrophe. For, at the height of his oratorical powers Satan makes another rhetorical turn, this time addressing the Tree of Life: “O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,/ Mother of science, now I feel thy power” (678-9). In this instance, the figure of address works through misdirection: by seeming to talk to the tree rather than to Eve, Satan can disguise the work of persuading Eve that the tree is “sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving.” He imposes this image of the tree by addressing it as

such in Eve's hearing—again, acting as the sophistic image-maker whose ornaments of speech (apostrophe) can cause a wise and wisdom-giving plant to spring to life in the mind of the hearer. He then offers his own body as the visible (and audible) proof of the plant's power, instructing Eve, "...look on me,/ Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live,/ And life more perfect have attained than fate/ Meant me..." (687-90). Picking up on Satan's use of the word "incarnate" to describe his transformation into the serpent, the implications here are, again, messianic. Satan's submission of corporeal evidence of the truth of what he says recalls Christ's appearance to doubting Thomas, who is bidden: "Put thy finger here, and see mine hands, and put forth thine hand, and put it into my side, and be not faithless, but faithful" (John 20:27). If Thomas is ultimately faulted for requiring sensible proof of the resurrection, his need to touch and see is nonetheless borne up by the very idea of the word-made-flesh, which to some extent "insisted...that [religion] must be experienced by the senses" (Miles 1).

In the temptation of Eve, the sensible experience of the word leads to its internalization and incorporation into oneself. When he realizes that Eve has tasted the fruit, therefore, Adam attempts to identify the moment of Eve's irrevocable fall and connect it to a particular sense. He suggests that even looking at the fruit had been perilous:

Bold deed thou hast presumed, adventurous Eve!
And peril great provoked, who thus hast dared,
Had it been only coveting to eye
That sacred fruit, sacred to abstinence,

Much more to taste it under ban to touch.

But past who can recall, or done undo?" (9.923-26)

This looking had led Eve not merely to violate the ban on touching the fruit, but to do more: to taste it. It is only after his own fall that Adam points to listening to Satan in the first place as the original misdeed: "O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear/ To that false worm, of whomsoever taught/ To counter man's voice" (1067-69). It's possible to go further back to the dream inspired by Satan whispering in Eve's ear. If the fall is unlocatable in time, however, it can be traced to moments when persuasive speech exploits the senses to gain access to the body's "inside." Indeed, Milton compares persuasive speech to sexual penetration:

He ended, and his words replete with guile
Into her heart too easy entrance won:
Fixed on the fruit she gazed, which to behold
Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound
Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregned
With reason, to her seeming, and with truth" (733-738).

It is ostensibly Satan's words that are "replete" with guile and "impregned" with truth, but these images of fullness (the etymon of impregnate is the Latin verb "to fill") together with the assertion that Satan's words won entrance into her heart imply that Eve is being filled and impregnated by Satan's full and pregnant words. As Satan closes his speech, his words ring in Eve's ears ("He ended..., and in her ears the sound/ Yet rung of his persuasive words..." [539-31]), and she is finally persuaded by rehearsing Satan's

arguments, which now seem to issue from her own mind and body. Her speech concluded, she acts quickly:

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:
Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost.... (780-84)

In eating the fruit, Eve herself trespasses and commits an act of rapine: she “wounds” earth in a repetition of Satan’s violation of her own boundaries. As critics often note, however, Eve’s persuasion does not amount to compulsion, and she and Adam are therefore responsible for the choice to eat the fruit. Stanley Fish highlights the epic voice’s reminders that the pair have all the knowledge needed to repulse Satan’s advances: “For still they knew, and ought to have still remembered” (*PL* 10.12 qtd. in Fish 14). Similarly, in his discussion of the temptation scene, William Pallister urges us to “remember one fact: Eve is not constrained after all, whatever influence sophistic speech may wield. She need only revert to faith.” The fact that she does not “testifies to the power of eloquence” that moves her, but the act is nevertheless “entirely her own choice” (Pallister 215). In this, Milton undermines Gorgias and sophistry by setting limits on the power of eloquence and appealing to the higher, immutable truth of faith. Unlike Gorgias, he compares Eve’s persuasion not to rape but to a woman’s willing receptivity to a lover: Satan’s words win “too easy” an entrance into her heart. While Eve is in this sense not entirely passive or powerless, Milton leaves the force of eloquence nevertheless in tension

with the idea of Eve's free choice, and thus accomplishes in poetry what would be inadmissible in theology: he suspends, to some extent, the question of Eve's culpability.

The temptation scene highlights the excesses of eloquence not only in demonstrating how it can violate the boundaries of mind and body and literally "move" the persuaded, but also in dramatizing how figurative language can produce a confusing multiplicity of meanings. Satan persuades Eve by undermining the literal sense of God's commandment, recalling exegetical debates of the early modern period that centered on the question of how believers might know if a divine utterance, such as the commandment not to taste the fruit, were literal or figural. The prevailing figure for allegory in medieval and early modern Christian writing was the veil Moses wore in his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, which Paul the Apostle appropriated as an emblem of Old Testament figures foretelling the incarnation of Christ. The idea that the veiled face of Moses (the figurative language of the Old Testament) gave way to the open face of Christ (the literal language of the New) lies behind reformation thinkers' emphasis on scripture's "plain" and "simple" meanings. However, the Reformers did not simply reject medieval allegorical readings of scripture in favor of "literal" interpretations; in fact medieval reading practices persisted into the early modern period, and early modern "literalism" was not radically unlike patristic allegorization and its roots in classical rhetoric (Muller 3-22). With the rediscovery of Plato and Xenophon in the Renaissance, humanists learned that the oldest term for allegory was *hyponoia*, "the sense beneath," and that Cicero was the first to use the word allegory, identifying it with forms of speech (*translatio* and *permutatio*) in which words mean other than what they say. Quintillian

likewise defined allegory or *inversio* as saying something more than, or directly contrary to, what the words convey (Allen viii). With multiple interpretive possibilities available, some of them belied by the grammatical sense, reformation thinkers also lacked the stabilizing authority of an institution like the Catholic Church. As James Douglas Fleming argues, the reformers' exceptions to literalism threatened to make biblical interpretation arbitrary and relative, and their solution—what Fleming, drawing on Gottlob Frege, calls “intensionalism”—potentially authorized complete reversals of grammatical extension. Fleming brings this problem to bear on the temptation of Eve:

Milton's Satan, along these lines, convinces Eve that when God says (in so many words) 'don't eat this fruit', He really means 'do eat this fruit (even though I seem to say you shouldn't)'. Satan's reading of God's prohibition, plainly, is quite radical. It consists in a complete reversal of grammatical extension. Intension, however, easily authorises this sort of thing, bringing it within the bounds of a Bellarminian rhetoric. Satan is simply claiming that God spoke in a figure. Like the earlier diktat that Adam needed no wife...the Paradisal prohibition is subjunctively revealed as an example of an utterer's saying one thing, while meaning the exact opposite. A shocking and unusual practice. (48)

“Shocking and unusual” as it is, Satan's against-the-grain interpretation of the “touch not” prohibition takes rhetorical reading to its logical conclusion: he convinces Eve that the consequence of death is metaphorical, that she will only die in the sense of “putting off/ Human, to put on gods” (713-14). Though Satan's views are not endorsed by the narrator, his manipulation of divine utterances calls attention to how the richness with which

rhetoric was credited could become a confounding overabundance. Where Johann Sturm emphasizes that speech should be “ornamented by abundance and variety” and compares elegant discourse to the “clothing and ornaments” of the nobility (Spitz and Tinsley 126; 195), Puttenham goes so far as to concede that ornamental figures are

...in a sort abuses, or rather trespasses, in speech, because they pass the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the ear and also the mind, drawing it from plainness and simplicity to a certain doubleness, whereby our talk is the more guileful and abusing. For what else is your metaphor but an inversion of sense by transport; your allegory by a duplicity of meaning or dissimulation under covert and dark intendments.... (3.4.231).

In these and many other ways, Puttenham continues, a speaker can seek to “inveigle and appassionate [impassion] the mind” (3.7.238). This diagnosis of rhetorical “abuses” (which Puttenham will go on to defend) could not be more justly applicable to Satan, the arch-trespasser who passes “the ordinary limits of common utterance” to gain access to the senses and thus the mind. With so much potential for instability and deception in rhetorical readings it is no wonder that reformers fell back on the “plain” or “natural” sense of scripture, and that Calvin called allegory satanic (Steinmetz 285). He insisted: “We must...entirely reject the allegories of Origen, and of others like him, which Satan, with the deepest subtlety, has endeavored to introduce into the Church, for the purpose of rendering the doctrine of Scripture ambiguous and destitute of certainty and firmness” (qtd. in Zachman 15).

Still, Satan is not entirely a repudiated embodiment of what Milton, combining two categories of excessive rhetoricians (sophists and Catholics), called “the hellish Sophistry of Papism” (“Church Government” 828). The threat he poses is so grave because his rhetorical power springs from the divine principle of making as adornment, and adornment as an act of language. The “mantle” that clothes the world in Book 3’s “Hymn to Light” figures creation as both a speech act and an act of investiture, giving language-as-adornment the power to articulate the world by delimiting objects. Yet the end-stopped twelfth line of the hymn that delineates this creation of forms “Won from the void and formless infinite” closes with the cadence of the dactylic word “infinite.⁹ From the Latin “to fall,” “cadence” means the rhythmical flow of language that marks the end of a line of poetry and in Italy by the end of the late Middle Ages, *cadenza*, referred to the falling off of the voice at the end of a phrase or song” (Wigham and Rebhorn 169 n.2). The word “infinite” creates the effect of such a rhythmic fall as a dactylic foot made up of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. This deviation from the iambic meter highlights the word “infinite,” and so unexpectedly accentuates the thing that the Word should have conquered and ended: the in-finite. Infinity is the source of not just a rhythmic but also a moral fall, since the victory of “Won from the void and formless infinite” is tempered by the mutability implicit in the very act of shaping the universe. To be formed is to be subject to form—mutable—and for Milton this mutability is the cause

⁹ “Cadence” means the rhythmical flow of language that marks the end of a line of poetry. It comes from the Latin meaning “to fall,” and in Italy by the end of the late Middle Ages, *cadenza*, referred to the falling off of the voice at the end of a phrase or song” (Wigham and Rebhorn 169 n.2).

of sin. In *Christian Doctrine*, he answers the question of how sin can proceed from God by explaining that “[s]trictly speaking indeed it is neither matter nor form that sins; and yet having proceeded from God, and become in the power of another party, what is there to prevent them, *in asmuch as they have now become mutable*, from contracting taint and contamination through the enticements of the devil, or those which originate in man himself” (240, emphasis mine). The phrase “contracting taint and contamination” connects mutability with the “contagious touch” of infection that so alarmed early moderns, suggesting the transmission of qualities—like diseases—across the fragile and permeable “fleshy envelope” (Milton, *Christian Doctrine* 240; Healy 22-23). Only God is immutable and immune to such violations, and ironically this means that he cannot revoke the decree of human liberty that allows mutability. In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton explains that “by considering those things as necessary, which the Deity had left to the uncontrouled decision of man, God would be rendered mutable. But God is not mutable, so long as he decrees nothing absolutely which could happen otherwise through the liberty assigned to man” (47). In *Paradise Lost*, God allows Adam and Eve to fall because, paradoxically, freedom is inherent in their very form:

So without least impulse or shadow of fate,
Or aught by me immutably foreseen,
They trespass, authors to themselves in all
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so
I formed them free, and free they must remain,
Till they enthrall themselves: else I must change

Their nature, and revoke the high decree

Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained

Their freedom, they themselves ordained their fall. (3.121-128)

Mutability is not named but merely suggested by its opposites—“immutably,” [u]nchangeable,” “eternal”—as well as in the ideas of “freedom” and “trespass.” The double negative of “ought...immutably foreseen” avoids directly associating God with anything mutable, even as he confers on humans the possibility of change. Thus the central paradox of the passage is that God is bound by an “immutable” decree allowing human mutability. Within this nine-line sentence, line 124—“I formed them free, and free they must remain”—is focal. Flanked by four lines on each side, line 124 stands at the center of the sentence, is the only line that forms a complete semantic unit, and is marked by a balance absent in the other lines. The symmetry of the line is achieved by reversing the syntax after the caesura, so that “I formed them free” becomes “free they remain.” This chiasmic structure has the effect of centralizing “free,” which is repeated on either side of the caesura and accented both times. The echo of “free” is an example of anadiplosis, the immediate repetition of a word for the purpose of amplification, while the alliteration of the “f” sound aligns two things that are ostensibly opposite: the “form” imposed by an authoritative “I” and the “freedom” to trespass, or to violate the boundaries drawn by form (Smith 11). Furthermore, the paradox of a freedom ordained by irreversible decree (“free they must remain”) is resolved by yet another paradox: the mutability of Adam and Eve leaves them free to revoke their own freedom, to “enthrall themselves” in new forms.

The dictum of free will thus crystalizes a paradox of language as that which imposes order but also produces excesses that are “uncontrolled,” like “the decision of man” (*Christian Doctrine* 47). For although God forms and fashions Adam and Eve (“the rib he formed and fashioned with his hand”), he also ordains their freedom to “judge” and “choose,” and thus gives them the means for self-fashioning in and through language (*PL* 3.123). In Stephen Greenblatt’s account, self-fashioning, the “deliberate shaping” of identity, is a phenomenon of particular relevance to the early modern period because the sixteenth century saw an “increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (1-2). Though focusing exclusively on the sixteenth century, Greenblatt’s concept of self-fashioning offers a paradigm for interpreting Milton’s seventeenth-century epic. Adam and Eve’s self-fashioning “occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien”: God and Satan. While the authority has “absolute power,” the alien is “unformed or chaotic” (an absence of form), or “false and negative,” (a “demonic parody of order”)(4). The description of Greenblatt’s alien could not be more suited to Satan, whose propensity for disguise suggests fluidity of form and whose government in hell is a “demonic parody” of heavenly order. Indeed, the hymn to light implicitly compares Pandemonium to the pre-formed world when Milton, addressing the Son as a conqueror of disorder, describes his own ascent from the “Stygian pool” where he “sung of Chaos and Eternal Night” (*PL* 3.14-18). Against the threat of this alien (satanic chaos), God deploys the word as an ordering and adorning principle, but the “power generated to attack the alien is produced in excess and threatens the authority it sets out to defend” (Greenblatt 4). The decree of freedom exemplifies this kind of

excess, at a word creating Adam and Eve in the “form” of free subjects who can then trespass, mutate, become “contaminated” by sin. When Eve does transgress, she succumbs precisely to the “cosmetic” weapons forged against chaos: Satan’s “pleasing...shape” and his eloquence worthy of “an orator renowned/ In Athens or free Rome” (9.503; 670-71).

This porous boundary between chaos and *kosmos*, embodied in Satan, is what the Romantics encounter and foreground in their reinterpretations of *Paradise Lost*. These reinterpretations stress instability in ways that abandon Milton’s ever-present framework of the divine order of signs, and it is in this sense that their appropriations of Milton might be characterized as against-the-grain and “satanic.” While Milton highlights the threat posed by changing form, he nevertheless affirms that Satan as well as Adam and Eve have a “proper,” divinely-ordained form that they have tainted: Satan is Lucifer, the “bright star” that fell from heaven while Adam and Eve are originally of noble shape “with native honour clad/In naked majesty,” and in them “The image of their glorious Maker shone”—an image that, for Milton, is still manifest in fallen man and will be more brightly so at the end of times (9.426; 4.292). Romantic adaptations, by contrast, cast doubt upon the existence or possibility of access to this proper shape. In Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and *Essays upon Epitaphs* as well as in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the ideal of a pure and permanent Adamic language that perfectly speaks of the immutable inner self can only be articulated and momentarily glimpsed through continuous rhetorical turns and deviations. In Byron’s dramas and *The Letter to Murray*, bodily mutation and deformity figures the continual flux of a world that is cyclically destroyed and recreated in new,

sometimes terrifying forms. As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the more dramatic falls staged in these Romantic texts are informed by the material conditions of life at the turn of the eighteenth century: what Wordsworth called “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times” that were hourly acting on the world and the mind and undermining the once-stable signs of a legible universe (*Major Works* 599). With “fashion” and the commercial system more broadly as a source of anxiety, the Romantics turn to satanic mutability and anarchy as the model for representing a world of accelerating and bewildering change.

CHAPTER II

Rousseau and Revolutionary Iconography

In the second half of the eighteenth century the name of Rousseau became an icon for the ideal of transparency and a taste for the simple life. He did not invent this eighteenth-century pastoral tradition, but his celebrity ensured that “Rousseau” and “primitivism” went together, and in this way his intricate rhetoric of “unveiling” was reduced to an immediately intelligible sign. As critics have long argued, the Romantic aesthetic of “plainness” and “naturalness” that Wordsworth inherited from Rousseau was far more complex than a “mere return to the state of nature” or to Adam’s paradise (Hartman 45). Rousseau acknowledges in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* that “it is no small enterprise to disentangle the original and the artificial in the current nature of man, and to understand a state which no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, and probably never will exist, but of which it is nevertheless necessary to have accurate notions in order to rightly judge our present state” (18).¹⁰ Paradoxically, he here insists on the importance of having “accurate notions” of the state of nature, even as he acknowledges the fictional nature of this state, as well as the difficulties of inferring such a fiction from a current state seen as having deformed the hypothetical original. In this chapter, I argue that the difficulties of his enterprise are inscribed within the very rhetorical structures of Rousseau’s writing. In texts such as the *Confessions* and the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau illustrates that the theoretical fiction of

¹⁰ “... ce n’est pas une légère entreprise de démêler ce qu’il y a d’originaire et d’artificiel dans la nature actuelle de l’homme, et de bien connaître un état qui n’existe plus, qui n’a peut-être point existé, qui probablement n’existera jamais, et dont il est pourtant nécessaire d’avoir des notions justes pour bien juger notre état présent.” (18)

paradise can only be imagined through lapsarian frameworks, and that the ideal of an Adamic language that names the essences of things can only be verbalized in fallen language with an arbitrary, changeable, and disfiguring relationship to what it names. From a retrospective point of view, Rousseau's foregrounding of this linguistic predicament appears prophetic because of the ways in which his own name and aesthetic of simplicity would be deformed first by the commercial fashion and celebrity system, then by revolutionary discourses that transformed his rhetoric into icons and ideologies. His aesthetic of nakedness and simplicity was "deformed" both because it was reabsorbed into the social order of unstable meaning (for instance, when simple dress became a fashion trend) and because it became a trigger for a practice of iconography that policed thought and behavior. In the second instance, his metaphors of "unveiling" went from being tropes, which are discursive and initiate a chain of transformation, to being icons, which imply "an identification on the level of substance" (de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope" 241). By examining the fate of Rousseau's sartorial reforms as well as the way his ideas played out in Revolutionary-era engravings from the French National Library's De Vinck collection, I contend that the case of Rousseau offers a particularly potent example of the unpredictable ways in which rhetoric can transform into, as well as be transformed by, political ideology and its reinforcing material practices.

As I will argue in Chapter 4, for Byron the pastoral aesthetic of Rousseau and Wordsworth was chaotically uniform and threatened stabilizing traditions, but for Rousseau, the structures that in classical rhetoric represented an orderly cosmos seemed to be ruled by arbitrary and ever-changing signs that obscured or defaced "things as they

are.” These contradictory positions parallel what Edward William Tayler identifies as the two characteristic views of Nature and Art in the Renaissance: “when Art is viewed eulogistically, Nature signifies the unformed, the inchoate, the imperfect. When Art is viewed pejoratively, as falsification or counterfeit, then Nature signifies the original, the unspoiled, the transcendent” (qtd. in Attridge 20). Reiterating a version of the latter view, Rousseau asserts in *Émile, ou de l'Éducation* that it is vain to put faith in the current social order with its “inevitable revolutions” because “all that men have made, men can destroy: there are no ineffaceable characters but those which nature imprints, and nature makes neither princes nor rich men nor great lords” [“Tout ce qu'on fait les hommes, les hommes peuvent le détruire: il n'y a de caractères ineffaçables que ceux qu'imprime la nature, et la nature ne fait ni prince, ni riches, ni grands seigneurs”] (217-18). Rousseau here sees the world as an order of signs, like a language, and distinguishes between the enduring signs of nature and the effaceable characters of men, relying upon a provisional comparison of nature's signs to the technology of writing and printing (“the characters...which nature imprints”). In his warning that social identities are mutable “characters” by contrast with nature's “ineffaceable” ones, he suggests not only that social signs substitute for, and even lead to the “neglect of,” things, but also that they produce chaos in their continual mutations in time, and in their consequently unstable relationship to the permanent “things” and human feelings they ought to describe (Derrida 149; 216; Rousseau, *Émile* 216). Rousseau and those he influenced often called the alien and fugitive nature of such signs by the name of “fashion,” with the emerging fashion system in the eighteenth century as an emblem for fashion in the broadest sense

of whatever is “fashioned” and consequently subject to historical vagaries. In particular, fashionable dress represented all manner of social ills because, as Jennifer M. Jones observes, more than other commodities “clothing became the problematic emblem of modernity” in the eighteenth century, where modernity signified the “arbitrary and capricious” as opposed to the stable and everlasting (Jones, “Repackaging Rousseau” xvii; Wordsworth, *Major Works* xvii).

Fashion thus came to represent the signature of civilization in its continually shifting and deforming nature, and for Rousseau these shifts and deformations carried society ever farther from a theoretical origin point when men might have lived more virtuously. As Jean Starobinski observes, Rousseau uses the Platonic myth of the statue of Glaucus, which is disfigured by seas and storms, to offer two versions of human history: one proposes that the human soul has merely been eclipsed, “hidden, veiled, shrouded in artifice—yet intact,” while the other holds that it has been forever deformed—“modified in society by a thousand ever-recurring causes” (Starobinski 15; qtd. in Starobinski 16). In a “drastic, Calvinist version of the myth of origin,” Rousseau occasionally claims that as time goes by, man becomes irreparably “disfigured and depraved” until his appearance and essence are unrecognizable (Starobinski 16). He conceived of the advance of society as the progressive unmooring of human nature from its highest form, with the capricious fashions of the day most immediately illustrating historical vagaries and their transformative effect on what ought to be a free and immutable nature. In rebellion against social flux and deformation he lauded “plainer” and “simpler” styles of expression such as those of primitive man or the Roman republic, but he articulated these notions in

language that did not take for granted the simplicity of the “simple,” but which instead charted the difficulties and contradictions of formulating an ideal of paradise and its language when writing from within the paradigms one seeks to examine (Simpson 10).¹¹

Rousseau outlined the ideas that would catapult him to fame in the *Discours qui a remporté le prix à l'Académie de Dijon en l'année 1750*, commonly known as the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, and in *Émile, ou de l'Éducation* (1762), and in these texts Rousseau begins to display the problems associated with generating a concept of “natural simplicity.” In the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, which won the Academy of Dijon prize in 1750, Rousseau identifies art and eloquence as means of refashioning and distorting human nature; yet, as he would later do in the opening passages of the *Confessions*, he denounces artifice in highly wrought language. He begins the *Discourse* with an elaborate piece of irony, first seeming to celebrate France’s enrichment by the sciences and literature following the fall of Constantinople, then concluding that as a consequence “[t]he world now began to perceive the principal advantage of an intercourse with the Muses, that of rendering mankind more sociable by inspiring them with the desire to please one another with performances worthy of their mutual approbation” (2). The primary contribution of art and culture, Rousseau sarcastically suggests, was to turn the world into a stage and the people in it into players anxious to give a gratifying performance. In a comparison that would become common in eighteenth-century France and England, he draws parallels between his present-day

¹¹ In his discussion of Wordsworth as a poet of commercial modernity, Simpson writes that both Wordsworth and Marx were “very much aware of the rhetorical complexities generated by writing from within the very paradigm [they were] trying to describe” (10).

society and the decline of ancient Greece and Rome, once-virtuous republics that were weakened by the advance of the sciences and the arts. Virtue here signifies a masculine aesthetic in accordance with the origins of the word in *virtus* or virility, for Rousseau recounts that though originally “peopled by heroes”, Greece descended into “a dissoluteness of manners” and an effeminate “voluptuousness” leading inevitably to enslavement, and “[n]ot all the eloquence of Demosthenes could breathe life into a body which luxury and the arts had once enervated” (3; “virtue, n.”). Likewise Rome, “founded by a shepherd, and made illustrious by peasants,” became a “theater of vice” following the emergence of poets like Ovid and Catullus, and finally “submitted to the yoke of slavery” (3). These falls from virtue Rousseau attributes to “ornaments”—whether eloquence or fashion and decorum—that are more invidious than outright despotism because they work on the mind to stifle the sense of liberty, submit men to the social order, “and so make of them what is called a civilised people”—or in the original French, “des peuples policés,” meaning polished but also with the suggestion of disciplined or “policed” (*Sciences and Arts* 2; *Sciences et arts* 97; “policer, verbe trans.”). If eloquence was a civilizing principle as rhetors like Cicero argued, this did not, for Rousseau, make a harmonious society out of savages, but instead enslaved men to the dictates of culture through “cosmetic” means—that is, precisely through the enticements of eloquence and decorum, or in his words by flinging “garlands of flowers over the chains” that weigh men down (*Sciences and Arts* 2). “Before art had moulded our behavior, and taught our passions to speak an artificial language,” Rousseau affirms, “our morals were rude but natural,” and therefore free of social restraint. Implicit in Rousseau’s argument is the idea

that in giving itself up to luxury the healthy masculine body of the republic becomes weak and effeminate. Like a woman who must seduce men through cultivated beauty, the republic is servile and in thrall to the art of pleasing. This figurative enslavement—submission to the despotism of art and culture—then leads to literal enslavement in the examples Rousseau gives of Greece and Rome. Yet as Jean Starobinski notes, Rousseau ironically conveys this counter-cultural argument by following all the conventions of rhetoric, including apostrophe and prosopopoeia (4). Even more than the circuitous irony of Rousseau’s opening passages, the prosopopoeia of Fabricius, a heroic character from Plutarch’s *Lives*, is an elaborate piece of rhetorical theater (Bouchard 114 n.14). Imagining how Fabricius would react to the “pomp and magnificence” of the empire he had rescued, Rousseau first evokes the Roman hero through apostrophe (Oh Fabricius...) then ventriloquizes him and invents for him an address to the Romans. Rousseau’s Fabricius exclaims:

Ye gods! ... what has become of those thatched roofs and rustic hearths, which were formerly the habitations of temperance and virtue? What fatal splendour has succeeded the ancient Roman simplicity? What is this foreign language, this effeminacy of manners? What is the meaning of these statues, paintings, and buildings? Fools, what have you done? You, the lords of the earth, have made yourselves the slaves of the frivolous nations you have subdued. You are governed by rhetoricians, and it has been only to enrich architects, painters, sculptors and stage-players that you have watered Greece and Asia with your blood.... Romans! Romans! make haste to demolish those amphiaters, break to pieces those

statues, burn those paintings; drive from among you those slaves who keep you in subjection, and whose fatal arts are corrupting your morals. (*Sciences and Arts* 5)

[Dieux!...que sont devenus ces toits de chaume et ces foyers rustiques qu’habitaient jadis la moderation et la vertu? Quelle splendeur funeste a succédé à la simplicité romaine? Quel est ce langage étranger? Quelles sont ces moeurs efféminées? Que signifient ces statues, ces tableaux, ces édifices? Insensés, qu’avez-vous fait? Vous les maîtres des nations, vous vous êtes rendus les esclaves des hommes frivoles que vous avez vaincu? Ce sont des rhéteurs qui vous gouvernent? C’est pour enrichir des architectes, des peintres, des statuaristes, et des historiens que vous avez arrosé de votre sang la Grèce et l’Asie? ... Romains, hâtez-vous de renverser les amphithéâtres; brisez ces marbres; brûlez ces tableaux; chassez ces esclaves qui vous subjuguent, et dont les funestes arts vous corrompent.] (*Sciences et arts* 102-3)

In this grandiose address amplified by exclamations and rhetorical questions, Rousseau dons the mask of Fabricius and makes him a mouthpiece for Rousseauvian iconoclasm, thereby engaging in the kind of artful discourse which he condemns and which was taught by the “rhetoricians” who supposedly drove Rome to ruin. In this dissonance between the style he ostensibly advocates and that which he practices, Rousseau illustrates the inescapability of cultural determination and the logic of figure, for in order to address the Academy of Dijon on the morally deleterious effects of the arts, Rousseau must assume and be determined—or “read”—by the artful language of the academy. As he would go on to do in the *Confessions*, which begins with an elaborate prosopopoeia,

Rousseau here exhibits in his rhetoric the insidious power of discursive structures to shape thought and expression.¹²

The problem the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* both identifies and displays, then, is that art “mould[s]” men and enslaves them to its arbitrary rule: “[p]oliteness requires this thing; decorum that; ceremony has its forms, and fashion its laws, and these we must always follow, never the promptings of our nature” (2). Embedded in this idea of human nature being “mould(ed)” by art is the threat of changeableness. For Rousseau the dictates of culture are by definition not inherent in nature, and are therefore “arbitrary” both in the sense of despotic and in the sense of capricious (“arbitrary, adj. and n.”). While in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* the primary consequence of fashion’s arbitrary rule is a “servile and deceptive conformity,” in *Émile, ou de l’éducation* the problem of arbitrariness is more clearly both unquestioning submission to the laws of culture and the changeable nature of those laws (2). As Jones explains, the capricious nature of fashion had “troubled observers” since the “‘invention’ of fashion in the courts of fourteenth-century Europe,” with eighteenth-century men and women becoming more aware in their age of commercialism “of the problems that the changeable, arbitrary ‘*règne de la mode*’ might pose for society” and projecting political critiques of monarchy

¹² A complex and contradictory set of biographical circumstances led to this attack on culture. Having come to Paris to seek a place among the literary élite through his “beau style,” Rousseau found himself at nearly forty undistinguished and impoverished, a hanger-on to his rich friends, and ostracized for his relationship with the illiterate Thérèse Le Vasseur. These bitter disappointments led Rousseau to long for the “paradise lost” of his youth in Geneva, far from superficial Paris, and to condemn the literary world he had failed to conquer with his eloquence (Bouchard 14-15)

and absolutism onto the “reign of fashion” (“Repackaging Rousseau” 947-8; 948 n.2).¹³ In his discussion of female beauty through the example of the fictional Sophie, Rousseau attempts to distinguish dress—a benign art that enhances nature—from fashion, a pernicious and arbitrary one that distorts the female body.¹⁴ His idealized Sophie combines elegance with timeless simplicity: she knows how to show herself to advantage, but hates ornate dress (“elle hait les riches habillements”); she doesn’t know what colors are *à la mode*, but knows what colors suit her (489). Sophie instinctively understands that

We can shine through our dress, but we only please through our person. Our modifications are not us: often they disfigure by dint of being cultivated; and often those that render most remarkable she who wears them are those that we remark the least. The education of young girls is on this point entirely backwards. We promise them ornaments as rewards, we make them love cultivated finery: *How beautiful she is!* We tell them when they are all dressed up. But on the contrary we should make them understand that so much modification is only made to conceal flaws, and that the true triumph of beauty is to shine by itself. The love of fashion is in bad taste, because faces do not change with it, and the figure remaining the same, what suits it at one time suits it forever. (452-3)

¹³ “Not until the Revolution were the problematic relationships between the fickle reign of *la mode* and women ‘solved’ through the ascendancy and institutionalization of a discourse on women and fashion which rested on three interconnected assumptions: (1) fashions should be ‘natural’ rather than artificial and dissimulating; (2) the arbitrary, despotic nature of fashion did not threaten men or society because *la mode*’s power was restricted to the comparatively unimportant domain of the frivolous and the feminine; (3) the most essential quality for dressing fashionably was taste (*goût*) rather than ostentation (*luxe*)” (Jones 949).

¹⁴ As Jones notes, Rousseau grounds women’s interest in dress in their nature (stating that little girls love adornment almost from birth [“prèsque en naissant”]) and the natural desire to please men, yet abhors their subjection to changeable fashion (Jones 948; Rousseau, *Émile*, 483).

[On peut briller par la parure, mais on ne plait que par la personne. Nos ajustements ne sont point nous : souvent ils déparent à force d'être recherchés; et souvent ceux qui font le plus remarquer celle qui les porte sont ceux qu'on remarque le moins. L'éducation des jeunes filles est en ce point tout à fait à contre-sens. On leur promet des ornements pour récompense, on leur fait aimer les atours recherchés : *Qu'elle est belle !* leur dit-on quand elles sont fort parées. Et tout au contraire on devrait leur faire entendre que tant d'ajustement n'est fait que pour cacher des défauts, et que le vrai triomphe de la beauté est de briller par elle-même.]

Rousseau here identifies fashions with the changeable and ephemeral ("one time"), and natural beauty with the permanent ("forever"). Changeableness for Rousseau is synonymous with distortion: "Our modifications are not us: often they disfigure by dint of being cultivated." Indeed, he later suggests that fashion can even permanently degenerate the species ("dégénérer l'espèce"), claiming that the health and beautiful proportions of Spartan women had disappeared thanks to "gothic" encumbrances like whalebone bodices (443). Yet Rousseau's efforts to distinguish nature and culture are problematic from the beginning. In order to condemn fashion as arbitrary and changeable, he must idealize nature as timeless by falsely claiming that faces and figures "do not change." His argument also posits an impossible natural perfection: while he argues that fashion disfigures what is naturally beautiful and healthy, he also suggests that it conceals natural disfiguration ("so much modification is only made to conceal flaws"). In this sense, he identifies fashion as a supplement to nature both in the sense that it is exterior and

superfluous, and in the contradictory sense that it fills a void in a nature that “should be self-sufficient,” in Derrida’s words, or in Rousseau’s, whose beauty ought to “shine by itself” (Derrida 145; Rousseau 452). In his objections to fashion, then, he attempts to construct a fiction of a perfect and timeless nature that, as he acknowledges in the *Discourse on Inequality*, can only be known through the thorny enterprise of disentangling the present state from a theoretical and ultimately unimaginable origin. As a result, Rousseau’s theory as well as his rhetoric become entangled in the very problems he sets out to elucidate.

Just as his theory and rhetoric could not be fully extricated from their social nexus, so, in fulfillment of the dark promise of his rhetoric, Rousseau’s sartorial reforms failed to escape the context of modern commercialism against which they rebelled. In Rousseau’s era opulent dress became more accessible to all classes, and the sartorial reforms Rousseau advocated presented a threat to the trade in fashionable dress that fashion merchants could not allow to stand. As Jones relates, “[b]etween 1650 and the Revolution the commercial culture of Paris witnessed a profound transformation in the production and consumption of clothing, fashion styles, and the meaning of *La mode* itself.” Whereas in 1650 only elite men and women could dress in fashionable and ornate styles, by the late eighteenth century the “wardrobes of virtually all Parisians from manual workers to aristocrats” had increased significantly in value, abundance, and variety (“Repackaging Rousseau” 943). Critics of this new culture of commercialism and material abundance—of whom Rousseau was foremost—worry over the morally corrosive effects of luxury, expressing particular concern about women’s new role as fashion’s biggest

consumers (943; 948). On the opposite side, Paris *marchandes des modes* and editors of the emerging fashion press fretted that the “new vogue for more spare, neoclassical garb” advocated by Rousseau and others would prove ruinous to their enterprise (945). The fashion industry’s creative solution to this problem was to “repackage” the style of Rousseau’s Sophie not as a timeless aesthetic reflecting humanity’s original state, but as another of fashion’s vicissitudes, no less susceptible to cyclical patterns and no more independent of the ministrations of the fashion press and the *marchandes des modes* than the elaborate styles that coexisted alongside it (947; 945-6). In this way, Rousseau’s concept of natural female beauty was re-read and re-absorbed into the fashion system it was meant to criticize, as a consequence of the problem Rousseau encounters in his rhetoric of the impossibility of disentangling art from an idealized “nature” within the inescapable structures of a fallen world.

Even before his Sophie was co-opted by the fashion industry, Rousseau had seen his personal “sumptuary reform” reframed as a new vogue of fashionable dress, and his efforts to live by his theories misunderstood (*Confessions* 8.445). His reforms are from the beginning mere signs and approximations of the ideal state of nature that Rousseau describes, in which the honest man “loves to wrestle stark naked” (*Sciences and Arts* 2). A life so entirely exempt from social convention being impossible, Rousseau can only gesture to this ideal in a project of personal reform that nevertheless became reabsorbed into the orders of meaning Rousseau sought to escape. As he describes in Book 8 of the *Confessions*, Rousseau begins this project by simplifying his dress, a gesture symbolizing his bid for independence both from the financial support of his wealthy patrons and from

the tyranny of appearances and public opinion. He frames these events within a conversion narrative whose catalyst is the writing and success of the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*.¹⁵ When Rousseau discovers in 1750 that he has won the Academy of Dijon prize, the news reawakens the ideas that had inspired the discourse and reignites the love of “heroism and of virtue” that his father, his country, and Plutarch had placed in his heart during childhood: “I no longer found anything greater and more beautiful than to be free and virtuous, above fortune and opinion, and sufficient to oneself,” in no need of the supplement of art. The irony here, of course, is that Rousseau rediscovers these principles upon learning that his ideas have been judged positively by the Academy of Dijon, as a representative of the literary world. Following a life-threatening illness, he decides to put his “severe principles” into practice by subsisting on income earned from copying music, and forgoing the support of his wealthy Parisian patrons: “I began my reform with my finery; I left behind the gold trimmings and the white stockings, I took up a round wig, I laid aside the sword, I sold my watch” (Rousseau, *Confessions*, 8.442; 444; qtd. also in Campbell 143). When a thief (possibly his lover Thérèse’s brother) steals Rousseau’s laundry, he unwittingly helps the writer complete his reform by curing him of the “passion” for luxurious underclothes. Rousseau thereafter seeks to make the reform “strong and lasting, by working to uproot from my heart all that still clung to men’s

¹⁵ In a “road to Damascus” moment, Rousseau comes across the question for the Academy of Dijon essay prize—“[w]hether the progress of the sciences and arts has contributed to corrupting or purifying mores [les moeurs]”—while traveling from Paris to Vincennes to visit Diderot in 1749. Rousseau describes reading the advertisement as a moment of quasi-religious revelation—“as soon as I read this I saw another universe, and I became a different man”—that leaves him only with the memory of arriving in Vincennes in a state of delirium (430).

judgment, all that could divert me, through the fear of rebuke, from what was good and reasonable in itself" (445-6).

However, these honorable intentions soon fail before the inescapable power of social determination. After undertaking this reform, Rousseau attends the Paris debut of his musical interlude *Le Devin du village*, whose extravagantly dressed ("excessivement parés") audience included the King and Madame de Pompadour, in the same "simple and neglected" appearance that had become his habit (460). At the time, Rousseau recounts, he mistook this want of "decency" ["défaut de décence"] for an act of courage, and was determined to be always and only himself ["être toujours moi-même"] (460). In the event, this effort to disengage from the social does not allow Rousseau to be seen as he is, but instead leaves him inarticulate amidst a cloud of speculation. Contrary to Rousseau's fears, the audience receive him with benevolent curiosity, a reaction that Rousseau finds more difficult to manage than the censure he had anticipated: "I was armed against their ridicule; but their caressing manner, which I had not expected, subjugated me so well, that I trembled like a child when the show began" ["J'étais armé contre leur raillerie; mais leur air caressant, auquel je ne m'étais pas attendu, me subjuga si bien, que je tremblais comme un enfant quand on commença"] (461). As becomes clear in the course of Rousseau's narrative, this welcome from the social elite proves so challenging because it solicits him to abandon his rebellious stance and respond in kind. Whereas ridicule of his appearance might have liberated him from social intercourse ("They will find me ridiculous, impertinent; ha! What does it matter to me!"), flattery and kindness from such prominent people demand a reciprocal response and thus "subjugate[]" him to the

rhetorical order he sought to escape (461). Following the success of the opera, Rousseau finds himself in a predicament when he hears that the King has asked to see him, most likely to offer him an annuity. He is called upon to “figure” before the king (“I would then figure before the king” [“Je me figurerais ensuite devant le Roi”]) in the sense of presenting a “figure” of himself dressed in deferential eloquence, rather than simply “moi-même.” Having called politeness a “deceitful veil” in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*, Rousseau now faces the challenge of attempting to abide by his principles without offending the powerful: “I wanted, without quitting the severe tone and air that I had adopted, to appear sensible of the honor done me by so great a monarch. It was necessary to cloak [“envelopper”] some great and useful truth in a beautiful and merited piece of praise” [“Je voulais, sans quitter l’air et le ton sévère que j’avais pris, me montrer sensible à l’honneur que me faisait un si grand monarque. Il fallait envelopper quelque grande et utile vérité dans une louange belle et méritée”] (*Sciences and Arts* 2; *Confessions* 8.463). Unable to negotiate between truth and the veil or “envelope” of politeness, and terrified of committing one of his habitual idiocies [“balourdises”], Rousseau decides not to risk exposing himself by appearing before the king. He thereby forfeits the money but, he reasons, keeps his integrity:

I lost, it is true, the annuity that was offered to me in some way; but I also exempted myself from the yoke that it would have imposed on me. Adieu truth, liberty, courage. How could I have spoken thereafter of independence and disinterestedness? I could have done no more than flatter or be silent, in receiving

this annuity: and who then would have ensured that it would be paid to me?

Nothing but steps to take, people to supplicate! (463)¹⁶

[Je perdais, il est vrai, la pension qui m'était offerte en quelque sorte; mais je m'exemptais aussi du joug qu'elle m'eût imposé. Adieu la vérité, la liberté, le courage. Comment oser désormais parler d'indépendance et de désintéressement?

Il ne fallait plus que flatter ou me taire, en recevant cette pension: encore qui m'assurait qu'elle me serait payée? Que de pas à faire, que de gens à solliciter!]

By rejecting the annuity, Rousseau concludes, he abides by his severe principles and “sacrifice[s] appearance to reality” [“sacrifier l'apparence à la réalité”]—as well as saves himself from potential embarrassment (463). Yet if deference to the king would have censored him (“I could have done no more than flatter or be silent”), its refusal is no less silencing. Unable to negotiate between “truth” and “figuring,” Rousseau says nothing, but his ultimate silencing is in how this nothing is interpreted. While Rousseau seeks to incarnate the truth of himself in his “severe tone and air,” his self-representation remains just that: a representation, with all the ambiguity that that entails. Even his silence invites interpretation precisely as an interruption of discourse, and his refusal to pay homage consequently becomes re-inscribed within the unstable order of meaning it was meant to evade: “My departure made noise and was generally censured. My reasons could not be felt by everyone. Accusing me of a foolish pride was much sooner done, and better suited the jealousy of whoever felt in himself that he would have not have behaved thus” [“Mon départ fit du bruit et fut généralement blâmé. Mes raisons ne pouvaient être senties par

¹⁶ There is a contradiction in Rousseau's reasoning here: he refuses to speak both out of adherence to higher principles, and for fear of appearing foolish.

tout le monde. M'accuser d'un sot orgueil était bien plus tôt fait, et contentait mieux la jalousie de quiconque sentait en lui-même qu'il ne serait pas conduit ainsi"] (463). The passive construction of this passage reflects Rousseau's sense of being the victim of interpretive violence, and of being constituted by fugitive figures here described as "noise," signifying nothing because of the changeableness of their meanings.

Rousseau's image was appropriated and "deformed" not only in the context of the *ancien régime* system with its requirements of feudal deference, but also within the realm of celebrity, the fashion system he criticized, and the Revolution he helped inspire. In 1762 Parisian authorities condemned *Émile* and *The Social Contract*, and Rousseau fled to Switzerland to escape prosecution—developments which only increased his notoriety (Arnold 40). In Switzerland he adopted what would become "his most visible reformed ensemble," an Armenian costume made up of a fur-trimmed jacket, a caftan, a fur hat, and a belt (Campbell 143; *Confessions* 12.711). He refused to abandon this habit even when it made him an easier target for the local Swiss populace that had risen up against him following the publication of *Lettres de la Montagne* (*Confessions* 12.742). Timothy Campbell argues that, though part of his project of reform, Rousseau's Armenian costume was from the beginning arbitrary and implicated in the social and fashion system. In *Émile* Rousseau had written of the alienation that resulted from the global system:

Everyone extends himself over the entire earth, and becomes sensible across this great surface. Is it surprising that our ills are multiplied in all the points by which we can be hurt? That princes are sorry for the loss of a country they have never

seen! That trouble in the Indies is enough to make merchants cry out in Paris! Is it nature which carries men so far from themselves? (64)

[Chacun s'étend, pour ainsi dire, sur la terre entière, et devient sensible sur toute cette grande surface. Est-il étonnant que nos maux se multiplient dans tous les points par où l'on peut nous blesser? Que de princes se désolent pour la perte d'un pays qu'ils n'ont jamais vu! Que de marchands il suffit de toucher aux Indes, pour les faire crier à Paris! Est-ce la nature qui porte ainsi les hommes si loin d'eux-même?]

Yet Rousseau's own Armenian costume was not rooted in local tradition but emerged from "the world of commercial exchange" and the "chance presence of an Armenian tailor" in his Swiss neighborhood (Campbell 143; 150; 148). Thus made possible by trade between distant nations, adopted through a chance occurrence, and plucked from the tradition to which it gestured, Rousseau's costume straddled "the tension between rooted, customary dress" and contemporary fashion (146; 148). In that sense, Rousseau's Armenian dress did not simply recur to an earlier era or a more traditional culture, but remained singularly modern, as his contemporary Hume understood (146). In spite of his antipathy for British commercial modernity, Rousseau initially took to Hume, whom he described as combining "a very republican soul with the English paradoxes in favor of luxury" ["M. Hume associait une âme très républicaine aux paradoxes anglais en faveur du luxe"] (Campbell 143; *Confessions* 12.744). However, Hume would live up to Rousseau's poor opinion of the English, for after he escorted Rousseau across the channel, he took charge of the reproduction and distribution of Rousseau's portrait in Armenian dress, and

thereby ironically made Rousseau's counterstyle as well as Rousseau himself "the height of fashion" in the second half of the eighteenth century (Campbell 142). As Campbell contends, Hume thus "reinscrib[ed] this unruly guest as well as his conspicuous costume within the realm of commercial reproducibility"—a realm which, given the origins of the costume, it had never fully transcended (143-4; 149). In repackaging Rousseau in the context of commercial fashion and celebrity, Hume helped make him into an icon and to assign recognizable meaning to his name. Increasingly paranoid, Rousseau considered this new iconicity of his name a "defacement," and the developments of the Revolution proved him right: his name became the trigger for a practice of iconography that underpinned government-by-terror.

These political developments, ostensibly based on a principle of austerity, actually emerged from the commercial fashion and celebrity system that disseminated Rousseau's name. The style of dress that became iconic of Rousseau, along with his work, cemented his celebrity and consequently the importance of his ideas—in the deformed ways in which they were diffused—in the narrative of the French Revolution as the purging of old idolatries and the re-fashioning of the state into a virtuous republic. A modern category distinct from heroic fame, celebrity produces figures whose personalities "are created, bought, sold, and advertised through capitalist relations of production" (Elfenbein 47). As Whitney Arnold notes, late-eighteenth-century France "witnessed the emergence of a modern system for the production of literary celebrity" that made Rousseau "one of Europe's most visible authors and citizens" and therefore a figure of adulation as well as a topic of rumor and speculation (39). The consequence of this celebrity, Rousseau

complained, was the appropriation and disfiguration of his name. This was true not only in the sense that the public misunderstood Rousseau and his character (framing him, as he complained in the Neufchâtel Preface, not necessarily as better or worse, but simply as *other* than he was), but also in the sense that his celebrity later helped popularize the idea of natural simplicity in unanticipated ways. In 1765 Rousseau began the autobiographical *Confessions* not just as a spiritual practice of self-examination in the tradition of Saint Augustine, or to help other men understand themselves by understanding him, but also as a way of managing this unprecedented celebrity (Arnold 39; 41). As a response to the commercial system that had created a fictional “Rousseau,” the *Confessions* does not emerge as the definitive or corrective account that Rousseau announces, but instead sets in motion complex rhetorical figures that “read” Rousseau, in the sense that they reinscribe him within the structures whose undoing he insists is necessary to arrive at “truth.”

In the so-called Neufchâtel Preface to the *Confessions*, Rousseau insists on the uniqueness of his autobiography as a consequence of the uniqueness of the circumstances that led to its composition: “if my enterprise is singular the position that caused me to write it is no less so. Among my contemporaries there are few men whose name is as well known in Europe, yet whose character is more unknown” [si mon entreprise est singulière la position qui me l’a fait faire ne l’est pas moins. Parmi mes contemporains il est peu d’hommes dont le nom soit plus connu dans l’Europe et dont l’individu soit plus ignoré]. Everywhere read, criticized, and discussed in his absence, Rousseau saw himself as a screen on which others projected their fantasies: “Everyone figured me according to his

fantasy, without fear that the original would come to contradict him” [“Chacun me figurait à sa fantaisie, sans crainte que l’original vint le démentir”] [“Annexe I” 862]. Yet Rousseau cannot, of course, simply present the “original,” his own physical presence. He states that “there was one Rousseau in the great world, and another in retirement who in no way resembled him” [“Il y avait un Rousseau dans le grand monde, et un autre dans la retraite qui ne lui ressemblait à rien”], but even if it were not so he could hardly present himself to every one who had ever heard of him (862).¹⁷ He therefore offers the *Confessions* as a text that stands in for this original, but in doing so remains within the realm of representation that produced his celebrity, and so paradoxically attempts to compensate for his absence through another *in absentia* representation. However, Rousseau insists that this representation is different because, rather than creating a figure of the author, it is supposed to “unveil” and reveal him in all the truth of nature [“dans toute la vérité de la nature”], where the “veil” signifies the unifying structures of the understanding (“Annexe I” 864; *Confessions* 1.34). The content no less than the style of this autobiography would lack any artful uniformity, merely laying bare all of the disparate elements, good and bad, that make him uncircumscribable.

Rousseau insists in the Neufchâtel Preface on the originality of this new and thorough form of autobiography, emphasizing the fullness of what he will reveal and the loss of face that such revelations entail. Through repetition and amplification, he accents the profound novelty of his autobiography as though setting the stage for a dramatic

¹⁷ Arnold argues that Rousseau eventually abandoned the realm of representation itself and advocated in the *Dialogues* “a new model of ‘public intimacy’” that emphasized “direct or almost direct contact with the author’s embodied person outside the text” (40).

representation. What follows at the beginning of Book 1 of the *Confessions* is indeed high drama rather than a bald account of facts. After again insisting on the unprecedented nature of his project, Rousseau repeats his claim of “unveiling” his inner self while deploying a figure that Jonathan Culler suggests may represent all that is most “mystificatory” in poetic language: that of apostrophe (Rousseau 1.34; Culler 137). He sets a scene of public confession on the Day of Judgment, claiming that he will arrive, book in hand, and loudly proclaim (“dirai hautement”) before God and the entire population of the earth:

‘Here is what I did, what I thought, what I was...I have shown myself as I was; contemptible and vile when I was, good, generous, sublime, when I was: I have unveiled my interior as you have seen it yourself. Eternal being, gather around me the innumerable crowd of my fellow men; that they may hear my confessions, that they may groan at my indignities, that they may blush at my miseries. That each of them may in turn uncover his heart at the foot of the throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one of them say to you, if he dares: *I was better than that man.*’ (33-4)

[‘Voilà ce que j’ai fait, ce que j’ai pensé, ce que je fus.... Je me suis montré tel que je fus ; méprisable et vil quand je l’ai été, bon, généreux, sublime, quand je l’ai été : j’ai dévoilé mon intérieur tel que tu l’as vu toi-même. Être éternel, rassemble autour de moi l’innombrable foule de mes semblables ; qu’ils écoutent mes confessions, qu’ils gémissent de mes indignités, qu’ils rougissent de mes misères. Que chacu’un d’eux découvre à son tour son coeur au pieds de ton trône avec la

même sincérité ; et puis qu'un seul te dise, s'il l'ose : *Je fus meilleur que cet homme-là.*']

In spite of his insistence on the contradictions of his character, this scene allow Rousseau to offer a coherent version of himself presumed to be acceptable to the Divine Judge and to the audience of men once all is revealed and the meaning of events understood. In this way, as E.S. Burt explains, his preamble refers to a “teleological being, to a future moment of Divine Justice, when the end of all events will be revealed and justified.” It gathers up the threads of the coming narrative and keeps the “end toward which the development leads...in sight” from the very beginning (41). This fiction of the whole and acceptable self emerges in the context of a staged scene with Rousseau in the lead role as confessant, and the Divine Judge and the “the innumerable host of [his] fellow men” as both secondary characters and mute audience members. In a 1759 rhetorical manual John Ward surmised that the term “figure” was borrowed from the stage, “where the different habits and gestures of the actors, suitable to the several characters they sustained, were by the Greeks called *σχήματα*, and by the Latins *figurae*” (33). Here Rousseau creates a “figure” of himself—shaped into legible form by the experiences in the narrative to come—by depicting himself as a character at the center of an orchestrated drama.

Rousseau’s role as the only actor with a speaking role *appears* to place him in a position of power, but this piece of rhetorical theater reveals the fictional nature of the voice Rousseau gives himself. As Derrida argues, Rousseau writes so as to overcome what he considers the great dilemma that men insist on seeing him other than he is, and that timidity prevents him from expressing himself adequately in improvised speech

(Rousseau, *Rêveries* 17; qtd. also in Chase 32; Rousseau, *Confessions* 8.463). For Derrida, this inadequacy is not just a consequence of Rousseau's timidity but a "disease of speech," which "denies itself even as it gives itself," and thereby forces Rousseau to turn to writing to supplement what is lacking in speech. In so doing, he hides himself in order to show himself, or renounces his concrete existence in order to make himself known "in the ideality of truth and value" (Derrida 142). In the apostrophe to God that serves as the highlight of his mini-drama, Rousseau attempts to recapture the full presence of living speech in its representation in writing. He establishes a fiction of voice ("that they may hear my confessions"), and thereby posits a speaking face, but he does so through figures of address that ultimately undermine his discourse of "unveiling" or of undoing the disfiguring structures of language.

When Rousseau turns to the "Être éternel" as witness of his truthfulness and asks him to gather a crowd of men to hear his confessions, the figure of apostrophe "collude[s]" with that of prosopopoeia to inscribe an audience for Rousseau's revelations within the text (Chase 88). In apostrophe, the speaker interrupts the current of discourse "to turn to another person, or to some other object, different from" that to which the address was first directed (Gibbons 213). Meanwhile, prosopopoeia "consists in... introducing persons silent as speaking, or persons deceased as living; in making rocks, woods, rivers, temples, and other inanimate beings, assume the powers and properties, and express the emotions of living, and even reasonable creatures" (329). While rhetors typically distinguish between apostrophe and prosopopoeia, Paul de Man defines prosopopoeia as "*the fiction of an apostrophe* to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity,

which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech" (de Man, "Autobiography as Defacement" 75-6, emphasis added). He thus differentiates prosopopoeia from personification or anthropomorphism, for whereas anthropomorphism denies the role of tropes and figures in favor of recognizing essences, in prosopopoeia the human form—specifically the face—is not a natural given but rather conferred by a "fiction" (Chase 83-4). For by positing the possibility of God's reply, Rousseau gives him voice, which assumes "mouth, eye, and finally face" (de Man, "Autobiography as Defacement" 76). In turning away from men to address God (apostrophe), Rousseau posits the possibility of God's reply and thus introduces "persons silent as speaking" (prosopopoeia), or confers a speaking face upon a silent entity through an act of language (Gibbons 329). It is through this address to a God who is presumed to be responsive that Rousseau introduces the fiction of his own voice, but in doing so he evokes the "latent threat of prosopopeia, namely that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death" (78). In order to imagine himself as speaking, Rousseau must conjure up the responsive figures of an accepting God and a remorseful audience: he has to imagine himself being "read" by the other, or totalized into a readable sign that another entity can understand and to which it can respond. In this sense, Rousseau is "struck dumb" in that he is not the one speaking or reading but is instead being "read" and determined by rhetorical figures.

The role of the audience of men that overhears is critical in this context because their imagined reaction is an important way in which Rousseau attempts to see himself

being seen. As Douglas Kneale notes, intrinsic to apostrophe is a diversion that “redirects speech to someone other than the original hearer” (13). In the apostrophe at the beginning of Book 1, Rousseau turns away from readers to address God, but this diversion is really a means of persuading his audience of men. In *Paradise Lost* the diversion of speech in apostrophe appears as an example of rhetorical deception and misdirection: as I explain in Chapter 1, Satan persuades Eve to eat the forbidden fruit by turning away from her to address the Tree of Life as a “sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant,” and thereby establish its status as such (9.678). While Satan addresses the tree, the real target of his persuasive discourse is the woman who overhears. Rousseau similarly turns away from the audience of men to address a God who does not need to hear the confessions, for he has already seen into Rousseau’s heart: “I have unveiled my interior *as you have seen it yourself*” (34, emphasis added). Rousseau evokes the “eternal being,” then, only so that he may gather the “innumerable crowd” of Rousseau’s fellow men, so that “*they* may hear my confessions, that they may groan at my indignities, that they may blush at my miseries” (34, emphasis added). By turning away from the audience of men, Rousseau works to persuade these men through mirroring, by inscribing the audience within the text as figures already subject to the power of Rousseau’s discourse. In a chain similar to the one Paul de Man describes (in which “[v]oice assumes mouth, eye, and finally face”) Rousseau first posits for his imaginary audience ears that hear, then mouths that groan, and finally faces that blush (de Man 76). Yet instead of presenting “persons silent as speaking,” Rousseau here uses the fiction of an apostrophe to another entity to evoke a legion of silent onlookers (Gibbons 329). Rousseau addresses God rather than the audience because

he wants to suggest that God alone can respond in judgment or forgiveness. The crowd of men's imagined responses, meanwhile, are passive (hearing) or inarticulate (groaning, blushing), so that the overheard confessions impose physiological reactions on the hearers rather than implying that they can answer back. The ambiguity of responses like groaning and blushing means that they can be read either as expressions of sympathy for the speaker's suffering, or evidence of shame at their own hand in it. In particular, the image of "blush[ing]" at Rousseau's miseries—a surprising reaction to hearing of someone's unhappiness— suggests a sense of shame. As a form of disfiguration, blushing suggests that the audience are divested of the virtuous image they present to the world and—as passive listeners—of the power of speech and therefore of face and personhood. If the groans and blushes can be interpreted as responses of sympathy rather than shame, the final line of Rousseau's apostrophe to God confirms his rhetorical efforts to silence his accusers: "That each of them may in turn uncover his heart at the foot of your throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one of them say, if he dares: *I was better than that man*" (50). Here Rousseau evokes the Biblical challenge "let him who is without sin cast the first stone," which turns judgment back on those who would dispense it, and so silences them. While the grammar of the line prompts the audience to speak and accuse, its rhetoric inhibits those very acts. This rhetorical silencing of the crowd *appears* to restore power to Rousseau, but the strategy of silencing is a double-edged sword. In repeating the violent appropriations he experienced, Rousseau reaffirms that language does not merely describe the world and the self in reliable ways, but instead imposes meanings on them. Moreover, by inscribing the reader within the text through

apostrophe and prosopopoeia, Rousseau dramatizes the ways in which figure or face are determined by acts of language because, again, Rousseau has to imagine himself being heard and interpreted by the other, and therefore fitted into a cosmetic order that renders him knowable. Rousseau's act of supposed self-revelation, then, paradoxically takes the form of conspicuous rhetorical turns that violate his claims to transparency: rather than "unveiling" his interior and peeling away the social self, Rousseau's opening apostrophe trades in the giving and taking away of masks and fictional faces. This conferral of face through language implies that, as face is not a natural given, it is as mutable and arbitrary as the figures that posit it. In contradiction to Rousseau's ideal of the immutable self, the self here appears to be liable to distortion and reinvention through the slippery turns of rhetoric. Taken to the extreme, this idea of the self as that which is posited by language makes Rousseau, like Milton's Death, "a shape that shape had none," since what is fashioned can be fashioned anew (*PL* 2.666-7). This is the predicament Rousseau encounters in the preamble of the Confessions, where the act of "unveiling" turns out to be one of putting on another disfiguring veil. By staging this dilemma in such a dramatic fashion, Rousseau foregrounds the impossibility of undoing the cosmetic order that, in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, he identifies as a form of "polishing" as well "policing" that submits human nature to arbitrary cultural dictates.

The drama of Rousseau's preamble finds a parallel in the theatricality of the French Revolution, whose proponents saw themselves as acting out Rousseau's principles and lifting the veil of the old order. Reiterations of Rousseau's rhetoric of truth, simplicity, and unveiling are everywhere to be found in the discourse and iconography of

the French Revolution. One 1793 allegorical engraving particularly resonates with Rousseauvian thought. Comparing the Revolution to the lifting of a veil, it bears the legend “From the heights of heaven, the veil lifted by Patriotism in the figure of a Veteran, reveals August Truth in all its splendor, which comes to enlighten the Nation, the National Assembly and the universe; French Liberty... knocks down the crown and shatters the iron scepter of frightful Despotism” [“Du haut du Ciel, le voile soulevé par le Patriotisme sous la figure d’un Vétéran, laisse paraître Auguste Vérité resplendissante, qui vient éclairer la Nation, L’Assemblée Nationale et l’univers ; La Liberté Française...fait tomber la couronne et brise le sceptre de fer de l’affreux Despotisme »] (Duplessis, “La Révolution française”; Bruel, vol. 2, p. 101). The engraving shows Patriotism, personified in the figure of the Veteran, floating on a cloud and lifting a veil off of August Truth, who is represented as a beautiful naked woman holding a mirror that reflects rays of light over the Parisian crowds below, including members of the National Assembly. To the left of Truth and Patriotism lies a naked king whose broken scepter eludes the grasp of his uplifted hand as the crown falls from his head. Through these images of light, nakedness, and unveiling, the engraving links the Revolution to the ideals of the Enlightenment, whose metaphor of *les lumières*, as James Swenson points out, lead to “concepts of diffusion and influence” such as those suggested by the light radiating from the mirror of Truth in the engraving (Swenson 2). As one of the principle authors of the Enlightenment and therefore of the Revolution, Rousseau received credit in a petition to the National Assembly for inspiring the French with republican principles through his “work of moral regeneration, his condemnations of the artificiality of the Old Regime and his

propagation of simple tastes” (Swenson 10). The engraving evokes these Rousseauian principles in coupling the “light” of truth shed by the enlightenment with the idea that all the drapery and iconography of the Old Regime had to be shed in order to allow this truth to shine forth.



Figure 1
 “La Revolution française” (1793)

In the logic of the engraving, lifting this veil is supposed to harmonize a divided society. The image of celestial light illuminating the nation suggests that the French citizenry (and indeed the whole “universe”) is brought together under the unifying sign of “transparency” and the acknowledgement of a common truth. The first bas-relief

engraved on the Arc de Triomphe for the inaugural fête de la Fédération in 1790 likewise emphasizes the harmony that would result from abandoning the Old Regime's material symbols of power. It shows French ladies in spare classical dress "imitating the Romans" by willingly sacrificing their jewels. To their right is a woman holding the cornucopia or "horn of plenty," representing the abundance that would result from this sacrifice, while behind her an angel sounds the horn of victory ahead of the arrival of "La Loi," personified as another classically dressed woman (since "law" is feminine in French) on a chariot pulled by two lions (Lucien and Pauquet, "Hommage"; Bruel, vol. 2, p. 397). The image of the women's sacrifice of jewels on the left of the engraving would likely have recalled to mind the notorious *affaire du collier* that led to the trial of Cardinale Rohan, which the comte de Mirabeau called the "the prelude to the Revolution" (qtd. in Bruel, vol. 2, p. 487). The legal scandal involved an extravagant diamond necklace that Marie Antoinette never actually commissioned, but which nevertheless came to stand for her duplicitousness, frivolity, and profligate spending, and inspired satirical engravings of the players in the drama (Weber 164-75). The image of the classically dressed women contrasts that national disgrace, and the social fissures it both represented and reinforced, with the peaceful image of Frenchwomen sacrificing their own wealth and interest to ensure the prosperity of the republic. Indeed, by that point Marie Antoinette herself had "abandoned the aggressively jeweled stance she had assumed during the Revolution's first summer" and bowed to the new patriotic fashion trend by buying cockades and decorating her wardrobe with the tricolor. Conceding, at least in appearance, to the new emphasis on harmonious uniformity, she attended the fête de la

Fédération in a simple white dress similar to that all the female attendees were required to wear (and not dissimilar to the one she would wear to her execution three years later) (Weber 220-221; 286-7).



Figure 2
“Hommage à la deuxième législature” (1790)

This kind of national harmony was in theory the work effected by the aesthetic of transparency and simplicity. As other engravings and national events show, however, transparency did not always appear as the gentle “unveiling” of truth but rather as the aggressive and divisive stripping off of the nation’s vices. In the engraving of August Truth, for example, to the left of Truth the king lies naked with the crown falling from his

head and the broken scepter from his hand, now that “French Liberty” has knocked down the crown and “shattered the iron scepter of frightful Despotism” (Duplessis, “La Révolution française”). In this case nakedness is a humiliation showing the king divested of the accouterments of power, a symbol of the revolutionary project of stripping the nation of Old Regime opulence before August Truth could shine forth and republican simplicity take hold. Indeed, if Marie Antoinette arrived at the 1790 fête de la Fédération in patriotic dress, this was partly because the mob that had seized Versailles in 1789 had literally destroyed her wardrobe and decorated themselves with the fragments of her dresses—a symbolic gesture of tearing off, as Edmund Burke would put it, the “drapery” of the feudal age (Chrisman-Campbell 2; Burke 169). Like the engraving of August Truth, other images placed contrasting kinds of nakedness side by side. One image depicts the apartment of an Abbé, which is decorated by the statue of a naked woman and the portrait of a woman who is “très décolletée” (in fact her breasts are almost fully exposed), signaling his depraved appetites (“Voilà ce que c’est”; Bruel, vol. 2, p. 475; see figure 3). Amidst these signs of sexual hypocrisy, the furious and now bald Abbé is unwillingly being shaved by a barber: the barber’s plate on the left holds the Abbé’s shorn curls while a symbolic deplumed peacock stands to the right. The legend reads, “This is what it is to have too much” [“Voilà ce que c’est d’en avoir trop”], referring to the Abbé’s thick curls and the material wealth they symbolize. While the nakedness of the women of the statue and portrait represents the debauchery of religious men, the “naked” head of the Abbé emblemizes how revolutionary patriots were shearing or depluming members of the First Estate—stripping them of their power and its material signifiers. The Abbé’s

baldness is a humiliation like the nakedness of the king in the engraving of August Truth, and perhaps refers to the Biblical story of Samson, who loses his strength when he loses his hair.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 3
"Voilà ce que c'est que d'en avoir trop" (1790)

Other images similarly used nakedness to represent the sexual license of the nobility and clergy, as well as gestured self-referentially to the ways in which such abuses were being “exposed” in these images. Often, images of nude or semi-nude women suggested—as Rousseau did in the *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts*—that the state had become a weak and effeminate body through its submission to the feminine arts of fashion and refinement. By contrast with the virtuous nakedness of August Truth or of the classically-dressed Marianne with her exposed breasts in Jacques Louis David’s iconic painting “Liberty Leading the People” (1830), the nakedness of aristocratic or religious women could signal their promiscuity as a symbol of the corruption of church and state. Whereas an earlier, more favorable engraving had the nude Graces standing with a sumptuously dressed Marie Antoinette and crowning her as the protector of the sciences and the arts, later engravings show her allowing her skirt to be lifted and her breast caressed by a kneeling comte d’Artois in one image, or, in a 1790 pornographic print called “Ma constitution,” “My Constitution,” lifting her dress above her waist while a uniformed Lafayette places his hand on the exposed “center of her charms” (Bruehl, vol. 1, p. 86; Bruehl, vol. 2, p. 520). Underneath his hand are the words *Res publica*, meaning “republic” but also, given the placement of the words, likely suggesting that the Queen’s “charms” are a “public thing.” At the time Lafayette, who attempted to chart a middle path between radical and reactionary ideologies, was incorrectly rumored to be having an affair with the queen, and the print shows him kneeling deferentially before her pudendum in order to suggest his divided loyalties. Through elaborate visual composition and verbal play in high and low language, the print suggests that the only constitution

Lafayette was interested in was the queen's "con" and the only republic her "*Res publica*."¹⁸ An equally elaborate obscene satire shows a naked Marie Antoinette with the body of a siren at the center of an orgy scene. In her left hand she holds a scepter, and in her right a goblet and a pair of scissors alluding to Delilah ("Un peuple"; Bruel, vol. 2, p. 523). Meanwhile, the king—whose full royal dress highlights Marie Antoinette's nakedness—is draped over his throne beside the bed with a sword plunged into his side. The rhyming legend reads, "A people is without honor, and deserve their chains/ When they bow their heads to the Scepter of Queens" ["Un peuple est sans honneur, et mérite ses chaines/ Quand il baisse le front sous le Sceptre des Reines"]. The engraving aligns Marie Antoinette with the mythical sirens as well as the Biblical Delilah, female figures who seduce, entrap, and weaken men through their beauty. The engraving also shows a dog jumping on the bed and biting Marie Antoinette, possibly alluding to the story of Jezebel being eaten by dogs, and thus predicting the queen's fate. The immediate victim of her rule is the king who allowed himself to be "shorn" of his strength as Samson was by Delilah, but the rhyming couplet suggests that the king represents an entire nation that has compromised its manly courage by submitting to a queen. The pornographic print strips her of her fashionable attire to lay bare illegitimate female power, and her

¹⁸ In a play on words that was common in satirical verse, emphasizing the "con" of constitution evoked the French slang word meaning "idiot" or "jerk" but also "cunt" (Auricchio 231). Laura Auricchio offers a detailed analysis of the print in her biography *The Marquis: Lafayette Reconsidered*. As she explains, Lafayette was controversial because he did not support an American-style republican model for France, but favored instead a constitutional monarchy (xxiv-xxv). In 1789, charged with protecting Versailles from the mob, he encouraged the queen to appear before the angry crowd and, unable to make himself heard, resorted to the symbolic gesture of kissing her hand. At the time this gesture turned the tide in favor of Marie Antoinette and Lafayette, but it later became a "sign of double-dealing" (208). By 1790 his troubles had deepened and he found himself the subject of a tide of unflattering publications (223).

nakedness, as well as that of other exalted men and especially women, thus self-referentially emblemizes how revolutionary images sought to “expose” the abuses of the powerful. In these ways, nakedness in Revolutionary iconography was not a “transparent” and unifying signifier but had multiple, complex meanings developed in elaborate, allusive, and politically motivated pictorial allegory. Though it was meant to represent the enduring and immediately readable (“August Truth”), the figure of nakedness in Revolutionary iconography, much as in Rousseau’s writing, remained a shifting and unstable signifier, and in many ways no less divisive than the differentiating symbols of the *ancien régime*.

While pictorial allegory figured “transparency” as nakedness (of a sort), in public life Frenchmen and women needed to be “transparent” by signaling their allegiances through items such as the cockade, the liberty cap, and the *sans-culotte* costume, and thus making their bodies into immediately legible signs. In that sense, Rousseau’s rhetoric of transparency hardened into icon in a way that pre-empted discourse. In the preamble of the *Confessions*, Rousseau confronts the dilemma that in attempting to render himself “transparent” to a responsive audience, he is silenced and being “read” by the structure of figure. In the French Revolution, “transparent” signs like the cockade, a decorative embellishment to items like hats and shoes, or the liberty cap, a pointed red bonnet, were supposed to immediately announce one’s status as a patriot without any discourse taking place (Chrisman-Campbell 271). These signs *were* transparent in that they had an immediately discernible meaning, but at the same they pre-empted discourse and silenced the citizenry, who were no longer speaking and interpreting but were

instead being “read” within a pre-existing arrangement. This was indeed an effort to “imprint” the social and political landscape with unambiguous signs, recalling Rousseau’s metaphor of nature’s “ineffaceable characters” in *Émile* (217-18). The rhetoric of transparency thereby made the revolutionary-era French into a “policed,” if not necessarily a “polished,” people by replacing discourse and interpretation with icon and ideology. In putting such practices into place, the Revolutionaries relied upon the name of Rousseau as it had itself become an icon, signaling an apparently “transparent” message of simplicity and transparency that does not invite discourse and interpretation.

At the same time that Rousseau’s rhetoric of transparency hardened into icon in revolutionary dress, supposedly transparent signs continued to mutate in excess of the meanings assigned to them—the predicament that Rousseau had displayed in his rhetoric. Tracing the fate of symbolic dress reveals the complexity of codes of dress during the Revolution, the legal debates and the misunderstanding and violence they provoked, as well as the ways in which they remained freighted with the weight of *ancien régime* codes. As Kimberley Chrisman-Campbell notes, although it would soon “drive the fashion industry to the brink of extinction,” “the French Revolution began as just another trend,” with images of the Bastille adorning fans, buttons, bonnets, and shoe buckles (Chrisman-Campbell 267-9). In gradual, complex, and non-linear ways, “fashion” went out of fashion as sartorial distinctions were eliminated and the upper classes had to give up their finery, with its counterrevolutionary significance, while the lower classes enjoyed greater variety in dress. Dress no longer simply took inspiration from current events, but instead “explicitly advertised partisan loyalties.” The *sans-culottes*, the working-class men

who led the charge on the bastille, favored trousers over aristocratic “breeches” and rejected other kinds of finery like lace, silk, and hair powder (270). Symbolic items like the cockade became necessary symbols of patriotism, and even their color (tricolor, white, or green) and the manner in which they were worn could provoke disputes (Wrigley 97-98). The liberty cap, supposed to have Roman origins as part of the Revolution’s classical model, was perhaps the revolutionary item that most provoked “violently conflicting interpretations,” and after the Terror its red color became associated with the bloodshed of those months (Wrigley 143). In every case, symbolic items had multifarious and ever-changing meanings depending on context, and revolutionaries struggled to stabilize their meanings, which could be misappropriated and deformed (Wrigley 8). As Richard Wrigley argues, such misappropriations revealed that the process of establishing new signs that “expressed the social and political principles of equality and patriotic virtue” proved far more troublesome than that of abolishing old signs (Wrigley 70). The difficulty partly lay in the fact that the revolutionaries did not actually dispense with the Old Regime culture of appearances—since appearances grew even more critical during the Revolution and the Terror—but instead attempted to redefine it in the pressurized context of social and political revolution. Since they had inherited this dimension of social life from the Old Regime, they struggled to distinguish new codes of dress from older, class-based codes, as well as to stabilize meaning through “what was recognized to be the essentially unreliable nature of vestimentary appearances” (Wrigley 10).

In these ways, the culture of dress during the French Revolution saw the complexities of Rousseau's rhetoric of "transparency" and "simplicity" playing out on a national stage in a high-stakes political struggle. On the one hand, the figures of "transparency" and "simplicity" were reduced to icons that foreclosed discourse and instead signaled meanings assumed to be easily intelligible. On the other hand, as idealists sought to "reduce" all citizens to "an absolute level"—a theoretical point of origin in which they were equal—the disputed meanings of revolutionary dress and the elaborate allegorical engravings that played on these meanings reveal that the Revolution could never fully escape the burden of the unstable sign system it had theoretically abandoned (Hazlitt 214). In the "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," Marx cites Hegel's observation that great events and characters of world history occur twice, and adds that they occur "the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce" (31). Marx goes on to describe Louis Bonaparte's *coup d'état* in 1851 as a farcical reenactment of Napoleon's coup of 1799, on the 18th Brumaire in the revolutionary calendar (Marx 31 n.). Marx' remarks regarding the 1851 coup as a feeble re-enactment of earlier events can apply to, and indeed eventually include, the Revolution of 1789:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances, in creating something unprecedented, in just such epochs of revolutionary crisis, that is when they

nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms, in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language. Thus Luther masqueraded as the Apostle Paul, the [French] revolution of 1789-1814 draped itself alternately as Roman republic and Roman empire, and the revolution of 1848 could come up with nothing better than to parody 1789 at one point, the revolutionary inheritance of 1793-5 at another. Likewise a beginner studying a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue; but only when he can use it without referring back, and thus forsake his native language for the new, only then has he entered into the spirit of the new language, and gained the ability to speak it fluently. (32)

As Marx argues, the revolutionaries of 1789 sought to re-invent the nation—or even the “universe” itself—, but in attempting to enact new scenes in history, they borrowed their names, marching orders, and uniforms from prior moments. They had to “translate” the new language of revolution back into that of the Roman republic, but the rhetoric of transparency and the vestimentary sign system it inspired could not simply undo centuries of history and return France to Roman republicanism through an act of “unveiling.” Instead, the Revolution became an echo, a self-consciously staged and costumed re-enactment of past events. Moreover, the “dead generations” that haunted the Revolution were not just those of the classical past, but also those of the intervening *ancien régime*. As my analysis of revolutionary dress has shown, the revolution of 1789 was “draped” not only in the costumes of the Roman republic, but also in those of the Old

Régime, whose culture of appearances conducted to the urgent significance of dress during Revolution. This is the predicament that Rousseau had encountered and displayed in his rhetoric, when he foregrounded the perplexity of disentangling a theoretical nature from the millennia of arbitrary change presumed to have deformed it.

CHAPTER III
Wordsworth's *Prelude* and the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*

Following Rousseau, the Wordsworth of the early works proposed an anti-style or counter-style in rebellion against the classical notion that the cosmetic order of rhetoric sustained a harmonious civilization. For Wordsworth, too, the structures that in classical rhetoric represented an orderly *kosmos* seemed to be ruled by arbitrary, ever-changing, and hence disfiguring signs. However, Wordsworth's figures of undoing these structures are often more violent and destabilizing than Rousseau's. His rhetoric is not that of the dramatically lifted veil (though this figure, too, can become violent in Rousseau's work), but the grislier rhetoric of the "poisoned" or "possessed" vestment that consumes and maddens the wearer in the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, or in the *Prelude*, of "garments that...prey upon" one's strength (*Selected Prose* 360; *Prose Works* 177; *Prelude* 4.292-3).¹⁹ In these figures Wordsworth objects categorically and forebodingly to the classical comparison of language to the "dress" of thought, where previous rhetors tended to move more easily from one analogy (language as ornament) to another (language as embodiment). While Milton warned that the clothing of language could conceal, manipulate, and produce false images, Wordsworth warns of something even more pernicious: that this clothing is poisoned; that it can actually consume and *fuse with* the skin beneath it. The consequences for Wordsworth are no less than madness and death. In these figures of poisoned or possessed vestments, Wordsworth does not reject the classical tradition itself, but instead finds the specific analogy of language as dress no longer acceptable. In the negativity of his statements—his insistence that language is *not*

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated all references are to the *Prelude* of 1805.

a garment for thought—Wordsworth in fact engages with the abiding rhetorical question of how do define the relationship between meaning and expression, which he reframes in texts like the *Prelude*, and the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* as the relationship between language and the “inner human world” of thought and feeling (Attridge 57).

In this chapter I argue that debates about rhetorical style gained particular urgency for Wordsworth as part of his reaction not only to the eighteenth-century rococo strain of neoclassicism, but also to modern commercialism and widespread political upheaval. In response to rapid political and commercial changes, Wordsworth offers the myth of an Adamic “naked” language that is eternal and invulnerable to social disfiguration. The ideal of such a language, modeled on “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature,” emerges both as a revolutionary act of rejecting the prevailing social order, and as a means of locating stable grounds of meaning amidst historical disruption (*Major Works* 597). Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the Terror and with England still at war with France, Wordsworth—even more than Rousseau—confronted an acute sense of cultural acceleration as well as a feeling of living in an increasingly crowded, globalized, and commercialized world whose ordering principles had proved forces of chaos. In *Paradise Lost*, an important consequence of the fall is Adam’s expulsion into the world of time and history and a “heightened awareness of duration and change” (Kellogg 260). As if to intensify this consequence, Wordsworth’s epoch of political and commercial revolutions saw change occurring more rapidly and becoming perceptible in changing dress an emblem of the visible exterior of civilization. In Wordsworth’s writing, these problems surface as figures of poisoned or possessed

vestments leading to madness and death, or of a succession of urban strangers known only by their clothes, or of sundry objects in a museum that the mind cannot order or combine. Not only do things and their representations fail to correspond, but also the outer realm of changeable representation impinges on the mind in such a way that it cannot make sense of the world. Wordsworth offers no easy solution in this problem: instead, he encounters and displays in his rhetoric the perplexities involved in making sense of the world from within the context of a modern society of representation gone haywire, in which signs proliferate and seem to refer only to their own internal logic rather than offer glimpses of anything outside of or beyond themselves.

In the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth famously articulates the ideal of a “naked” and “permanent” language as a counterpoint to cataclysmic historical change. His ideas in the “Preface” were not wholly new, but consistent with older English traditions as well as enlightenment and revolutionary movements of the neoclassical period.²⁰

However, Wordsworth’s “Preface” is distinctive in its more extreme attitude regarding questions of style and literary convention (Butler 61; Jacobus 9). His bleak view of modernity suggests why Wordsworth so urgently sought to distance poetic language from the realm of advanced society:

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for

²⁰ In announcing this program of aesthetic simplicity, Wordsworth did not “invent” a new theory of poetic style but instead renewed older traditions of English literature, as well as followed enlightenment and neoclassical currents of the second half of the eighteenth century that favored the ephemeral over the essential, the “primitive” over advanced society, and widely accessible over elitist language (Jacobus 1; Butler 16; 59; 57).

all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations provides a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of this country have conformed themselves. (*Major Works* 599)

With proto-sociological acuity, Wordsworth here identifies the ways in which the conditions of urban modernity—including crowding, national conflict, mechanization, and print technology—had enfeebled the human mind and compromised its power to “discriminate” or distinguish signs from things. In referring to the “daily” occurrence of national events and the “hourly” communication of intelligence, he highlights the feeling of cultural acceleration, where historical intervals no longer consist of decades, years, or months, but of days and hours. As a remedy, he delineates the ideal of a permanent and living language, made of “flesh and blood”—“alive with metaphors and figures,” yet free of any “foreign splendour” or “transitory and accidental ornaments” (603; 607). In evoking “ornaments” and the “interweave[ing]” of “foreign splendour,” Wordsworth uses the rhetorical convention of comparing figures of speech to visual or sartorial adornment, but the comparison takes on new meaning in light of the historical context he evokes: the “multitude of causes unknown to former times,” and the “tendency of life and manners” to which he believed the country’s literature and theater had conformed (599). As Timothy Campbell argues, in the course of the eighteenth century commercial culture

produced unprecedentedly rapid material successions and brought these successions of changeable objects into irresistible perception, “most paradigmatically through visual reproductions of fashionable dress that recast social flux into serial styles” (132). By consequence, I argue, fashion became the pernicious emblem of modernity, the “other” against which writers like Wordsworth and Rousseau defined language in rhetorical exercises that challenged literary convention.

Wordsworth’s stated preference for language stripped bare of ostentation (a “naked and simple style”) echoes subversive, revolutionary sentiments of equality, as Hazlitt emphasized in his derisory remark that in the poetics of the Lake School “[a]uthority and fashion, elegance or arrangement, were hooted out of countenance as pedantry and prejudice....The object was to reduce all things to an absolute level; and a singularly affected and outrageous simplicity prevailed in dress and manners, in style and sentiment” (Wordsworth, *Major Works* 609; Hazlitt 214-15). At the same time, this aesthetic is also an anxious response to the causes and consequences associated with revolution: fashion, print culture, commercialization, and political upheaval. In rejecting both convention and innovation, Wordsworth repudiates the customary rhetorical “dress” of poetry as well as the modern fashion into which it had been transformed in the era of revolutions. Indeed, in the logic of his argument, the first problem leads to the second. While for Byron the poetic inheritance stemming from classicism represents a stabilizing tradition, for Wordsworth it is associated with historical and generic instability: “The exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language,” he reflects, “must at different moments and in different areas of literature have excited very different expectations”

(596). He therefore rejects “the common inheritance of Poets,” meaning “phrases and figures of speech” that have been passed down through generations (600-601), and declines to determine what is expected of poetry in his own day except to condemn its “gaudiness” and denounce poets who indulge in “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation” (596-7). For Wordsworth, then, tradition is destabilizing and results in the ostentation of modern poetry, to the extent that the phrases and figures that are the “common inheritance of Poets” are subject to the vagaries of time and history and mutate with every iteration to suit, and help shape, contemporary expectation (600-601). Such mutations risk making a poem from a previous age seem as outmoded, transient, and incomprehensible as that era’s ridiculous “ruffs and fardingales” (Hume 246).²¹ By contrast, poetry worthy of the name, such as the “most affecting parts of Chaucer,” is “expressed in language pure and universally intelligible” (Wordsworth, *Major Works* 597 n.). The stakes are especially high for Wordsworth because his historical moment saw the short cycles of “fashion” overtaking what ought to be the permanent and philosophical language of poetry. Not only could clothes and decorative objects go in and out of fashion, but, thanks to changes in print culture arising from commercial reproduction, so could authors and their styles, as witnessed by Rousseau’s celebrity, the craze for the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, and later the “Byromania” stemming from the success of *Childe Harold*. These enthusiasms for particular authors and styles of

²¹ Hume warns that just as we must not “throw aside the portraits of our ancestors, because of their ruffs and fardingales,” we must not devalue poetry because of “innocent peculiarities of manners and customs,” but should instead make allowance for the continual revolutions of manners and customs” (Campbell 140).

writing also inspired fashions in dress, with the French fashion system exploiting Rousseau's ethic of simplicity and young men in England imitating Lord Byron's signature style of dark clothes and a carelessly open collar (Stott 16-17). Such developments further linked literature to the world of fashion, lending credence to Wordsworth's complaint that to "those whose existence passes away in a course of fashionable pleasure" poetry "is a species of luxurious enjoyment" (*Selected Prose* 192).

As a counterpoint to the debased modern iteration of rhetorical style, Wordsworth uses metaphors of vegetation to suggest that he is "planting" poetry in the paradisiacal English countryside, where "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil... and speak a plainer more emphatic language" (*Major Works* 597). This figure applies to different ends the language of early modern rhetors, who wished to "plant" classical figures in the English shire and thereby develop a classically influenced English art of discourse (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 99). Instead of transplanting classical figures like so much foreign vegetation, Wordsworth proposes to rediscover in poetry the language already native to English soil. Consistent with contemporary nationalist movements, he upheld the English countryside as a protected place whose language was distant from a metropolitan culture where commerce promoted the promiscuous mixing of foreign and native things. His remark that the poet should not interweave any "foreign splendour" into his language, then, can refer not just to superfluous literary ornaments but also to the notion of elaborate style as a foreign, usually continental import contaminating native simplicity (603). Since commerce contributed to a sense of acceleration, Wordsworth depicts the countryside as a place of slow time distinct from the quickly "revolving"

world. In the conditions of low and rustic life, he writes, people “convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions,” and “such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language” (597). When he contrasts the permanent and philosophical language of the country with “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” that “furnish food for fickle tastes,” he evokes an imagined rural England associated with rootedness, “sameness,” and slow *evolutions* rather than revolutions. In such a place, language keeps time with the steady rhythms (“repeated experience and regular feelings”) of country life, its slow growth (passions “incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature”) guaranteeing organicism (597). By contrast with this “rooted” language, codified eloquence is cast as a historical construct that changes in time and place, and therefore lacks any genuine relationship to the timeless in human experience. While the business of poetry is to treat of things not as they are but “as they appear,” Wordsworth writes, it ought nevertheless to be “as permanent as pure science,” for poetry itself is a science of the passions and the senses, or of the “primary laws of our nature” (*Selected Prose* 192; *Major Works* 597).

While Wordsworth thus rejects overtly rhetorical language in the “Preface” and elsewhere, scholars have long argued that he never fully abandons the classical tradition, even in his earlier writings. As Douglas Kneale contends, “there is a deep strain of classicism in Romanticism, not just in the second-generation poets such as Keats and Shelley...but in the very origins of Romanticism itself” (4). Kneale identifies the Romantics’ simultaneous turn from and turn to rhetoric with the detours of rhetorical

figures themselves, specifically with the figure of *aversio* or preterition, in which a speaker or writer turns away from something while at the same time dwelling upon it (3). Thus, I would extrapolate, Wordsworth's remark in the *Essays on Epitaphs* that language should not be "what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul" introduces classical rhetoric precisely by rejecting one of its central claims and thereby engaging with a question posed by classical rhetoricians (*Selected Prose* 360). Richard Clancey, meanwhile, demonstrates how Wordsworth's uniquely talented teachers at Hawkshead school trained him in a standard classical curriculum focusing on rhetors such as Cicero and Demosthenes, while at the same time lifting the artificial constraints typically placed on classical education. Under their influence, as well as his experience of what he saw as the narrowness of eighteenth-century Cambridge, Wordsworth developed into both a revolutionary and a classically rhetorical poet, revolting against an ossified eighteenth-century neoclassicism while allowing a "classical undersong" to stream through his poetry (xiv-xvii). Building upon these studies, I argue that Wordsworth's classical "strain" or "undersong" emerges in the ways he figures the ideal of a permanent, Adamic language in rhetorical language characterized by unmasterable turns and mutations, and therefore associated with the chaotic world of historical contingency whose most visible emblem was fashion.

In the literary experiment of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1802 "Preface," distinctive moments in his poetic career, Wordsworth explores the possibility of expressing thought in a language approaching the "Adamic," where figures of speech are not superadded "ornaments" but organic features arising from passion mediated by thought, and

consequently as “permanent” as the processes of feeling and perception they name. In the different style of the 1805 *Prelude* and the 1810 *Essays on Epitaphs*, Wordsworth encounters and displays in his rhetoric the challenge of conveying the essential and eternal in figures that were necessarily arbitrary, changeable, and hence deforming. In these texts Wordsworth often projects anxieties about the disfiguring potential of figure onto the conditions of urban modernity, cast as the realm of representation run amok. In Book 1 of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth celebrates his escape from the city’s walls, and rejoices,

The earth is all before me: with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at it its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing more than a wandering cloud,
I cannot miss my way. I breathe again;
Trances of thought and mountings of the mind
Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,
As by miraculous gift ‘tis shaken off,
That burthen of my own unnatural self,
The heavy weight of many a weary day
Not mine, and such as were not made for me. (15-25)

Wordsworth here evokes the ambiguous final lines of *Paradise Lost*, which refer to Adam and Eve after they are cast out of Paradise: “The world was all before them” (*Prelude* p. 28 n. 2; *Paradise Lost* 12.646). Instead of being cast out of paradise, however, Wordsworth

describes escaping the urban inferno *into* a bucolic paradise, where he can breathe, think, and make sense of the world again: “Trances of thought and mountings of the mind/ Come fast upon me.” These “trances” and “mountings,” which he never specifies, suggest a mystical sense of ascendance beyond representation. His mind is liberated because he has “shaken off” the burden of the “unnatural self,” as though this self were a garment he removes in the journey from city to country. This “unnatural self” can be thought of as the “dress” of urban modernity and an emblem of the ways in which thought can be determined by external powers, what Wordsworth would later call a “contagious air” or pollution that one breathes in (*Prelude* 4.290). It is in that sense a figure for the social and commercial as the realm of disfiguring signs. While that unnatural self seems easily removed in this passage, elsewhere in the *Prelude* that garment instead “prey[s] upon his strength” (4.293). The unnatural self does not remain separate from Wordsworth but is instead something he carries with him, much as Satan carries a hell within, as a consequence of the inevitable potential of representation to become disfiguration. Even in this passage, the allusion to *Paradise Lost* recalls the consequences of the fall as a permanent exile (at least in life) from paradise, and thus casts doubt upon the possibility of access to uncontaminated truth.

In the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth encounters this predicament when he attempts to define an appropriate language for preserving the memories of the illustrious or beloved dead, and laments that “thoughts cannot, even upon this impulse, assume an outward life without a transmutation and a fall” (361). Milton had similarly asserted that “[c]orporeal resemblances of inward holiness & beauty” were “now past,” evoking the incoherence of truth and goodness with their now disfigured and ever-mutating forms as

an irrevocable consequence of the fall (*Church Government* 828). In spite of these inevitable transmutations and falls, Wordsworth sets out in the *Essays* to define the kind of epitaph that can conduct to some kind of “holinesse and beauty”—or more precisely, the kind of epitaph that fails to do so. He most vividly evokes the classical and neoclassical analogy of language as the “dress” of thought in this context in the third essay, in which he asserts that the eighteenth-century poets had abandoned “those expressions which are not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul” (*Selected Prose* 360), and later, more forcefully, that

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an incarnation of the thought but only a cloathing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift; *such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.* Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (*Selected Prose* 361, emphasis added)

As Paul de Man explains, in comparing language to one of those “poisoned vestments” (in some editions “possessed vestments”), Wordsworth borrows an image from the tale of Hercules and Nessus told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and in Sophocles’s *Trachinae* (here not named but dismissed as one of “those stories of superstitious times”), in which Hercules is devoured by a poisoned coat given to him by his wife Deianira and finally

succumbs to madness and death (“Autobiography as Defacement” 80-81).²² In an essay that identifies the churchyard as the a place of “repose” and quiet “contemplation” and relies on metaphors that harmonize life and death, this moment is singularly violent and antithetical, relying on the urgent distinction of body and dress despite the fact that “[t]he sequence garb-body-soul...is a perfectly consistent metaphorical chain: garment is the visible outside of the body as the body is the visible outside of the soul” (de Man, “Autobiography as Defacement” 79). Along with the classical influence, this distinction emerges partly from the protestant tradition I discuss in Chapter 1, in which “dress” was a figure for obscuring satanic allegory, and the living body represented the clarity of the letter. In validating the practice of burial and its accompanying rites, Wordsworth affirms that the human body is not a “worthless shell” but the habitation of a “rational” as well as an “immortal Soul,” and that attachment to the body and veneration of the immortal soul are not mutually exclusive, but rather feelings that “have another and a finer connection than that of contrast. —it is the connection formed through the subtle progress in which, both in the natural and the moral world, qualities pass insensibly into their contraries, and things revolve upon each other” (329). As the sun circles the planet, so the contemplative soul comes from and returns to immortality via “the land of transitory things” (326-7). It is therefore at the “midway point” between attachment to the mortal body and a higher regard for the immortal soul that the author of an epitaph should take his stand, in compositions that offer a tribute to the man as a human being as well as offer “something more,” some glimpse of eternity (327). Such compositions can contain

²² For instance, in William Knight’s 1896 *Prose Works of William Wordsworth* the term is “possessed vestments” (177).

“no momentary illusion, nothing fugitive,” and express only thoughts which have the “infinite of truth” (327; 363). Here, too, we can detect the influence of protestant iconoclasm, in which the veneration of the body as mere body is akin to idolatry—the worship of “dead things” that refer to nothing more than themselves—but its veneration as the sacred abode of the soul guides the worshiper to the divine. These ideas culminate in the figure of the poisoned (or possessed) vestment, where, in the encounter between classical rhetoric and the classically influenced Christian tradition, Wordsworth examines whether and how changing outward form might offer glimpses of the “infinite of truth.”

The allusion to Hercules and Nessus both affirms and interrupts Wordsworth’s efforts to harmonize life and death. In the story the poisoned coat destroys Hercules: when he tears at the coat to remove it, he shreds his own skin, and—after ascending a funeral pyre—is finally apotheosized as a god. In this way, the story ends in a chiasmic reversal in which clothing clings tenaciously to the body, becoming itself a “constituent part,” while the body is shed like clothing. Clothing and body therefore appear to be indistinguishable from one another. But because Hercules does not simply die, but metamorphoses into a god, the allusion seems to affirm Wordsworth’s argument that life and death do indeed have a “finer connection than that of contrast.” At the same time, by contrast with the metaphors of the revolving sun or the “running stream,” this poisoned vestments offers no sense of harmony (324). The figure constitutes a rupture because it is the only time in the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* when Wordsworth summons death as the painful and violent destruction of the body rather than the serene journey of the soul to

immortality, and as de Man emphasizes, it is striking that Wordsworth should do so in the context of reflecting on language. For de Man, death “is displaced name for a linguistic predicament” because the face given by language is a defacement: giving a “face” or an intelligible form to a work—such as an epitaph— involves imagining that its language refers both to what is *outside* or prior to the text—the person’s life—and to what is *inside* the text, meaning the formal construction that comes into being through language (de Man 81). As language has both a referential and a formal function, de Man compares reading to “being stuck in a revolving door” with no way in or out, because we have to understand the text both as a “fiction” or formal construction, and as a reference to something outside of or prior to itself. In that sense, reading involves the taking away of a face in the sense of destroying the intelligible surface or inside/outside structure (Chase, “Lecture on ‘Autobiography as Defacement’”).

De Man identifies the “outside” as the events (real or simply possible) presumed to be prior to the text, while the inside is its own formal structure—the figures that make it intelligible. Given the essay’s focus on life beyond death, I propose that the “outside” of text or language can also refer to the divine or immortal—that which is completely outside the realm of the empirical—and that this is why Wordsworth insists so urgently on the incarnational model of language in spite of the acknowledged precariousness of that model. One of the animating ideas of Wordsworth’s *Essays Upon Epitaphs* is that funeral monuments and epitaphs, as expressions of the desire to remember the dead, would not exist if man did not have some “consciousness of a principle of immortality.” “[M]ere love, or the yearning of kind towards kind could not have produced” this desire to

“live in the remembrance of his fellows” (323). Wordsworth compares two forms of remembrance: the “sepulchral monument,” which is a “tribute to a man as a human being,” and the epitaph, “which contains this general feeling and something more” (327). The “something more” that epitaphs should communicate can be identified as some inkling of the deceased as an immortal soul. The writer of an epitaph therefore has to take his stand, as I explained earlier, at the “midway point” between attachment to the body and regard for the immortal soul. The language of an epitaph accordingly must contain “no momentary illusion, nothing fugitive,” because it is tasked with mediating between the fugitive body and the everlasting soul, with the understanding that the body is a transient figure through which we catch glimpses of the divine and immortal (327; 363).²³ Pope and other writers of epitaphs who come under fire violate this principle because they favor words over things. Their language is “unmeaning” and refers only to its own formal structure, with the antithesis as prime example because it exists simply as an artificially and gratifyingly neat distinction rather than a way of understanding the thing or idea to which it purportedly refers. It refers only within, to its own manipulable form, rather than also without, to something more lasting. Such language, for Wordsworth, is the self-referential dead letter without the life-giving spirit; it is the body that does not conduct to an everlasting soul (356).

²³ In Christian thought the human body is sacred because, though mortal, it is the image or figure of an immortal God. It is therefore the transient thing through which we can glimpse the eternal. I think this is one of the reasons why Wordsworth insists on what humankind have in common rather than on the highly specific attributes of an individual character. Such attributes refer only to the one life, whereas qualities shared in common suggest something bigger unifying humankind: this is the image of God in a Christian context, though Wordsworth’s thinking relies on more than just the Christian tradition and often evokes it in unorthodox ways.

This cannot be the language of epitaph because, as Wordsworth makes clear throughout the essay, that language must affirm immortality. Hence Wordsworth praises epitaphs that “personate the deceased” as though he were speaking from his own tombstone, for this “*shadowy interposition...harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead* by their appropriate affections. And it may be observed, that here we have an *additional proof of the propriety with which sepulchral inscriptions were referred to the consciousness of immortality as their primal source*” (335, emphasis added). The overlapping figures of apostrophe, or address, and prosopopoeia, or the representation of silent things as speaking things, here “interpose” and reconcile life and death through a “discourse that is *sustained* beyond and in spite of *deprivation*” (de Man 73). Whereas antithesis separates life and death both in its dichotomous structure and in its self-referential quality, prosopopoeia makes a “smooth gradation or gentle transition” between opposites: the silent dead and the speaking living (76). Yet as de Man observes, elsewhere Wordsworth warns against using the convention of having the “*Sta Viator*” bidding the traveler to pause in the voice of the departed person. “Such chiasmic figures, crossing the conditions of death and life with the attributes of speech and silence are, says Wordsworth, ‘too poignant and too transitory’” (de Man 77). Here the transitory and fugitive figure re-imposes itself. For de Man prosopopoeia is not just a prefiguration of mortality but an “actual entry into the frozen and the dead” because the latent threat of prosopopoeia is that “by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (78). I propose that the living are “frozen in their own death” because of the problem of

the inside/outside structure of language I summarized above. In order for prosopopoeia to harmonize life and death, it cannot be “merely” a self-referential, decorative figure or “dead letter”: it has to refer to something outside of itself, to some notion of a living spirit speaking from beyond the grave. What potentially heals this breach is the idea that prosopopoeia refers both to its own transitory formal structure *and* to something more lasting outside of itself, and thereby harmonizes life and death as does the human body, which is not a mere thing-among-things but a sacred edifice conducting to the immortal. However, as an aporia or an undecidable structure, this “revolving door” of reference does not offer a satisfying answer, particularly in the question of an immortal soul to which no empirical reference is possible, and which therefore causes the figure to return upon itself. This undecideability is at the heart of Wordsworth’s argument in the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*. One of his central claims is that no-one would wish to live in remembrance of the dead if humankind had no shadowy notions of immortality. However, this argument is itself aporetic because Wordsworth contends that the reason epitaphs exist is that we have some notion of immortality, *and* offers the existence of epitaphs as proof of immortality (they are not a mere “thing of words,” in Byron’s phrase, but refer to something more than themselves) (Byron, *CMP* 128). The argument thereby circles back upon itself in an undecidable structure: do we write epitaphs because we know immortality exists, or do we believe in immortality because we write epitaphs?

This is where I believe the context of commercial modernity puts pressure on this question. In an older, more pious society the answer to the problem would require a leap of faith, where belief bridges the gap between two logical opposites. For instance, in

Milton's "At a Vacation Exercise," which I discussed in Chapter 1, Milton confronts a similar problem: are the outward qualities of things proof of their existence, or do we assume that things exist because we perceive their outward qualities? Do language and the changing forms of the created world refer to some eternal truth, or just back to themselves? In "Vacation Exercise," Milton presents this problem in a comic way, with nothing like Wordsworth's seriousness. While the poem doesn't "solve" the problem, theoretically the pious person need only resort to the bedrock of faith for his or her answer. In Wordsworth's capitalist society, that bedrock was increasingly unsteady. As David Simpson argues, "[b]y about 1800 Wordsworth's best poetry, sensing the pressure of a 'multitude of causes unknown to former times,' discovers that it may have lost...anything we might conventionally identify as an immortal soul" (3).

The figure of the "poisoned" or "possessed" vestment in the third *Essay Upon Epitaphs* interpolates itself as the emblem of this soulless modernity, hence the rising intensity of Wordsworth's tone as he advances this figure. In the first essay, Wordsworth states his preference for the country over the city churchyard because the country church-yard offers, in the visible image of fields and woods, "types of renovation and decay" confirming the continuity of life and death (328). Compare this soothing place, Wordsworth urges, with "the unsightly manner in which our monuments are crowded together in the busy, noisy, unclean, and almost grassless church-yard of a large town" (328). In an echo of the "increasing accumulation of men in cities," Wordsworth affirms that in the modern city men are crowded in noisy and unclean places even in death. The problem here concerns not the implication for the dead—that this crowding shows

disrespect—but the influence of such a place on the living visitor. Such a church-yard offers no soothing thoughts for the contemplative mind because it contains no signs that refer to anything beyond themselves, no fields and woods (it is “grass-less”) engaged in a gradual process of renovation and decay, and thereby offering glimpses of renewal and of death as a gentle journey from one realm to another. The city graveyard is “noisy” because its signs signify nothing; the fact that its monuments are “crowded together” contributes to this “noise” because such crowded monuments are associated by the mere accident of proximity, mere metonymy, while the implied proliferation of epitaphs must inhibit any kind of contemplative imagination because the mind is overrun by signs it does not have the space to make sense of. Such a place is “busy, noisy, and unclean,” with all three adjectives implying a form of pollution or contamination. “Noise” pollution—implying the busy hum of city life—is a kind of air pollution in the sense that it contaminates the mind as air pollution contaminates the body. The figure of a surrounding “air” that one breaths in comes up again in the poisoned vestments passage of the third *Essay Upon Epitaphs*, in which Wordsworth urges that “language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, derange, to subvert, to vitiate, and to dissolve” (361). Language as “poisoned vestment” is a contagious air, or an air that does not “feed” or allow life-giving “breath,” but does precisely the opposite. The phrase “Contagious air” appears in a passage from Book 4 of the *Prelude*, which I will later examine in more detail, and which likewise connects the contaminated garment and contaminated air. Wordsworth writes:

—but sure it is that now

Contagious air did oft environ me,

Unknown among these haunts in former days.

The very garments that I wore appeared,

To prey upon my strength.... (289-293)

The garment is like a “Contagious air” because it likewise disturbs the inside/ outside structure by becoming a “constituent part of” the person it is meant to merely surround or envelope: it “prey[s] upon” his strength, or fuses with his skin, in the second example causing madness and death. The garment should be distinct from the body because it is a mere lifeless thing offering no glimpse of anything beyond itself, no external reference. The body, meanwhile, is supposed to be a figure for the everlasting: the mortal thing in whose motions between death and life we catch gleams of the divine nature it bodies forth. Wordsworth’s unstable figure begins as an antithesis clearly distinguishing the one from the other, but collapses into a chiasmus that confuses the two. This collapse threatens the argument of Wordsworth’s essay because it suggests that the body, like dress, is a mere self-referential *thing*, and that the language of epitaph is likewise a *thing* of words indicating nothing beyond its own formal structure; that the fiction of the dead speaking from beyond the grave is a prosopopoeia whose only reference is its own formal structure rather than the speaking face of the deceased that continues to be and speak in some other realm. As I argue above, the idea that language is *both* a garment (referring inwardly to formal structure) *and* a body (referring outwardly beyond itself) is not satisfying, particularly in the question of immortality, because it merely puts the reader in

the position of having to posit or assume this relationship between the representation and the unknowable thing in a context in which piety can no longer offer the faith necessary for this leap. As my reading of passages from *The Prelude* will elucidate, Wordsworth evokes the “poisoned” or “possessed vestment” as an emblem of the modernity that erodes this relationship between sign and meaning by producing a rapid succession of unmeaning signs, which, in their rapid transformation and the accidental relationships produced by their exchange, make it impossible for the mind to infer from this order of signs some higher signification. This failure to make sense of the world produces not just madness *and* death but madness *as* death because sense-making—what Wordsworth calls the “authentic sight of reason”—is what gives the mind of man its “religious dignity” and makes him more than a “senseless idol” (*Prelude* 4.296-7; 304).

In Books 3 and 4 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes what is ostensibly his first encounter with this senseless commercial world in an account of his studies at and return from Cambridge, which represents his first significant experience of life outside of the North country in a modern city where “Even science,” or knowledge, “Is smitten with an unnatural taint” (3.427-429). He identifies the university town with a concern for “signs” rather than “things,” which he sees as a consequence of commercial exchange that then taints learning and distracts from the quest after “stedfast truth” (403). In *Émile* Rousseau proposes that the consequence of the system of money is that “signs lead to the neglect of things” [“les signes font négliger les chose”]. He explains that it is “difficult to immediately compare things of different natures, sheets, for example, with wheat; but once we have found a common measure, namely currency, it is easy for the manufacturer

or the laborer to relate the value of the things they want to this common measure... Thus, it's through money that goods of different kinds become commensurable and can be compared" (216). Simpson elucidates a similar point by reading Wordsworth alongside Marx to demonstrate how Wordsworth's poetry stages aspects of modernity. Linking Marx's commodity form with figurative language, Simpson contends that the system of money that makes everything equivalent to everything else removes the limits on figuration and takes over the imaginative faculty of comparison. Rhetorical theory at least since Aristotle, Simpson notes, had been troubled by the tendency of all metaphor toward catachresis and the ensuing threat of incoherence; hence, limits had to be placed on acts of figuration. The system of money, however, makes it possible to equate anything with anything else, removing those boundaries and giving free reign to acts of comparison (151).²⁴ In his descriptions of Cambridge, Wordsworth emphasizes the chaos emerging from such unbounded acts of comparison in a modern context, dramatizing the ways in which commercial exchange gives a sense of acceleration and a consequent interchange of "things by nature most unneighbourly," in the metaphor of the modern world as museum to which I will return (3.662).

As he joins the "great world" of commercial society at Cambridge, Wordsworth acquires a heightened sense of time and of its rapid passing, demonstrating the feeling of

²⁴ Simpson specifies that this paradigm is historically specific to the conditions of modern industrial capitalism around 1800. "If it were just a matter of the invention of money, or of the creation of objects for exchange, then the terms of human alienation would not differ between, say, classical Greece and the modern world. What changes in the course of the eighteenth century is the whole spectrum of circumstances that we call, rather loosely, social conditions and/or modes of production," such as the invention of large-scale industrial production and the increase in the circulation of print (153).

contemporaneity and sharp awareness of historical difference that characterized turn-of-the-century Britain (Sachs 52). His life punctuated by the sound of “Trinity’s loquacious clock/ Who never let the quarters.../Slip by unproclaimed,” Wordsworth seems newly conscious of being swept along by the flux of history and by the shorter intervals of the present day (3.51-3). These shorter intervals are a consequence of commercial modernity, whose quickening pace Wordsworth intimates when he recounts that upon arriving at Cambridge he felt that the place seemed to have “an eddy’s force, and sucked us in” ever more eagerly, with “eddy” alluding to the river Cam (3.10-11). While Wordsworth’s initial response to the spectacular world of eighteenth-century Cambridge is one of delight (followed by disillusionment once “the first glitter of the show was passed”), his retrospective descriptions register anxieties about the dizzying pace, irresistible pull, and alienation of modernity (3.94).

I roamed

Delighted through the motley spectacle:

Gowns grave or gaudy, doctors, students, streets,

Lamps, gateways, flocks of churches, courts and towers—

Strange transformation for a mountain youth,

A northern villager. (3.28-33)

In this graphic demonstration of the “increasing accumulation of men in cities,” Wordsworth here describes a quick succession of signs whose estrangement from things leads to a failure to communicate (*Major Works* 599). The passersby he watches but never interacts with are hardly human, identified by their dress (“Gowns grave or gaudy”), or

their profession (“doctors, students”), and grouped with inanimate things (“streets,/ Lamps, gateways”). Wordsworth uses metonymic substitution and personification to blur the boundaries between subject and object, or more precisely, to drain life from the living and imbue inanimate things (signs) with life (Simpson 155). The gowns as metonyms for the wearers seem to roam the streets as if self-animated “possessed vestments,” while Wordsworth’s personifying reference to “flocks of churches” uses the word “flock,” which typically refers to the congregation of a church, to signify the clusters of church buildings. These substitutions tending toward catachresis, combined with the speed of the non-encounters, create figures of ghostliness or “half-life,” which recur in the *Prelude* and which Simpson associates with the invisible operations of the commodity form.²⁵ In the passage above, Wordsworth reduces passersby to the gowns they wear and groups of worshippers (“flocks”) into clusters of buildings; and through these acts of comparison signs are drained of meaning, while the speedy operations of commercial exchange take over acts of figuration and human encounter (Simpson 7). At the end of Book 3, Wordsworth refers to the university world no longer as a delightfully motley spectacle but as an “inferior exhibition, played/ By wooden images, a theater/ for wake or fair,” or as a dizzying museum:

Carelessly

I gazed, roving as through a cabinet

Or wide museum, thronged with fishes, gems,

²⁵ Simpson argues that in Wordsworth’s poetry the major figure of the “half-life” of the commodity form is the specter, “the permanent-impermanent shape that comes and goes without obeying categories of space and time,” and that commodities are especially hard to figure “when commodity form seems to threaten or even govern figuration itself” (7).

Birds, crocodiles, shells, where little can be seen,
Well understood, or naturally endeared,
Yet still does every step bring something forth
That quickens, pleases, stings—and here and there
A casual rarity is singled out
And has its brief perusal, then gives way
To others, all supplanted in their turn.
Meanwhile, amid this gaudy congress framed
Of things by nature most unneighbourly,
The head turns round, and cannot right itself;
And, though an aching and a barren sense
Of gay confusion still be uppermost,
With few wise longings and but little love,
Yet something to the memory sticks at last
Whence profit may be drawn in times to come. (3.651-668)

Such displaced objects, crowded together though by nature “most uneighbourly,” invite only a careless gaze or occasionally the brief perusal of a casual rarity. Wordsworth can only redeem the experience by affirming that a vague “something” sticks to the memory and may prove rewarding in times to come. In the moment, however, the “head,” guided by the eye, is alienated from a viewer rendered soulless and passive: he is no longer an imaginative being whose mind acts upon the world, “eager to combine/ In one appearance all the elements/ And parts of the same object, else detached/ And loath to

coalesce,” but a head turned round by a succession of incommensurate things (2.247-250). While in the quote from the “Blessed babe” passage an act of figuration permits the infant to produce a whole from many parts, in the museum metaphor the promiscuous comparisons permitted by commercial culture overtake figuration and render the mind helpless to make meaning out of disparate things (Chase 85). Such dizzying moments convey Wordsworth’s anxiety about the ways in which fashion and commercial culture had taken over the mental operations of comparison and contaminated the higher faculties of the mind.

Much to Wordsworth’s regret, classical study seemed a part of the spectacle of unmeaning signs, whereas his own attitude toward education, texts, and the classics Wordsworth valued “the thing itself” (Clancey 63). Much of his criticism of the state of learning therefore centers on how the tone of life at Cambridge tainted the approach to knowledge and texts. Even he begins to see himself as “A man of business and expense, and went/ From shop to shop about my own affairs/ To tutors or to tailors as befel” (24-26). He profits here from alliteration to conflate his haphazard visits to tutors and to tailors, to the extent that both learning and fashion are meant to equip the “wild, unworldly-minded youth” with the means of social interchange. He later describes his new penchant for dressing in “hose of silk” and adopting the fashion of wearing his hair powdered (“Glittering like rimy trees when frost is keen”) among “other signs” not only of “manhood” but also of gentlemanliness—social standing rather than true maturity (3.36-

39; *Prelude* p. 94 n. 4).²⁶ In fact, the extravagance of Oxbridgeans in matters of fashion was an acknowledged problem: in 1786, the year before Wordsworth went up to Cambridge, an address to the undergraduates of the university complained “of the waste of money on fashionable buckles, coats, or waistcoats, through the ‘artful civility of the accommodating shopkeeper,’” while Oxford statutes collected in 1781 reflected a distrust of the innovations of modern fashion in prohibiting “the making or buying of novel and strange-fashioned dresses” (476; 481). Traditional sober dress was meant to remind students, teachers, and clerics of their duty to scholarship and religious worship, and some worried that fashionable dress tainted such values. Wordsworth reiterates this rather puritanical view in Book 3 in a way that allows him to stage the specific problems of modernity and their effect on what he describes as the quest after truth. He associates the ideal university world with the aesthetic plainness of the early Roman Republic as

²⁶ Wordsworth was far from the first to voice complaints that Oxbridgeans’ concern with fashion and expense diminished the values of piety and scholarly devotion the university was supposed to espouse. Wordsworth’s nephew Christopher—who had a more successful academic career than his uncle—compiled documents on social life at English universities showing that, historically, strict and highly specific codes of dress dictated the kinds of clothes that could be worn at universities depending on the person’s social rank as well as their status and function within the university. Gowns in sober colors were prescribed and expensive materials like silk and lace prohibited except for sons of peers and some other specific groups. Punishments for violating the dress code included— in various eras—fines, suspension, inhibition from degrees, and expulsion (C. Wordsworth 454-492). Nevertheless, as early as 1342 complaints were made against clergy and students for “the extravagance of their dress, the gay and unclerical appearance of their garments: disdaining the tonsure, the distinctive mark of their order, they wore their hair either hanging down on their shoulders in an effeminate manner, or curled and powdered...” (459). In 1587, parents complained to the vice-chancellor of Cambridge about the “‘idleness, avarice and luxury of tutors and fellows” as well as the exorbitance of their sons’ tailors’ bills (465). While in previous eras codes of dress were intended to visibly preserve social hierarchies, Wordsworth’s historical moment saw a loosening of such boundaries with the repeal of sumptuary laws and the emergence of a modern fashion system (producing “novel and strange-fashioned dresses”) that made fashionable dress cheaper and more accessible to those, like Wordsworth, with humbler means (481).

well as that of primitive Christianity, in which, he imagines, fugitive signs were secondary to “stedfast truth” (*Prelude* p.112 n.7). He preaches that

The passing day should learn to put aside
Her trappings here, should strip them off abashed
Before antiquity and stedfast truth,
And strong book-mindedness; and over all
Should be a healthy sound simplicity,
A seemly plainness—name it as you will,
Republican or pious. (3.401-7)

Wordsworth here implies that in its current state Cambridge resembles an Imperial Rome sunk into luxury. Rousseau, as I have noted, saw Rome as a virtuous republic “beguiled by glittering appearances,” “doomed by luxury,” and betrayed into the hands of rhetoricians (Starobinski 4). Roman republicanism became an important source of inspiration for the ideals and sartorial styles of the French Revolution, leading Marx to assert that the Revolution was “staged through the costumes and phrases of the Roman republic” (Sachs 32). The distinction between early and late Rome was also applied to Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century, where, as Jonathan Sachs argues, “the understanding of commercial modernity is established through its difference from the simplified background of antiquity, through a distancing reference to ‘warlike Romans’” as well as, in Wordsworth’s case, pious early Christians (33). While Rome’s shift from democracy to empire and thence to luxury and corruption served as a paradigm for discontented Britons, a fundamental difference between modern Britain and ancient Rome, as

contemporaries recognized, was that modern Britain experienced “the feeling of acceleration by which processes of economic or political change appear to be taking place” (qtd. in Sachs 34). In his reference to the “trappings” of “the passing day” as a contrast with the “seemly plainness” of the Roman Republic and the early church, Wordsworth registers this sense of transience and historical contingency as it is indexed in changing fashions (a parade of confused and unmeaning signs), and identifies the enduring aesthetic of simplicity with the ideals of the French Revolution as well as those of Protestant iconoclasm (“name it as you will, Republican or pious”) (*Prelude*, p.112, n.7).

This sense of Cambridge as a place of commerce and fashion suggests some of the reasons Wordsworth resisted the classics in his early poetry. In the academic world depicted in the *Prelude*, knowledge is a self-referential symbol of learning detached from genuine meaning—another sign that leads to the neglect of things (3.398-9). What he objected to was the practice of reading and imitating the classics not to derive truth from the great poets of the past, but instead to use their ornaments decoratively as a badge of learning or a way of mechanically producing writing with no living soul. In Book 6 of *The Prelude* (“Cambridge and the Alps”) he writes that as a young man he was

...a better judge of thoughts than of words

Misled as to these latter not alone

By common inexperience of youth,

But by the trade in classic niceties,

Delusion to young scholars incident—

And old ones also—by that overprized

And dangerous craft of picking phrases out
From languages that want the living voice
To make of them a nature to the heart
To tell us what is passion, what is truth,
What reason, what simplicity and sense. (124-134)

Here Wordsworth blames his misjudgment of words both on youthful naiveté and on education, tellingly described as “the trade in classic niceties.” “To trade” is to educate or train someone or something in a practice, and in noun form it can also signify a manner of living or acting; at the same time, “trade” has of course a commercial sense of exchange or a means of earning money (“trade, n.”). This latter interpretation is supported by his use of the word “niceties,” which compares phrases picked from classical texts to “[s]omething choice, elegant, or dainty; a luxury” whose use, to Wordsworth’s mind, is “overprized” (“nicety, n.”). For Wordsworth “nice” expressions plucked from their original context lack meaning or “living voice,” becoming hollow images that fail to communicate. Like so many fashionable things, Wordsworth suggests, such niceties are plucked from context and drained of meaning in a way that parallels the operations of commercial exchange.

While Wordsworth associates this disturbing commercialism with urban settings like Cambridge and London, his account of the return to his “native hills” on vacation from Cambridge in Book 4 is haunted by his experience outside of it (3.672). When Wordsworth returns to the Lake District, he faces his old schoolfellows with “shame” not for his nakedness, “but for my habiliments,/ The transformation and the gay attire” (4.66-

7). In this return Wordsworth dramatizes moments of “unveiling” that, much like Rousseau’s, inevitably lead to a “transmutation and a fall”: they develop not as promises of revelation but as rhetorical encounters with the difficulty of disentangling mutable signs and eternal things (*Selected Prose* 361). On one of his solitary evening walks, Wordsworth describes a moment when he sheds his outward coat: “Gently did my soul/ Put off her veil, and, self-transmuted, stood/ Naked as in the presence of her God” (4.140-2). What had before been a reference to literal dress that covers the body becomes, in de Man’s “metaphorical chain” (in which garment is the visible outside of the body just as the body is the visible outside of the soul), becomes the figural “dress” that covers the soul. The Norton edition glosses this uncovering of the soul as a reference to Moses, who took off his veil when talking to God, but covered his face again when he came down from Mount Sinai to convey the Law to the Israelites (*Prelude*, p.132, n. 8). However, the unveiling metaphor also echoes Milton’s descriptions of Adam and Eve before and after the fall, particularly in light of Wordsworth’s earlier reference to feeling “shame” for his “habiliments.” After the fall, Milton recounts, Adam and Eve

Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds
How darkened; innocence, that as a veil
Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone,
Just confidence, and native righteousness
And honor from about them, naked left
To guilty shame he covered, but his robe
Uncovered more, so rose the Danite strong

Herculean Samson from the Harlot-lap
Of Philistean Dalilah, and waked
Shorn of his strength, they destitute and bare
Of all their virtue: silent, and in face
Confounded long they sat, as stricken mute,
Till Adam, though not less than Eve abashed,
At length gave utterance to these words constrained. (*PL* 9.1033-46)

Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked but “covered” with the veil of innocence. Once they are stripped bare of this figural clothing, they cover themselves in literal clothing to hide the shame of their nakedness; yet this clothing becomes an outward symbol of that shame and thus paradoxically “uncovers” it (Fried, “Milton Passage”). Milton’s figures in this passage are complex because he uses the language of paradox and reversal that is itself a consequence of the fall. In a fallen world, innocent nakedness can only be understood through the metaphor of being “covered” with the veil of righteousness. In this sense, the veil is a metaphor for metaphor: it is the thing that—after the fall— allows us to see “but darkly” (*Prelude* 3.491). While Milton’s language is complex, he nevertheless keeps in place a clear dichotomy in which the naked and the veiled are reversed, but still distinguishable from one another within a framework of divine order. Wordsworth, meanwhile, not only reverses Milton’s narrative into one of exile and then return, or covering and then nakedness, but also, through catachresis, foregrounds the impossibility of unperplexing the naked from the veiled. In the “gay habiliments” passage, he is like an Adam attempting to cover his shame, but only uncovering it further; but in the unveiling

passage, he describes a return to prior innocence through unveiling that only highlights the impossibility of that return. The word “transmuted” itself suggests this impossibility, especially as a possible echo of Milton’s description of Adam and Eve being “stricken mute” after their unveiling. To “transmute” is to change into something else (from veiled to naked) as well as to transport, here possibly in the sense that to put off one’s mortal veil is to be transported to another world (in the D² and C manuscripts Wordsworth wrote “Of the external world that round me lay/ I saw but little”) (3.160 [1959]). Yet it is precisely a failure to fully transport that makes Wordsworth’s metaphor, to some extent, “mute.” His figure of the soul putting off “her veil” and standing naked is catachrestic (like Rousseau’s uses of the same comparison) in the sense that it can only describe the emergence of the “naked” soul by borrowing the language of the body, the very “veil” that is being put off. In this way, Wordsworth draws attention to the status of his figure as a figure, or a “veil” that cannot fully be put off. This is implied, too, by the transformational meaning of “transmute,” which evokes the changeable nature of outer forms as a consequence of the fall. The transmutation, we can infer, occurs in a fleeting moment, and indeed Wordsworth recounts that his soul “stood/Naked” (with the enjambment offering a brief pause after “stood”) then begins a new sentence in the following line with “As on I walked” (141-3). Such moving figures can after all only offer “glimmering views” of the “immortal soul” and its “godlike power” (154; 156).

Much as this moment shows Wordsworth’s engagement with the Christian rhetoric of unveiling, the famous simile of autobiography later in Book 4 demonstrates how Wordsworth uses classical rhetoric to think through the question of how figurative

language can offer (limited) access to something beyond itself. In this passage and the passage immediately following, Wordsworth evokes what would later become the animating question of the *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, which asks how it may be possible to extrapolate higher things from the potentially dead signs that are their only conduit. In the simile of autobiography as a reflection on the surface of water, Wordsworth appears to offer a reassuring approach to the problem, but the tranquility of the moment quickly dissipates as he moves to another image of poisoned vestments and contagious air. In the boating scene Wordsworth compares autobiographical poetry to watching one's reflection from a "slow-moving" boat, and in the process, presumably re-encountering an authentic self separate from the quick-moving world of commercial exchange. While Wordsworth presents the boat simile as an intimate figure arising from his childhood in the Lake District and allowing solitary communion with himself, I propose that Wordsworth may have been influenced by a similar comparison the 16th century Italian writer of Latin poetry, Marco Girolamo Vida, made in his *Poetics*. Duncan Wu suggests that Wordsworth read Thomas Tristram's 1722 edition of Vida's *Poematum* in Latin, because there is a copy of the text in the Royal Mount Library that contains Wordsworth and Coleridge's autographs.²⁷ According to Wu, this was probably the copy of Vida that Coleridge was reading in 1796, when he may have introduced Wordsworth to Vida's work (Wu 140). In his *Rhetoric* (1767) Thomas Gibbons offers this translation of the relevant passage:

Such beauties entertain the Reader's mind,

²⁷ Both Clancey and Graver argue that Wordsworth was a skilled Latinist, even if his translations sometimes showed weaknesses in his knowledge of the language (Clancey 56; Graver 172).

As from one subject he beholds a croud
Of instantaneous images arise.
So from some neighbouring hill, while we survey
The ocean's pure and peacable expanse,
And all below us spread the liquid plain,
We see, reflected in the watery gleam,
Pastures, and waving woods, and wander o'er
The floating picture with immense delight.
Thus should the Muse's Son adorn his verse
With images in rich variety,
Secure the attention, bear the enraptur'd mind,
Now here, now there, in his resistless song. (104-5) ²⁸

In the *Prelude* Wordsworth writes:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
Of still water, solacing himself with such discoveries as his eye can make,
Beneath him, in the bottom of the deeps,
Sees many beauteous sights, weeds, fishes, flowers,
Grots, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more,
Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part

²⁸ I have not been able to find evidence that Wordsworth read Gibbons's *Rhetoric*, and Duncanc Wu makes no mention of Gibbons in Wordsworth's Reading, suggesting only that Wordsworth read Vida in the original.

The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
The region, and the things which there abide
In their true dwelling; now is crossed by gleam
Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
And motions that are sent he knows not whence,
Impediments that make his task more sweet;
—Such pleasant office have we long pursued
Incumbent o'er the surface of past time
With like success; nor have we often looked
On more alluring shows (to me, at least,)
More soft, or less ambiguously descried,
Than those which now we have been passing by,
And where we are still lingering.... (247-268)

Both passages develop an extended simile (Wordsworth writes “As one who hangs” and Vida “As from one subject...So from some neighboring hill”) that compares poetic imagery to the variety of images reflected in still water, while a watcher from above receives these images and is borne here and there by poetic motions. If Wordsworth was indeed influenced by Vida as I suggest, then his departures from Vida’s example reveal some of the ways in which he adapted classical rhetoric for his purposes and used it to think through the animating questions of his poetry, thereby living up to his claim that figures should not be mere embroidery while at the same time presenting the relationship

between meaning and expression as a problem rather than a resolution—and as a problem that can be thought through the intellectual habits of the rhetorical tradition.

Wordsworth's passage is both lyric and rhetorical, to the extent that he depicts not a writer persuading a reader but rather, as Cathy Caruth argues, "a form of rhetorical *self*-persuasion" (939, emphasis added). He adapts Vida's image of the poet bearing the reader along into one of the poet as a reader of his own rhetorical figures, carried and crossed by their mysterious "motions that are sent he knows not whence." As he moves across the water, the poet does not simply see his reflection in the water; he is instead "now is crossed by a gleam/ Of his own image, by a sunbeam now," with the crossing figure of chiasmus ("now is crossed....by a sunbeam now") instantiating the rhetorical motions that produce gleams of self-perception (Caruth 938). These images of motion depict self-knowledge as a rhetorical act. As Caruth argues, by means of rhetorical activity, the "mere 'eye' which looks into the water receives a whole 'image,' or face in return: the motion from past to present is also a passage from eye to face, or a totalization of the self by means of metonymical substitution." This "distorting act" makes self-knowledge possible, but Wordsworth also stresses that self-knowledge through figuration is an intricate problem. He describes his delight at the beauty of the image, as does Vida, but adds a sense of perplexity: "Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part/ The shadow from the substance" (Caruth 939; *Prelude* 4.254-5). Distinct from Vida, Wordsworth dwells upon how poetic imagery intertwines with "the thing itself" in mysterious ways ("perplex" comes from the Latin *plexus*, meaning interwoven or entangled). Whereas Vida's watcher delights himself with an image on the surface of the water, Wordsworth is actively

moving while looking down and into the water in an effort to discern “the things which there abide in their true dwelling.” “Mysterious motions”—or “wavering motions” in the 1850 *Prelude*—further heighten the poet’s bewilderment (*Prelude* of 1850 4.269). Where Vida’s watcher is standing still and only “moved” inwardly here and there by the poet’s “resistless song,” Wordsworth’s is himself in motion, hanging from a “slow-moving boat” that carries him across a moving picture, further perplexing his efforts to form a coherent image. He thereby complicates Vida’s “floating picture” with a floating picture that blends with the things that truly abide in the bottoms of the deep, emphasizing the mystificatory in figuration as offering a model of reading that may lead to a form of understanding. Yet the mystery is never resolved: separating shadow from substance remains an ongoing “task” that Wordsworth redeems by perceiving it as “sweet,” and locating access to self-knowledge—if only in gleams—in the active, “pleasant office” of attempting to see through the wavering motions of figurative language.

This simile of autobiography can serve as a figure for Wordsworth’s theory of organic form and the appropriate use of the classics, as well as a reflection on the possibility of retreat from the revolving world of getting and spending. Whether in conscious imitation or by internalizing the authors he read, Wordsworth does not use allusion as a means of transposing “foreign splendour” from one text to another, and thereby stripping figurative language of its “living voice” and engaging in a “trade” in “classic niceties.” Instead, he adapts classical rhetoric to the context and blends it with his own style, transforming the image of Vida’s watcher from a hill into one that is also an intimate memory from his childhood spent boating in the Lake District. Much as in his

translations, Wordsworth here allows classical voices to merge with his own from a conviction that there is no distinguishing between word and idea (Gillespie 126; Graver 173).²⁹ At the same time, he defines the poet's task as that not exactly of making this distinction, but—in an adaptation of the classical legacy—of attempting to access steadfast truth through poetic motion. As he reflects in Book 5, it is “through the turnings intricate of verse” that forms and substances “Present themselves as objects recognized/ in flashes” (625-9).

However, the perpetual motions of the fallen world mean that the poet cannot remain in those brief moments when truth “flashes” through the “turnings intricate of verse,” but must be carried along by currents he cannot control. After “lingering” over the image of one who hangs from the side of a slow-moving boat, Wordsworth recounts that “There was an inner falling off” in which he is beset by

...a swarm

Of heady thoughts jostling each other, gawds
And feast and dance and public revelry
And sports and games—less pleasing in themselves
Than as they were a badge, glossy and fresh,
Of manliness and freedom.... (4.270-7)

Here Wordsworth returns to the habits of thought he learned at Cambridge, where instead of lingering over the sweet perplexity of disentangling shadow from substance, he

²⁹ As Bruce E. Graver argues, Wordsworth's early translations from Horace, Catullus, and Virgil—among others—illustrate an important shift from Neoclassic to Romantic theories of translation arising from a growing suspicion of “making clear distinctions between meaning, on the one hand, and language, on the other” (169).

confronts a “swarm” of heady thoughts and activities as confused and undifferentiated from one another as they are detached from meaning (“less pleasing in themselves” than as “a badge”). The inner falling off thereby sees Wordsworth back to a way of being that is dictated by the rhythms of commercial culture, which produces a succession of unmeaning signs through rapid and indiscriminate exchange. Wordsworth’s emblem for commercial modernity is, again, the poisoned or possessed garment:

...sure it is that now

Contagious air did oft environ me,
Unknown among these haunts in former days.
The very garments that I wore appeared
To prey upon my strength, and stopped the course
And quiet stream of self-forgetfulness.
Something there was about me that perplexed
Th’ authentic sight of reason, pressed too closely
On that religious dignity of mind
That is the very faculty of truth,
Which wanting—either, from the very first
A function never lighted up, or else
Extinguished—man, a creature great and good,
Seems but a pageant plaything with vile claws,
And this great frame of breathing elements
A senseless idol. (289-304)

Like Hercules's poisoned coat, Wordsworth's garments here "prey upon" his strength, I think, in the sense that they pull him back to "material and contingent phaenomena" and away from spiritual things (Coleridge qtd. in *Prelude* p. 140 n.6). Oppressed by the outer world ("Something there was about me that....pressed too closely"), Wordsworth feels himself deprived of the inward sight or "faculty of truth" that in the boating simile had allowed him to catch glimpses of the interplay of shadow and substance. What had before been a sweet perplexity is now a disturbing one in which the "authentic sight of reason" is itself too "perplexed" by the outer world to untangle the material and contingent from the eternal and spiritual. Deprived of this inward sight, Wordsworth sees himself—or "man" in general—as "a pageant plaything with vile claws," and his "great frame of breathing elements" as merely a "senseless idol."

Wordsworth's image in these last lines contains a contemporary reference that helps illuminate his meaning in light of his poetry's concern with the specific problems of modernity (*Prelude* p. 140 n.7). Based on later revisions alluding to a tiger from the "barbarous East," W.J.B. Own contends that Wordsworth is referring to what is commonly called "Tipu's Tiger": now on exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum, this nearly life-sized wooden model of a tiger mauling a European man was captured from Tipu Sultan at the fall of Seringapatam in India in 1799 and sent for display at the East India Company in London in 1800. Inside the tiger's body is a miniature organ operated by a hand crank, which produces sounds supposed to resemble the cries of the prostrate man intermingled with the tiger's roar (Owen 379). The tiger is an important emblem in this passage for a number of reasons. Wordsworth's reference in his revisions to a tiger

from constructed through the “monstrous” skill of an Eastern tyrant suggest he was aware of the popular representation of Tipu as the incarnation of the cruel Oriental tyrant whose terrifying tiger embodied his brutality (3.302 [1959]; Chatterjee 73-4). Yet in the lines from *The Prelude* it is the tiger’s powerlessness that is terrifying. Wordsworth’s reference to his “vile claws” is ironic, since “vile” in reference to animals can indicate a destructive or dangerous nature that the mechanical tiger obviously lacks: it is a mere “pageant plaything”—a part of the modern spectacle—and therefore “vile” in the different sense of a mean or paltry imitation (“vile, adj.”). This is historically accurate, since in capturing and displaying the tiger in London, the British decontextualized it and reversed its meaning, “domesticating” the Eastern tiger as a symbol of British conquest rather than of the Indian tyrant’s threat to Europeans (Chatterjee 77-8). Wordsworth plays on this idea of a powerful thing made trivial to reflect on the threat that commercial modernity represented to the human “faculty of reason.” His reference to a “pageant plaything” or “senseless idol” in a display case recalls his earlier comparison of the world of Cambridge to “inferior exhibition, played/ By wooden images” or to a “cabinet/ Or wide museum” in which the head is turned round by a succession of displaced and “unneighbourly” objects of which it cannot make sense (3.606-7; 652-3; 662). In the tiger allusion Wordsworth suggests that the succession of objects in commercial society (creating a feeling of oppression) transforms the viewer into a “wooden” image or “senseless idol” himself to the extent that he is helpless to make meaning out of them, or to part the shadow from the substance. As a result, he loses that “faculty of truth” that ought to distinguish the human spirit from the world of senseless things: unable to distinguish the thing itself

from its dead representation, he is deprived, as de Man writes in a slightly different context, of the “sense and shape of a world” (qtd. in Chase 88). It is unclear whether Wordsworth is comparing man to the tiger’s victim, or to the tiger himself (“with vile claws”), whose faint roar is only an echo of the fearsome original. This confusion is itself part of the problem. Theoretically man is the speaking animal that gives voice to the tiger, which can only roar. In the case of Tipu’s Tiger however, the tiger’s roar is mingled with the cries of the man he is devouring, with both sounds emitting from a mechanical organ inside the tiger’s body. Instead of a tiger who roars and a man who speaks, here there is a confusion in which the one devours the other and both voices are combined in dissonant and inarticulate cries. This allusion to inarticulate sound suggests that the senselessness Wordsworth refers to is both an inability to “read” the surrounding world as an autonomous subject, and a consequent inability to make meaning of it through language. Instead of giving voice to silent things, the poet’s voice merely joins the cacophony of modern capitalism. He is not standing outside of and “reading” the world, but is instead being read by it. The mechanical tiger is thus an apt symbol for the ways in which modernity works to “blunt the discriminating powers of the mind,” as Wordsworth wrote in the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (*Major Works* 599). It is first of all a weak mechanical representation whose meaning can be transformed by context, as well as a symbol of economically-driven imperial conquest and globalization producing the forms of alienation and confusion Wordsworth fears; but more importantly it emblemizes the ways in which the succession of signs produced by such forces threaten to deprive man of “voice,” or the ability to extrapolate meaning from representation.

Through such sequences in which the poet sees truth flashing through the moving world of figures but then succumbs to an inner falling-of, Wordsworth stages the problems and paradoxes of attempting to figure paradise through the mutable means of language, in a world whose material conditions were blunting the “discriminating powers” that could discern such moments of truth. His Biblical allusions to a lifted veil are helpful here because in the Christian tradition figures of unveiling are only ever gestures toward a moment of revelation that is continually deferred or located in an inaccessible past. Moses’ veil in Exodus—to which Wordsworth refers in the “gently did my soul” passage—looks forward to the coming of Christ and the “unveiling” of the divine (a return to life before the fall), yet this New Testament unveiling is itself a figure for the final unveiling at the end of time. Profiting from this Biblical figure, Wordsworth, like Rousseau before him, stages moments when the “turnings intricate of verse” offer glimmers of forms and substances, but as they continue to turn those glimmers must disappear. As I have argued, Wordsworth is also influenced by the classical rhetorical tradition in his efforts to understand the intricate turnings of poetic language. While he sometimes rejects classical rhetoric as a socially determined art that joins the world of changeable and unmeaning things, he nevertheless uses the traditional rhetorical question of the relationship between words and ideas in developing what he envisions as a new and more meaningful poetic language that figures and compares things more carefully than does the world of fashion and commerce. At the same time the key passages from *The Prelude* and the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* that I have analyzed here

suggest Wordsworth's profound doubt that such tranquil contemplation and sense-making are still possible.

CHAPTER IV

Byron's Dramas and the *Letter to Murray*

In the "Preface" to *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Cain*, published together in 1821, Byron announces his dramatic project of restoring the civilizing "law of literature" by preserving or approaching the classical unities of action, time, and place (Cox and Gamer 263). In adhering to the unities, Byron follows through on his larger mission to reinstate classical decorum and formal poetics in the realm of English letters, following what he saw as the abandonment of those principles by contemporaries like Wordsworth and Keats (Beatty 240). This resistance to revolutions in style aligns Byron with the ideals and aesthetics of the Augustan age, putting him somewhat at odds with the mood of English politics and poetics at the turn of the nineteenth century.³⁰ In an 1822 review of several of Byron's dramas, Reginald Heber attributed the deficiencies of *Marino Faliero* to "Lord Byron's continental prejudices," claiming that Byron had rejected the model of nature and the English example of Shakespeare in favor of a foreign "affectation," which condemns "the speeches of the vulgar, and the outcries of the rabble and the soldiery, to strut in the same precise measure with the lofty musings and dignified resentment of the powerful and the wise." The "constraint and stiffness" of Byron's poetry, Heber asserts, can be blamed on his "apparent resolution to set...an example of classical correctness to his uncivilized countrymen" (Rutherford, *Critical Heritage* 239-241). Heber's criticisms

³⁰ Bernard Beatty distinguishes two conceptions of the eighteenth century in relation to Byron. The first version, in which the eighteenth century is said to begin in the mid 1700s after the English Civil War, is the classizing or Enlightenment account. Byron has an important relationship to this account of the eighteenth century, but he was also influenced by the second version, which privileged the cult of sensibility and sentiment (237-238). In this chapter, I focus primarily on Byron's return to the "classicizing" eighteenth century as an antipode to aspects of Romanticism of which he disapproved.

suggest that in embracing dignified “affectation” over the model of “nature,” Byron could be seen as having betrayed the nationalist and democratic principles of the age as they were expressed in the Romantics’ repudiation of classical rhetoric.

Such objections to Byron’s efforts to restore the “dignified” language of “the powerful and the wise” and to “civilize” his rude countrymen restage long-standing debates about the place of classical rhetoric in English letters. Much as rhetoric had fallen into disrepute during the English Civil War, the Romantics, following the republican example of Milton, renewed suspicion of ornate language as a disfiguration of thought that was inconsistent with egalitarian ideals (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 206-207). In his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth outlines his project of planting poetic language in the English countryside among the common people, where the passions find a better “soil” and a “plainer and more emphatic language” can flourish.³¹ In thus democratizing poetic language, it has been argued, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* did for poetry what the French Revolution had done for politics (Richey and Robinson 167). By contrast with this democratic poetics, Byron defended Pope’s neo-classicism, imitated eighteenth-century forms, and insisted in his dramas on adopting the more stately classical style that Heber found constrained, un-English, and elitist. The political implications of these aesthetic practices are surprising given Byron’s standing as the most famous English Romantic poet, “the poet of the Revolution,” and the most

³¹ Jenny C. Mann discusses how early English vernacular handbooks mobilized “an identification between language, land, and people in order to justify the translation of rhetoric into English, arguing for a common space of native rhetorical practice” (35). For instance, in *The Garden of Eloquence* George Peacham uses the metaphor of “planting and harvesting rhetoric in and from an English plot of land” (*Outlaw Rhetoric* 41-42). For Wordsworth, on the other hand, planting poetic language in the English countryside entails uprooting classical rhetoric.

visible figure of the anti-authoritarian “Satanic School,” as Robert Southey dubbed it (Rutherford, *Critical Heritage* 384; 181).³² In spite of his rebellious persona, however, Byron retained allegiances to classical decorum and formal poetics that strained against his revolutionary politics and transgressive image, since classicism favored ideals of regulated order, tradition, and hierarchy. Classicism also favored elevating literature above the “vulgar” language of the people through stylistic polish and through the influence of Latin and Greek, and so would seem to be incommensurate with Byron’s populism.

Byron’s respect for formal poetics can be better understood in relation to his polarizing philosophy of history. As Malcom Kelsall argues, Byron saw history as a perpetual struggle between tyranny and anarchy.³³ While he viewed Milton’s Satan as a “Whig” liberationist in rebellion against a tyrannical God, the success of Satan’s rebellion would only replace one form of oppression with another. In terrestrial terms, this meant Byron was suspicious of the anarchic *mobile vulgus* (“fickle crowd,” the origin of “mob”) as well as the tyrannical king (Kelsall 54-57; Bryson 82; “Mob, n.2 (and adv.)”). In the

³² Peter Schock specifies that Shelley, not Byron, was the driving force of this school, although Byron acquired a more notorious satanic identity once his reputation began to sink (7).

³³ Malcolm Kelsall notes that the opposition Whig Party, with which Byron identified in his early political career, boasted of a populist agenda, but stopped short of supporting the demolition of the old order as French revolutionaries had done:

[t]here was a substantial gap between the claim of great Whig lords to act as ‘the friends of the people’ (and the defenders of property) and, in France, the execution of the monarch and the aristocracy, the confiscation of property and the proclamation of universal republican war. Meantime, in Britain, the political establishment was challenged by a developing working-class movement, philosophically based on Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, and, in practical terms, demanding a ‘democracy’ based on universal male suffrage and the delegation of members to annual parliaments. This threatened the established constitution with what the ‘Tories’ called ‘anarchy.’ (46)

aesthetic realm, Byron stages a parallel tension between the old poetic order and anti-establishment “anarchy,” seeking to harness the sublime and ungovernable while also restoring the “rules.” He does not see poetry as the language of the elite, yet evokes Robespierre and the “Terror” when he claims that the Romantics have declared war against the literary establishment by proclaiming “Blank verse... the order of the day” (qtd. in Sourgen 1). He does not believe in an “*Aristocracy of Poets*,” yet he advocates a “Nobility of thought and Style,” and argues that literary language should eschew “vulgarity” and espouse a certain “gentlemanly” polish (*CMP* 159). He extolls the unmarked “watery plain” of the ocean, yet declares that without the “Poetry of Art”—meaning formal structure—earth would be buried in “indistinct confusion” (*Childe Harold* 4.179.1606; *CMP* 133). In this way, Byron gravitates to the sublime and the illimitable, but, like Hazlitt, shrinks from the idea that limiting markers like rhyme are a “feudal relic” or that kings and queens ought to be “dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic, as they were decapitated elsewhere” (Hazlitt 214-215).³⁴ The reason for this contradiction lies in what Peter Schock calls Romantic Satanism’s “oppositional stance,” which placed opposition above positive conviction, and led Byron to swing between the poles of order and anarchy (Schock 7; Kelsall 56). Thus Byron describes his politics as “utter detestation of all existing governments” and surmises that

³⁴ Eckermann records Goethe’s opinion of Byron’s use of the three unities: “‘With that disposition,’ said he, ‘which always leads him into the illimitable, the restraint he imposed upon himself by the observance of the three unities becomes him. If he had but known how to endure moral restraint also!’” (Eckermann 88). However, at another moment Goethe, to whom Byron had dedicated *Sardanapalus*, “laughed to think that Lord Byron, who in practical life could never adapt himself and never even asked about the law, finally subjected himself to the stupidest of laws—that of the *three unities*” (87).

“the first moment of a universal republic would convert me into a single and uncontradicted despotism” (qtd. in Kelsall 50). While Milton’s Satan famously declares “Evil be thou my good” (IV.110), Byron adds a further negation to the line when he has Lucifer in *Cain* describe fallen men and angels as

Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in
His everlasting face, and tell him, that
His evil is not good! (I.i.138-40)

Byron’s philosophy, in other words, depends less on determining what is good than on designating what is not good, which is whatever one is opposing, be it tyranny or anarchy. This opposition between tyranny and anarchy extends to Byron’s surprising commitment to classical rhetoric, which is closely related to his political ambivalence. It is useful to associate the formlessness of Romantic poetics (in Byron’s view) with the anarchic mob, and the regularity of classical rhetoric with the tyrannical “king-times” whose end Byron both feared and sought to expedite (*BLJ* 26). Like many of his contemporaries Byron maps this struggle between tyranny and anarchy onto Milton’s narrative of the war between God, the tyrant, and Satan, the anarchist. As I explain in Chapter 1, the battle between God and Satan is a battle over meaning-making, where God “adorns” matter to create a legible universe, and Satan manipulates the pliability of form and thus threatens stable meaning and order. Cosmetic adornment accounts for the creation of an orderly *kosmos*, the root word of “cosmetic,” but also admits the danger of the *kosmos* relapsing into chaos because the pliancy of form implied by adornment suggests that the created world and its inhabitants can mutate, a threat embodied in Milton’s shape-shifting Satan. When

Byron attempts to restore “a severer approach to the rules”—meaning a greater adherence to poetic and dramatic form—he confronts this Miltonic paradox that ornament both gives form and takes it away, producing chaos (*BLJ* 78).

In the first part of this chapter, I analyze the ways in which Byron extends Milton’s doctrine of *ex-materia* creation in the closet drama *Cain; A Mystery* and the dramatic fragment *The Deformed Transformed*. In these plays Byron relies upon the thinking of Lucretius and the mathematician Georges Cuvier to depict the cyclical creation and destruction of the universe. This cosmogony demonstrates Byron’s view of life as a struggle from “Chaos” to a tenuous “Conformity,” a term derived from the Latin *conformatio*, “shaping,” which Cicero used to denote figures of style as they gave shape to thought (*Major Works* 1017; Pernot 103). In tracing these cycles of chaos and conformity, Byron displaces the problem of satanic mutability in *Paradise Lost* onto human characters, depicting Satan as a God-like immutable spirit and ironic commentator on the flux of material life. In the second part of this chapter, a reading of the prose *Letter to Murray* and the closet drama *Sardanapalus*, I explain how Byron’s cosmogony informs his sense of living through a cataclysmic moment in history, in which the “decent drapery” of life (in Edmund Burke’s words) was being torn away, and the world rearticulated in new forms (Burke 169). In *Sardanapalus* Byron allegorizes political changes in England and Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century, mapping those changes onto an ancient Assyrian tale of a king whose habits of dress help bring down an empire. By linking the king’s self-styling to the crumbling of a social order, Byron evokes the ways in which social engineering since the French Revolution was occurring at the level of literary and

sartorial “style” and influenced by an emergent fashion system whose cycles encouraged protean transformations. In his inconsistent efforts to reinstate the “law of literature” at a moment of rapid change, Byron restages in a more polarized form the satanic conflict of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which ornament works as an ordering principle but remains ungovernable. Furthermore, in *Sardanapalus* he brings the material conditions of life at the turn of the nineteenth century to bear on the long-standing polarity between chaos and *kosmos* in debates about poetic language.

I. *Cain* and *The Deformed Transformed*

In *Cain* and *The Deformed Transformed*, Byron extends the implications of Milton’s ex-materia doctrine by adopting in these Miltonic sequels the scientific theories of Georges Cuvier and the philosophical speculations of Lucretius, both of which depicted a world in perpetual flux. Lucretius conceived of the world as a collection of atoms that repeatedly clustered and separated, shaped themselves into perceptible form and then disintegrated into chaos. As Eric Auerbach explains, Lucretius used the term “*figurae*” to denote how atoms clustered to create the things of the world:

As we know, he [Lucretius] professed the cosmogony of Democritus and Epicurus, according to which the world is built up of atoms. He calls atoms *primordia*, *principia*, *corpuscula*, *elementa*, *semina*, *quorum concursus motus ordo postura figura*... (“bodies whose combination, motion, order, position, *figura*”) brings forth the things of the world. But though small, the atoms are material and formed: they have infinitely diverse shapes; and so it comes about that he often calls them “forms,” *figurae*, and that conversely one may often translate figure, as Diels has

done, by “atoms.” The numerous atoms are in constant motion; they move about in the void, combine and repel one another: a dance of figures. (Auerbach 17)

Byron “believed with Lucretius in the changing universe,” constituted by a “dance of figures” in Auerbach’s words, as well as adopted the related speculations of the French naturalist Georges Cuvier (Boyd 178 n.13). In a prefatory note to *Cain*, Byron cites Cuvier’s contemporaneous theory of the cyclical destruction and re-creation of the world as the source for his depiction of the pre-Adamites, superior beings who were divested of their bodily form before the creation of humankind. *Cain* recounts the education of Adam’s son by Satan, who is referred to by his unfallen name “Lucifer” and offers an alternative narrative of the creation and fall than the Biblical one, denying that Satan tempted Adam and Eve. When Cain asks Lucifer to teach him “the mystery of my being,” the spirit escorts him to the dim realms of Hades and the Abyss of Space, where Cain encounters the pre-Adamites, “mighty phantoms” that “wear not the form/ Of the intelligences” around Eden, “Nor wear the form of man” like Adam and his family (I.322; 908-909: II.45-48). Lucifer recounts that these creatures fell

By a most crushing and inexorable

Destruction and disorder of the elements,

Which struck a world to chaos, as a chaos

Subsiding has struck out a world.... (II.80-83)

Byron repeats this theory of worlds crushed into and struck out of chaos in *Detached Thoughts*, where he writes that “Man may be the relic of some higher material being wrecked in a former world— and degenerated in the hardships and struggle through

Chaos into Conformity.” This philosophy posits the human form as *deformed*, fashioned from the wreck of higher beings and further degenerated by the crucible of struggling against chaos. Elsewhere in *Detached Thoughts*, Byron similarly describes mind as a “sad jar of atoms” and mankind as “congregated dust,” indicating his concept of the human form as a fragile cluster of elements (*Major Works* 1016-17).

In this way, Byron blends Miltonic materialism with Cuvier’s theories and Lucretian philosophy to posit bodily existence as the continual flux of forms rising out of and relapsing back into elemental chaos (*Major Works* 882; 1072). Cain’s Lucifer therefore defines death as the eradication of the textures of life: it “has no shape; but will absorb all things/ That bear the form of earth-born being” (*Major Works* 262-3).³⁵ This language is echoed in the king’s premonitory dream of living death in Act IV of *Sardanapalus*. The king recounts to his concubine Myrrha:

Then– then– a chaos of all loathsome things
Throng’d thick and shapeless: I was dead, yet
feeling–
Buried and raised again—consumed by worms
Purged by the flames, and wither’d in the air! (IV.i.159-62, emphasis added)

³⁵ On the other hand, Lucifer says something directly opposite to Cain:
...think not

The earth, which is thine outward cov’ring, is
Existence– it will cease, and thou wilt be
No less than thou art. (I.i.116-19)

This inconsistency may be the result of Byron’s vacillation between philosophical materialism and the Christian idea of the immortality of the soul, a conflict I discuss later in this chapter.

This account of the dream compresses in two lines a long passage from the end of Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan gathers his angels in “a place of utter darkness, fitliest called Chaos” (Milton, *Major Works* 355):

... all access was *thronged*, the gates

And porches wide, but chief the spacious hall

[...]

Thick swarmed, both on the ground and in the air,

Brushed with the hiss of rustling wings. As bees

In springtime, when the sun with Taurus rides,

Pour forth their populous youth about the hive

In clusters; they among fresh dews and flowers

[...]

... *So thick the airy crowd*

Swarmed and were straitened; till the signal given,

Behold a wonder! They but now who seemed

In bigness to surpass Earth's giant sons

Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room

Throng numberless, like the pygmean race (*PL* 761-80, emphasis added)

In Sardanapalus's sketch of his dream, Byron echoes Milton's alliteration of the airy <th> (loathsome, throng, thick) as well as his language and syntax, with “throng...shapeless” paralleling “[t]hrong numberless.” Through these resonances, Byron evokes Milton's vision of infernal spirits as a paradoxically “airy crowd” who are “thick” yet insubstantial,

reducible to the smallest dwarfs yet unfathomably big and numberless. Sardanapalus's dream is thus rendered as a Miltonic vision of sublime and limitless things that cannot be contained in sensible form (Kant 128). The phrase "Buried and raised again" perverts messianic incarnation and resurrection in the same way that Milton's Satan claims to "incarnate" his essence in the serpent, and thus depicts transfiguration as a satanic horror (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 9.166). For Sardanapalus, to die is to be assimilated to a Pandaemonium of ever-mutating creatures, much as the pre-Adamites in *Cain* are disfigured by the constant motion of the elements.

By contrast with Byron's human characters, his Satan exists independently of assumed figures and can discard them like garments. Instead of being a remnant of the chaotic, pre-formed world like Milton's Satan, he enjoys an ironic perspective on the human plight of existing only as a fugitive figure. Byron's satanic characters— "Lucifer" in *Cain* and "the Stranger" in *The Deformed Transformed*— have the eloquence³⁶ and proud defiance of their Miltonic predecessor, but with an important difference: while Milton had made the fallen angel a figure for the instabilities of poetic ornament, Byron recast him as a guide and ironic commentator on the human condition of being identified with one's mortal "coffer" and contingent upon its transfigurations (Byron, *Deformed*

³⁶ Cain. He is a god

Adah.

How know'st thou?

Cain.

He speaks like

A god.

Adah.

So did the Serpent, and it lied. (894: 350-1)

Transformed I.ii.312).³⁷ In *Cain* Lucifer denies having taken the form of the serpent—a shape he “scorns” along with all servile and mortal things—while in *The Deformed Transformed* the Stranger can take whatever from he chooses without altering his eternal being (*Cain* I.i.237). Instead of being identified with Satan, mutability as a threat to the legible universe is displaced onto the humans whom Satan mentors. Meanwhile, Satan enjoys a critical detachment and offers Byron’s protagonists, as well as his audience, the vicarious experience of surveying their existence from afar as one of continual transfiguration and, consequently, disfiguration.

In *The Deformed Transformed*, for example, the main character Arnold, the “Deformed” of the title, aptly calls the Stranger (Byron’s name for Satan in this play) an “everlasting sneerer,” for it is his “everlasting” quality—his ability to outlast the tatters of mortal dress—that permits him to mock the chaos of material existence (117). In the beginning of the play, Byron echoes Lucifer’s description of the pre-Adamites, who are deformed by “a disorder of the elements,” in the hunchbacked Arnold’s suicidal speech (*Cain* II.ii.81). Arnold directs his blood to

Pour forth my woes for ever with thyself
On earth, to which I will restore, at once,
This hateful compound of her atoms, and
Resolve back to her elements, and take
The shape of any reptile save myself,

³⁷ As Peter A. Schock observes, “[t]he impulse to seek distance from the conditions of existence seems to constitute a distinct form of irony in Shelley and Byron, and in several works the introduction of a Satanic persona enables the desired ironic detachment” (143).

And make a world for myriads of new worms! (*Deformed Transformed* I.i.57-62)

Arnold thus imagines the human body as a “compound of...atoms” (in his case a “hateful” one) that can resolve back into nature’s elements to take on a new shape. The Stranger, meanwhile, describes the body as both a “clod of ugliness”— a lump of poorly formed matter— and as a “garment” that can be worn and removed. In his role as overseer or guide, the Stranger promises Arnold a new and more beautiful garment for his soul, and in a demonic parody of creation offers him a choice from among the shadows of dead men—an idea likely inspired by Lucretius as well as Milton.³⁸ When Arnold finds these shadows wanting, the Stranger promises:

I’ll fit you still,

Fear not, my Hunchabck: if the shadows of

That which existed please not your nice taste,

I’ll animate the ideal marble, till

Your soul be reconciled to her new garment. (I.i. 260-4)

³⁸ In *De rerum natura* Lucretius theorizes that since many “visible things” like cicadas and serpents molt or “throw off bodies,” “a thin image must also be thrown off from things, from the outermost surface of things” that preserves the shape of the object (4.54-70). This explains why “shapes and images of the dead” terrify our minds in wakeful hours and in sleep (4.26-44). Byron cites this passages in a letter to Murray of October 1820, in which he responded to a report that someone mistakenly thought he saw Byron in England while the poet was in Italy. Byron writes: “I suppose you will be of the opinion of Lucretius- who denies (the immortality of the Soul- but) asserts that from the ‘flying off of the Surfaces of bodies perpetually, these surfaces or cases like the Coats of an onion are sometimes seen entire- when they are separated from it so that the shape & shadows of both the dead and the absent are frequently seen.’- But if they are- are their coats & waistcoats also seen?--(BLJ 192). The notion in *The Deformed Transformed* that the shadows of famous men persist after their death and can be worn by Arnold seems similar to what Byron says in this letter- particularly because his concluding question in the letter suggests a continuity between the shadows or outer surfaces of bodies and “coats & waistcoats.” Another major influence on this play is Goethe’s *Faust*, with the Stranger’s offer of a new mortal garment echoing the Faustian pact.

Finally satisfied with the shade of Achilles, Arnold wants to cast his hunchbacked body aside, but the Stranger bids him:

Stop!

What shall become of your abandoned garment,

Yon hump, and lump, and clod of ugliness,

Which late you wore, or were? (I.i.421-4)

Defining Arnold's body as a "garment" for his soul, the Stranger suggests that Arnold not only wears but perhaps is his mortal garment, a "hump, and lump, and clod of ugliness." The Stranger's physical manifestations, on the other hand, are mere disguises that are unattached to his being and can simply be removed without any loss of self. This is why, much to Arnold's surprise, the Stranger temporarily assumes Arnold's misshapen body rather than fashioning for himself a more beautiful form.³⁹ The Stranger's mortal garments, in other words, differ from Wordsworth's poisoned Coat of Nessus, which clings to the wearer's skin and consumes him from the outside. Perceptible form is not deadly to Satan as it threatens to be to Arnold, who is associated with the word "late" in its double sense: having lately discarded his mortal garment ("Which late you wore"), he is the "late" Arnold ("or were").

Immune to such fatal disfiguration, the Stranger repeatedly mocks Arnold's and humanity's perilous hold on existence, linking these limitations of flesh to limitations of thought and, by extension, language:

Thinkst thou that I pass from thee with my presence

³⁹ The price Arnold must pay in this Faustian bargain is to be followed by his former self (Beaton 98).

Or that this crooked coffer, which contained
Thy principle of life, is aught to me
Except a mask? And these are Men, forsooth!
Heroes and chiefs, the flower of Adam's bastards!
This is the consequence of giving Matter
The power of Thought. It is a stubborn substance,
And thinks chaotically, as it acts,
Ever relapsing into its first elements. (I.ii. 311-319)

For Satan, now appeared as and called "Caesar," "Adam's bastards" are mere matter given the power of thought: an ill gift because thought is limited by their physical existence as a cluster of fugitive atoms. Matter cannot think beyond itself or comprehend the more permanent existence enjoyed by a spirit whose physical manifestation is a mere "mask." Here Byron again relies upon an interpretation and extension of Milton's *ex-materia* doctrine, where humankind is ever in danger of "relapsing" into its first chaotic elements as a consequence of being bound to a "crooked coffer." That "coffer" is etymologically both a treasure chest for the soul and a coffin that entombs the principle of life ("Coffer, n."). In this sense, as Stuart Peterfreund argues, Arnold's deformity is generalizable to the whole of humanity: it is a metaphor of mortal existence as deformity, or as imprisonment in a "crooked coffer" whose mutations, figured as deformity, manifest the underlying chaos and illegibility of material existence.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ As several critics have noted, Arnold's deformity represents what Byron saw as his own disfigured form, caused by his clubfoot and various maladies.

Just as the materiality of the body and its consequent mutations mire human thought in chaos, so, by extension, do the material constructs of language that are meant to transcend physical existence. When Arnold asks Caesar why he does not translate Etruscan hieroglyphics into a modern alphabet, Caesar responds:

It answers better to resolve the alphabet
Back into hieroglyphics.

Like your statesman, And prophet, pontiff, doctor, alchymist,

Philosopher, and what not, they have built

More Babels, without new dispersion, than

The stammering young ones of the flood's dull ooze, 110

Who failed and fled each other. Why? why, marry,

Because no man could understand his neighbour.

They are wiser now, and will not separate

For nonsense. Nay, it is their brotherhood,

Their Shibboleth – their Koran – Talmud – their

Cabala – their best brick-work, wherewithal

They build more –. (105-117)

Here, Caesar frames the proliferation of discourses in modern language as a second Babel story, with the difference that modern men do not disperse, but are content to live side by side in mutual misunderstanding. The result is “stammering” and “[n]onsense,” an inability to communicate across the divisive “brick-work” of linguistic edifices. In using the term “brick-work,” Caesar does not just indict the materiality or reifying tendency of language. More precisely, he locates the potential for chaos in the changeable nature of

language, or the ways in which its elements—the “brick-work” of linguistic architecture—can be reconstituted in new ways to build “More Babels.” To some extent, Caesar is condemning the jargon of various groups, but the criticism is generalizable to language itself, with the disfigurements of language mapped onto the deformity of the human body throughout the play. While Peterfreund asserts that the crisis of the dramatic fragment revolves around the tendency of figurative language to reify its putative object and thus defeat the goal of transcendence, I’m contending that the crisis is not just that figurative language freezes thought into “thing,” or that incarnation hardens soul into body (Peterfreund 291). Beyond the threat of reification, the changeable nature of figures leaves “things” vulnerable to the forces of chaos and unintelligibility. As I will argue in what follows, Byron’s depiction of the slipperiness of “things” is influenced by the ways in which the material conditions of life were changing at the turn of the nineteenth century.

II. *The Letter to Murray and Sardanapalus*

In the oriental closet drama *Sardanapalus* and in the contemporaneous essay known as the *Letter to John Murray*, Byron both states and performs what Gavin Sourgen calls his “esteem for a tangibly rhetorical poetics” clothed in the artifice of formal qualities and continuous with classical and English tradition (3).⁴¹ This tangible rhetoric represents for Byron a stay against elemental chaos, both because it assures perceptible form and because it permits continuity with the past. In the *Letter* Byron defines poetic artifice as an analog to the atomic “dance of figures,” in that it imposes legible form onto a chaotic

⁴¹ On February 27th 1821 Byron recorded in his journal: “Yesterday wrote two notes on the ‘Bowles and Pope’ controversy and sent them off to Murray by post” (*BLJ* 50).⁴¹ Meanwhile, he had begun sketching an outline and *Dramatis Personae* for *Sardanapalus* in January of that year, and “dashed off the fifth act” by May 28th (*BLJ* 26; 127)

universe. Although the immediate occasion for the *Letter* was William Lisle Bowles's criticism of Pope as a poet of artifice rather than nature, Byron's prose broadside also attacks the origin of these ideas in Lake-School and Wordsworthian poetics (Howe 75).⁴² Criticizing Romantic "primitivism," he defends the classical notion that literary language and art more generally are analogous to the dress or ornament of otherwise indistinct bodies, evoking examples such as Homer's "well-booted" and armored Greeks, Caesar's mantle in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and the dyed garments of God in the Book of Isaiah (*CMP* 135; 137). Though Byron never makes the claim directly, he invokes these vestimentary images not simply as illustrations drawn from canonical texts, but as emblems of poetic language itself.

In one passage, for instance, Byron protests that

Art is *not* inferior to Nature for poetical purposes. —what makes a regiment of soldiers a more noble object of view—than the same mass of Mob- their dresses and banners- and the art- and artificial Symmetry of their position and movements.— A highlander's plaid—a Mussulman's turban and a Roman toga— are more poetical than the tattooed or un-tattoo-ed buttocks of a New Sandwich

⁴² The Pope-Bowles controversy was triggered by William Lisle Bowles's publication in 1806 of the *Works of Alexander Pope*, of which Byron owned a copy (Howe 84). In his "Concluding Observations" at the end of the tenth volume of the *Works*, Bowles relegated Pope to a lower order of poets on the grounds that his poetry drew not from nature but from "*incidental and transient MANNERS*" and from "the characters, incidents, and modes of *artificial life*" (Bowles 364). This challenge to Pope's canonical status offended Byron, who began to respond to Bowles as early as 1807, when he included lines on Bowles in his satirical *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (Howe 75; 84; 86). In the 1821 *Letter to Murray*, Byron confronted the latest developments in that controversy, including writing by Campbell and Bowles that alluded to Byron's earlier response to the *Works* (*CMP* 120).

Savage, although they were described by William Wordsworth himself- like the
'idiot of his glory.' (CMP 138-9)

Byron here adopts articles of exotic dress—in keeping with his predilection for foreign costume—as emblematic of poetic language and its power to distinguish bodies and things. He mockingly contrasts these styled figures with the “native and naked” language of Romanticism, which he summons in the image of “the tattooed or un-tattoo-ed buttocks of a New Sandwich Savage.” The citation at the end of the passage, a slight misquotation of Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy,” reduces Wordsworth’s monumental inscriptions to tattoos on the buttocks of a “savage” and equates his “naked” style with inarticulacy.⁴³ An example of those who “convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions,” Johnny in “The Idiot Boy” gestures and burrs and imitates the cocks’ crowing rather than producing articulate speech (Wordsworth, *Major Works* 597). By evoking the final couplet of “The Idiot Boy,” which locates Johnny’s “glory” in his rudimentary account of the “bold” journey to fetch a doctor for his sick neighbor, Byron pours scorn both upon Wordsworth’s ineloquent subjects and upon the plain style Wordsworth adopts to represent them (Wordsworth, *Major Works* 80). Identifying Wordsworth with the “idiot” of his creation, Byron here suggests that discarding the garment of classical rhetoric degrades language into nonsensical “idiocy.” The risk for Byron is thus not simply that of a threadbare style, but that of bewilderment and unintelligibility: in the poem he cites, Johnny doesn’t fulfill his mission of sending the doctor to old Susan Foy.

⁴³ _Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
And that was all his travel’s story. (Wordsworth, *Major Works* 80)

Much as the Stranger in *The Deformed Transformed* claims that men have built “Babels,” or created linguistic chaos, so Byron in the Letter evokes the Babel story to criticize Romantic appeals to the language of nature in works such as Wordsworth’s “Idiot Boy” (Byron, *CMP* 128; Howe 87). In a pun on “babble” and “Babel,” he dismisses Wordsworthian Romanticism as the “Babble of green fields’ & of bare Nature in general,” and calls poets who ostracize Pope the “envious destroyers of the classical temple of our Predecessor” who build in its place a “Babel attended by a confusion of tongues” (*CMP* 136; 148). In the *Letter* the confusion of tongues is a threat to existence itself, for Byron views poetic language and the formal qualities of art as stays against universal chaos. He associates formlessness with death and burial, asserting that without the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Obelisk, and the Sphinx, “the *Spots* of earth would be unnoticed and unknown—buried like Babylon and Nineveh in indistinct confusion—without poetry—as without existence...such is the Poetry of Art” (133). In a version of Cicero’s argument that eloquence founded cities, Byron contends that its death would destroy the architecture of the civilized world (Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric* 201).⁴⁴

Byron’s vehement objections to Wordsworth’s seamless blank verse, by contrast with what he saw as Milton’s more disciplined practice of the form, illustrate this view that eliminating the material structures of art—the architecture of the Parthenon, the rhyme and line breaks of a poem—erases the boundaries between things and thus erases

⁴⁴ Byron looked to Cicero as a model for his political endeavors, hoping to “sway the destiny of nations by the power of oratory” (Kelsall 44).

things themselves as the morphemes of a legible universe or *kosmos*.⁴⁵ In Byron's view, abandoning these structures creates a "chaotic uniformity" in Gavin Sougen's words, or "reduce[s] all things to an absolute level" as Hazlitt wrote. (Sourgen 7; Hazlitt 214). Much like Hazlitt, Byron associates such "chaotic uniformity" of language with revolutionary upheaval and the attempted erasure of differences in social class. In his lecture "The Living Poets" (1818), Hazlitt couples political and poetic ferment in symmetrical syntax: he links the decapitation of kings and queens in political revolution with their dethroning in tragedy and epic, associates the overthrow of authority with the abandonment of elegance in dress and poetry, and identifies the abolition of regular government with that of regular meter.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ As I explain in the Introduction, in his denouncements of the Lake Poets, Byron puns on "blank verse" when he refers to Wordsworth and company as "blank pretenders" and regrets that "Blank verse...became the order of the day, or else such rhyme as looked still blanker than the verse without it" (CMP 158; qtd. in Sourgen 1). In these quips Byron extrapolates an important aspect of Milton's blank verse, its purposeful plainness and avoidance of unnecessary ornaments like rhyme, which Milton compares to fashionable metal corsets or "tags" (Orgel and Goldberg x). For Byron, Milton's blank verse was a successful experiment, but one whose results could not be replicated. Though he speculates that the Spenserian stanza or Dantean *terza rima* might have improved *Paradise Lost*, Byron concedes that Milton made an anomalous triumph of the blank-verse epic thanks to his strong syntax (Sourgen 1). Wordsworth's blank verse, by contrast, abandoned the discipline of Milton's syntax and structure in favor of a "copious language and seamless meter," in which sense continually spills over the line breaks and creates a "feeling of interminable drift" (Sourgen 4). Such strategies in Byron's view create a "chaotic uniformity" in Sougen's words, or "reduce all things to an absolute level" as Hazlitt wrote. (Sourgen 7; Hazlitt 214).

⁴⁶ Hazlitt writes:

The change in the belles-lettres was as complete, and to many persons as startling, as the change in politics, with which it went hand in hand. There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets, kings and people. According to the prevailing notions, all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated. All the commonplace figures of poetry, tropes, allegories, personifications, with the whole heathen mythology, were instantly discarded; a classical allusion was considered as a piece of antiquated foppery... kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic, as they were decapitated elsewhere: rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular

In these reactions to poetic innovation Byron's esteem for formal poetics and literary tradition strains against not only his revolutionary sympathies but also his modern fashionable image. Given what we know about Byron's status as a fashion icon, it is tempting to suppose that in comparing rhetoric to dress Byron is defending fashion against "bare nature."⁴⁷ More accurately, Byron compares language to older forms of customary dress rather than modern protean fashion, which for him includes the "naked" style. Whereas customary dress was more rigid and reflected one's class, gender, and profession, fashion as it emerged in the eighteenth century offered more expressive freedom and could blur the boundaries between different social stations—hence its revolutionary significance. As Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell notes, in eighteenth-century France (at a time when Paris set the tone for all of Europe), sumptuary laws fell into disuse and technologies helped make clothing more affordable, meaning that "for the first time people of all classes could wear fashionable, luxurious dress" (8). Across the channel, as Timothy Campbell argues, "modern Britons [had] fashion—here a kind of 'liberty' with form—that [stood] in contrast to the customary dress of traditional cultures around the globe" (5). Modern fashion also changed far more rapidly than customary dress, and its rhythmic representations in print culture intensified Britons' perception of "cultural

government. Authority and fashion, elegance or arrangement, were hooted out of countenance as pedantry and prejudice...The object was to reduce all things to an absolute level; and a singularly affected and outrageous simplicity prevailed in dress and manners, in style and sentiment... The world was to be turned topsy-turvy; and poetry, by the goodwill of Adam-wits, was to share its fate and begin *de novo*... (214-15)

⁴⁷ Byron's trademark look consisted of black clothes with an artfully disheveled shirt collar revealing a bare neck. The particular look Byron cultivated was popularized by his portraits, which inspired worshippers as well as imitators. John Gibson Lockhart observed in 1821: "every boarding-school in the empire still contains many devout believers in the amazing misery of the black-haired, high-browed, blue-eyed, bare-throated, Lord Byron. How melancholy you look in the prints!" (Rutherford, *Critical Heritage* 182).

acceleration” in the eighteenth century (14). In the *Letter to Murray*, Byron—whose celebrity as well as his disgrace resulted from these cultural shifts—seeks to align literary form with more orderly customary dress, and thus set it against chaotic modern fashion.

In the examples I cited above, for instance, Byron compares formal structures like rhyme to turbans, togas, armor, and other forms of traditional dress that identify the individual in relation to society. In this sense, Byron evokes customary dress as it corresponds to the classical order of first half of the eighteenth century, whose adherents preferred “the universal rule over the divergent particular” and “put a premium on social life and hierarchical kinds of social organization so that decorum becomes a key feature of aesthetic judgments” (Beatty 237). More standardized modes of dress preceding the development of a fast-moving and freer fashion system can thus be aligned with a neoclassical standard of taste that favored genre distinctions and hierarchies. As David Duff notes, “[t]he neoclassical hierarchy of genres mirrors the social hierarchy, reinforcing class divisions by segregating literary forms and specifying what could and could not be represented in each,” with the word “decorum” denoting “both social and literary protocols” (35-36). This decorum also extended to the formal qualities that separated one genre from another, determining in what rhetorical dress a writer could clothe his work. When Byron questions whether Wordsworth’s “rather long ‘Excursion,’” written in blank verse, is really poetry or, indeed, comprehensible writing (“’Tis poetry—at least by his assertion./... And he who understands it may be able/ To add a story to the Tower of Babel”), he is objecting to Wordsworth’s deviation from this standard of taste (*Don Juan* 1.4.24; 29). In Sardanapalus these protocols are specifically mapped onto the questions of

dress and class, for Byron not only restores the king to his legitimate place in tragedy but also develops the plot in such a way that the king is brought to relinquish his shepherd's dress, associated with the pastoral genre, and take up the sword and scepter, implements of the epic world he inhabits (although, as I will demonstrate, this effort to discipline the protagonist through classical decorum are inconsistent). In the process, Byron criticizes Sardanapalus' embrace of a pastoral aesthetic of simplicity as, ironically, mere hollow fashion.

In this way, Sardanapalus' pastoral dress alludes to the fashion for a "natural" style inspired by Rousseau and imitated by the likes of Marie Antoinette. In his defense of customary dress above disorderly and disfiguring fashion, Byron includes both the Lake-School "plain style" and the overwrought elegance of the Leigh Hunt circle in the latter category. As Anthony Howe explains, Byron saw "Nature" as "the most resonant cant-word," where "cant" refers to unmeaning jargon (87). Hollow cant, Byron declaims, has become à la mode in English society:

The truth is that in these days the grand "primum mobile" of England is *Cant*— *Cant* political— *Cant* poetical— *Cant* religious— *Cant* moral— but always *Cant*— multiplied through all the varieties of life. —It is the fashion— & while it lasts— will be too powerful for those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time.— I say *Cant* because it is a thing of words— without the smallest influence upon human actions— the English being no wiser— no better— and much poorer— and more divided amongst themselves— as well as far less moral— than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum. (*CMP* 128).

As Howe argues, cant for Byron is a “disfiguring persuasive betrayal of thought” seen as aesthetically pernicious because it is removed “from the scene of ‘human actions’” (being merely “a thing of words”) and adopted by those “unable to reflect upon the linguistic structures that constitute” their world (77). Byron includes the rhetoric of nature in this category of stock language adopted as mere habit in conformity with the transient “tone of the time” (*CMP* 128). It is significant that Byron calls cant the “primum mobile,” or primary mover, of England, for it is precisely the movements of verbal and sartorial fashion that trouble him, or the ways in which signs were becoming unmoored from their naturalized referents. In *Sardanapalus* the king’s shepherd costume alludes to ways in which the Rousseauian “cant” of nature was emptied of meaning by the aristocratic fashion for “dressing down” in pastoral clothes. Most famously, Marie Antoinette dressed as a milkmaid and fashioned her Petit Trianon after the pastoral aesthetic of Rousseau, without adopting the concomitant critique of *ancien régime* luxury and social structures (Weber 132). This hollow gesture demonstrates how the “distinctive outward signs and symbols” of class became “imperiled” and prompted a double move in which the lower social ranks imitated the styles of the higher, and the higher ranks “move[d] away from their former position, which [was] now fashionably untenable” (Chrisman-Campbell 8). In these movements from above and below, the signifier (dress) becomes untethered from the signified (class), and is thus exposed as meaningless. Pastoral dress no longer reliably signifies a lower social class, and by extension its adoption does not indicate or prompt sympathy with the lower classes.

Byron's criticism of the Leigh Hunt circle likewise demonstrates the ways in which he privileges customary dress, as a metaphor for formal structure, above more flexible fashions. Just as he criticizes those who "dress down" in pastoral clothes, he also lambastes those at the other end of the spectrum, who "dress up" in aristocratic styles. In one particularly revelatory passage, he writes:

The grand distinction of the Under forms of the New School of poets is their *Vulgarity* -By this I do not mean that they are *Coarse*- but "shabby-genteel".... -A man may be coarse & yet not *vulgar* - and the reverse. - -Burns is often coarse-but never vulgar-and the reverse.- - -Chatterton is never vulgar; - nor Wordsworth-nor the higher of the Lake School, though they treat of low life in all it's branches.-It is in their *finery* that the New-under School-are most vulgar;- and they may be known by this at once-as what we called at Harrow-"a Sunday Blood" might be easily distinguished from a Gentleman-although his cloathes might be the better-cut-and his boots the best-blackened of the two-probably because he made the one- or cleaned the other with his own hands.- -

In the present case I speak of writing- *not* of persons... I will not judge of their [the Leigh Hunt circle's] manners from their verse.- -They may be honourable & *gentlemanly* men for what I know-but the latter quality is studiously excluded from their publications.- They remind me of Mr Smith and the Miss Branghtons at the Hampstead Assembly in "Evelina." ---Far be it from me to presume that there ever was or can be such as thing as an *Aristocracy of Poets*- I do not mean that they should write in the style of the Song by a Person of Quality or

parle Euphuism [to speak or write in an affected manner]—but there is a Nobility of thought and Style—open to all stations— and derived partly from talent— & partly from education.... (CMP 159; 159 n.254).

Though careful not to conflate social status and poetic talent, Byron nevertheless maps the language of social distinction, as signified by dress and manner, onto that of poetic style: publications, like men, can be judged on the basis of whether they are “gentlemanly”; writing, like “persons,” may be either “vulgar” or noble, where “vulgar” tellingly refers both to the vernacular or common language and to common and uneducated people (“vulgar, n.”). Especially revealing is Byron’s definition of the “shabby-genteel” poets of the Leigh Hunt circle, who are vulgar in their very finery. Their attempts at stylistic elegance are compared to the painstaking efforts of the “Sunday Blood” (where “blood” refers to a fast or fashionable man) to appear distinguished by blackening his own boots and making his own clothes (CMP 457 n.251). The comparison is not very different from the recurring motif in *ancien régime* literature of servants who dress in their masters’ clothes, provoking farcical situations (Chrisman-Campbell 9). Indeed, Byron’s allusion to Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* refers to a scene in which Mr. Smith’s attempts at “figuring,” in the sense of putting on the fine gentleman, are a source of amusement to the heroine because they are clumsy and incommensurate with his class and education (Burney 221). In drawing such comparisons, Byron aligns rhetorical form with modes of dress that are seen as stable and meaningful, by contrast with changeable and confusing fashions.

Thus, while he advocates for liberty and equality in politics and poetics, Byron also harbors nostalgia for a more decorous age similar to that which Edmund Burke expresses in his eulogy for the “age of chivalry”:

[T]he age of chivalry is gone...now all is to be changed....All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion. (Burke 169-171)

This image of “decent drapery” being “rudely torn off” to reveal a “naked, shivering nature” echoes Burke’s description of Marie Antoinette fleeing “almost naked” from the mob during the siege of Versailles, and so compares the revolution’s assault on authority to the sexual violation of the queen (Johnson 4-5). In the above passage, Burke specifically evokes the removal of the queen’s clothing as an image for the stripping off of society’s decorous surface. In fact, Marie Antoinette’s “wardrobe” was quite literally destroyed by the mob, who pulled her dresses “to tatters” and decorated themselves with the fragments (Chrisman-Campbell 2). In Burke’s hands, this act becomes a figure for the ways in which the revolutionaries exploded the social order and reduced mankind to a barbarous “nature.” For Byron, too, removing the “decent drapery of life”— or in his own words the “prior and purely beautiful fabric” of classical eloquence—reveals a deficient nature (*CMP* 148). Without the dignity and order of civilization, an anarchic nature

threatens to bury the world in “indistinct confusion,” as he says in the *Letter to Murray* (CMP 133).

In *Sardanapalus* the question of the king’s wardrobe is likewise paramount, and the conflict between other characters’ efforts to re-clothe the king in his proper attire and Sardanapalus’ refusal to conform allegorizes the tension in Byron’s poetics between *kosmos* and chaos. Byron announces his project of restoring the rhetorical dress of genre conventions in the “Preface” to the three plays that were published together (*Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari*, and *Cain*) and in the “Prefatory Note to *Sardanapalus*.” In the “Preface” Byron he explains that he has

...in one instance attempted to preserve, and in the other to approach the ‘unities’; conceiving that with any very distant departure from them, there may be poetry, but can be no drama. He is aware of the unpopularity of this notion in present English literature, but it is not a system of his own, being merely an opinion, which, not very long ago, was the law of literature throughout the world, and is still so in the more civilized parts of it. But ‘Nous avons changé tout cela,’ and are reaping the advantages of the change. (263)

In this passage Byron links his attempt to “approach” the Aristotelian unities in *Sardanapalus* to respect for genre distinctions and formal qualities, which he refers to as the civilizing “law of literature” that has been sadly overthrown in English poetics. His rueful assertion that “Nous avons changé tout cela” (“We have changed all that”) echoes Burke’s reflection that “now all is to be changed,” or Hazlitt’s summary of a “change in the

belles-lettres [that] was as complete... as the change in politics.”⁴⁸ In reaction to these movements, Byron states his preference for “the more regular formation of a structure, however feeble, to an entire abandonment of all rules whatsoever.” Much as he rejects the prosaic formlessness of blank verse, he implies that the unities are the architecture without which there “can be no drama” (263). In an echo of the *Letter to Murray*, Byron here insists on formal qualities as structures that distinguish the “things” of art.

To craft a true drama by this definition, Byron strives in *Sardanapalus* to comply with the conventions of classical tragedy. He shortens the “long war of history” into a rebellion that explodes and succeeds “in one day by a sudden conspiracy” (unity of time and action), and sets the whole of the action within the king’s palace (unity of place) (*Sardanapalus* p. 263 n. 6; *BLJ* 26). He also upholds “decorum” by restoring the king to his legitimate station as the hero of tragedy, and consequently, as Heber wrote of *Marino Faliero*, rejecting the speeches of the vulgar “to strut in the same precise measure with the lofty musings and dignified resentment of the powerful and the wise” (Rutherford, *Critical Heritage* 240). Yet at the same time that he reverts to this “old imperial code,”⁴⁹ Byron crafts an indecorous protagonist, “Misplaced upon the throne—misplaced in life,” who fails to meet the standards of heroic masculinity and so to uphold the old imperial

⁴⁸ In making this statement in French as a citation of Molière’s *Le médecin malgré lui*, Byron demonstrates the allusive sophistication that he favored over what he saw as the stylistic naiveté and break with the past that characterized his era (263 n. 5)

⁴⁹ Henry Body begins his “Comparative View of the Inferno” (1785) by stating that “In age this enlightened and discovery, when it is grown a kind of literary pastime to attack every establishment, and when the old fabrics of reason and experience are often exposed to the wanton assaults of genius.— It is but natural, that the old imperial code of criticism should begin to lose some of its authority” (25-26). For a discussion of the ways in which writers like Boyd voiced the sense that the traditional classifications and methods of criticism were breaking down, see David Duff’s *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, Chapter 1 (28).

order (IV.332). In the play's opening soliloquy, the King's brother-in-law Salemenes rehearses his transgressions: careless of domestic and political stability, Sardanapalus has rejected royal protocol by neglecting queen and empire, dressing and living like a woman, and indulging in a love affair with his Greek slave Myrrha. Disgusted with their effeminate and luxury-loving king, Arbaces, the Mede, and Beleses, a soothsayer, conspire to overthrow Sardanapalus and claim the throne for Arbaces. As the plot and characters advance to the tragic finale, Sardanapalus remains, as Susan Wolfson notes, "a texture of inconsistencies," eluding the discipline of classical decorum (Wolfson 875). Having squandered the crown, the king is finally left with little option but what Myrrha the "crowning act" of suicide, which allows him to die a king (V.i.229). As a storm rages and a turbulent Euphrates batters the surrounding wall, enabling the advance of the rebellious mob, the emperor and his concubine destroy themselves by fire. Thus, at the edges of Byron's unified drama, ungovernable forces—figured as water and fire— threaten to engulf the ordered world that rhetorical conventions like the unities are meant to preserve.

In foregrounding the precariousness of social arrangement, Byron allegorically displaces the political and aesthetic conflicts of his day onto an ancient oriental tale. The tone he captures in the play is not just that of the European revolutions whose vibrations were felt in Ravenna, where he was living at the time, but also that of the concomitant turmoil at home, which continued to occupy his thought and writing (Kelsall 52).⁵⁰ The

⁵⁰ Kelsall argues that Byron's writing after "exile" revisits the problems that occupied his failed political career, with the Venetian plays *Marino Faliero* and *The Two Foscari* as well as the

“king-times are fast finishing,” Byron wrote at the same time that he was composing *Sardanapalus*, and with them the aesthetic order that had assured a legible world (*BLJ* 26). This turmoil is evoked in topical allusions that occur in the first scene of the play as the first utterances of two principle characters. Sardanapalus is linked to George IV when his brother-in-law Salemenes evokes the “wrong’d...queen” in the first line of the play:

He hath wrong’d his queen, but
still he is her lord (I.i.1)

At the end of this opening soliloquy, Sardanapalus enters and orders his attendants to prepare for an evening banquet:

Let the pavilion over the Euphrates
Be garlanded, and lit, and furnish’d forth (I.i.58-9)

E.H. Coleridge insists that these remarks are veiled references to Queen Caroline’s trial of 1821 and George IV’s Brighton Pavilion, which was decorated in a fashionable oriental style, and would have been instantly recognizable to a contemporary audience had the play been staged.⁵¹ Repeated associations between Sardanapalus and silk (he is called a “silkworm” who engages in “silken dalliance”) may also refer to the dandified George IV, who once dressed “in a pink silk coat and white silk waistcoat embroidered with foil and

European cantos of *Don Juan* lending themselves to interpretation as “loosely veiled allegories of ‘domestica facta’” (52).

⁵¹ “Byron pretended, or perhaps really thought, that such a phrase as the ‘Queen’s wrongs’ would be supposed to contain an allusion to the trial of Queen Caroline (August-November 1820), and to the exclusion of her name from state prayers, etc. Unquestionably if the play had been put on the stage at this time, the pit and gallery would have applauded the sentiment to the echo. There was, too, but one ‘pavilion’ in 1821, and that was not on the banks of the Euphrates, but at Brighton. Qui s’excuse accuse” (E.H. Coleridge 15 n.1).

porcelain buttons” (Byron, *Sardanapalus*, I.ii.580; II.i.87; Fay 200). Byron would later write of the monarch in Canto XI of *Don Juan* (1823):

I have seen that sad affair of the late Queen—

I have seen crowns worn instead of a fool’s cap— (668-9)

In *Sardanapalus* these allusions link the crisis of the king’s “effeminacy” to socio-political disruptions and their aesthetic causes and consequences in Regency England and Europe. As the lines from *Don Juan* suggest, what troubles Byron is the way in which signifiers (here, the crown) have come untethered from the things signified (monarchical authority).

Byron allegorizes these changes in *Sardanapalus* by depicting a king who refuses to wear his crown, and finally has it wrested from him. In so doing, he evokes a variety of fashionable figures from his own time—including Marie Antoinette, Beau Brummell, George IV, and himself— who epitomized the changing aesthetic order. As Ellen Moers argues, the Regency period in which the dandy George “Beau” Brummell reached his ascendancy, and in which “fashion” replaced birth and wealth as the arbiter of status, was characterized by war and post-war restlessness and disequilibrium (39). The erratic and unpopular George IV—as Prince of Wales, Prince Regent, and King—was an index of these instabilities, with the term “Regency” itself implying discontinuity (Moers 39). In this revolutionary and post-revolutionary context, the hereditary status of an aristocrat or even a monarch no longer guaranteed authority. George IV aspired to cultivate an identity that was individual rather than dynastic, seeking to hold sway not as a prince of the state but as a man of fashion and “first gentleman of Europe” (Fay 24; Moers 34). That distinction, however, belonged to Brummell, the grandson of a servant, who had no title,

no family connections, and no significant inheritance (Lynch 687). In spite of these deficiencies, Brummell counted George IV and Byron among his admirers: the Prince of Wales sought his advice in matters of fashion and watched him dress, rather than the reverse, while Lord Byron pronounced Brummell's name "with a mingled emotion of respect and jealousy" (O'Brien 16; Lovell 201). As Glenn O'Brien observes, "[a]fter Brummell it was possible for a man to rule by virtue of style and wit alone. Land, title, and blood would never be the same" (16).

Although Byron participated in these cultural shifts, in *Sardanapalus* he persists with his project of restoring the "rules," framing his drama as a kind of mirror of princes that aims to discipline the wayward protagonist. Indeed, Sardanapalus calls his funeral pyre at the end of the play "a light/ To lesson ages, rebel nations, and/ Voluptuous princes" (V.i.440-2). While the play opens with a catalogue of the king's wrongs, Byron mitigates these irregularities by introducing Sardanapalus through the eyes of Salemenes, who sets the agenda of "rousing" the king from idle luxury (Wolfson 877). A stalwart of the old order, Salemenes frames the king's missteps as redeemable errors and insists that "latent energies" lie within him (I.i.11). This warrior-prince attempts to fashion the king into a traditional figure of heroic masculinity. Salemenes's soliloquy, which opens the play, is characterized by a rhetorical regularity that aligns with his esteem for traditional social frameworks:

Salemenes (*Solus*): He hath wrong'd his queen, but
still he is her lord;
He Hath wrong'd my sister, still he is my brother;

He hath wronged his people, still he is their
sovereign,
And I must be his friend as well as his subject:
He must not perish thus. I will not see
The blood of Nimrod and Semiramis
Sink in the earth, and thirteen hundred years
Of Empire ending like a shepherd's tale (I.i.1-8)

The ternary first lines have a parallel structure both within each line and among the three. Though not strictly regular, they are alexandrines— a favorite verse form of French neo-classical tragedies⁵²—, with each line including about twelve syllables (the first line has eleven) in iambic meter with a caesura in the middle. They exploit the figure of anaphora in the repetition of “He hath wrong’d” at the beginning of each line and “still he is” after each caesura. Varying from the iambic meter, “He hath wrong’d” is anapestic with two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable. This anapestic rhythm emphasizes Sardanapalus’ “wrongs” against queen and people, but the “still he is” that comes after the caesura rescues him from these accusations and insists—through the centrality of the phrase within the lines and the stress on “still” and “is”—on the king’s immutable identity within the social structure. That structure is based upon antithesis,

⁵² Byron was influenced to some extent by French neo-classical drama. In response to Murray’s concerns that *Marino Faliero* would not be popular, he protested: “It appears to me that there is room for a different style of the drama—neither a servile following of the old drama—which is a grossly erroneous one—nor yet too *French*—like those who succeeded older writers. ---It appears to me that good English—and a severer approach to the rules—might combine something not dishonourable to our literature” (*BLJ* 78).

with the caesura marking the symmetry and contrast of queen and lord, sister and brother, people and sovereign.

To abandon these antitheses is to “perish” and “Sink in the earth,” undifferentiated and therefore “a nothing,” as Salemenes later calls Sardanapalus (I.ii. 102). Because of the king’s wrongs and his effeminate sloth—his abdication of social roles and structures—, Salemenes fears his centuries-old empire will end “like a shepherd’s tale,” evoking Greek pastoral poetry and its idealizing of rural life and the natural (I.i.5-7). For Salemenes, such a pastoral ending promises not an Edenic existence (or its pre-Christian equivalent) but rather a sinking and a disappearance into the earth—the kind of erasure Byron associates with discarding rhyme in poetry or the unities in drama. Thus, through Salemenes, Byron associates the fall of empire with the abandonment of rhetorical “dress”: with the reign of Sardanapalus, an epic narrative of heroism and conquest devolves into a “shepherd’s tale,” with the generic hierarchy evoked by this epic/pastoral distinction corresponding to hierarchies of gender and class (which Sardanapalus betrays by wearing a shepherd’s costume seen as “effeminate”). Indeed, the king announces his pastoral values from his first appearance in the play at the end of Salemenes’s soliloquy. By contrast with Salemenes’ soliloquy, which begins with stately and measured Alexandrines, Sardanapalus’ first speech is irregular, and in it he plans the “soft hours” he will share with “Fair nymphs” rather than concerning himself with higher duties like Salemenes (I.ii.7-10). Much like Milton in the portrayal of *Paradise Lost*’s Belial, Byron presents Sardanapalus’ rhetorical style as a lax or “soft” one consistent with his betrayal of heroic masculinity (Mann, “Slack Muse” 53). Just when Salemenes has expressed fear that an epic

tale of sweeping conquest will end as a pastoral, Sardanapalus enters the scene “effeminately dressed, his Head crown’d with Flowers, and his Robe negligently flowing” (265). He thus appears as an actor in the wrong drama: a hero of tragedy wearing the costume and speaking the lines of a shepherd king, betraying Byron’s project of restoring generic conventions. In a later scene Sardanapalus tells Myrrha that the falsehood of his station makes him

Wish that I could lay down the dull tiara,
And share a cottage on the Caucasus
With thee, and wear no crowns but those of flowers. (I.ii.451-3)

In this bucolic fantasy, Sardanapalus imagines substituting the “dull tiara,” metonymic of the civilized monarch, with the crowns of flowers of shepherd kings. He makes a similar remark when, ignoring Salemenes’ concern over safety, he insists on holding the banquet in the outdoor pavilion rather than in the palace, wishing to celebrate like

The shepherd kings of patriarchal times,
Who knew no brighter gems than summer wreaths,
And none but tearless triumphs. (I.ii. 160-2).

By laying aside the “bright gems” of monarchy, Sardanapalus would inaugurate a harmonious age of benign rule, an epoch of “tearless triumphs” where differences in power, class, and gender are diminished because even the king lives in unadorned simplicity and wears soft feminine dress. The violence and rapine of heroic narrative, Sardanapalus imagines, will then resolve in the bucolic peace and plain living of an idyll.

This depiction of Sardanapalus can be seen as a critique of naïve interpretations of Wordsworthian and Rousseausian romanticism, evincing Byron's skepticism about the possibility that a "plain style" that abandons rhetorical distinctions can effect real political change. Sardanapalus' pose as a shepherd king is exposed as a hollow one: while he dresses in flowing robes and crowns of flowers, he nevertheless luxuriates in the spoils of empire, using its "imposts" (taxes or tributes) to finance his "revel," and showering his concubines with expensive gifts (when Salemenes descries him in the first scene of the play, he remarks: ...already I perceive/ The reeking odours of the perfumed trains,/ And see the bright gems of the glittering girls") (I.i.38-9; I.ii.119; 267 n.25). Furthermore, Sardanapalus opposes the fickle mob as much as the imperial order, continuing to see himself as superior to the rabble:

I would not give the smile of one fair girl
For all the popular breath that e'er divided
A name from nothing. What are the rank tongues
Of this vile herd, grown insolent with feeding,
That I should prize their noisy praise, or dread
Their noisome clamour? (I.ii.338-43)

Rejecting the "name" the people might give him as meaningless, Sardanapalus describes their speech as both silent breath and inarticulate noise: whether uttering praise or criticism, their voices are "noisy" and "noisome," with "noisome" echoing "noise" phonologically, though not etymologically. In spite of his democratic rhetoric, then, Sardanapalus sees the people as a mass, a "vile herd," as indistinguishable from one

another as they are inarticulate. The hypocrisy of Sardanapalus' claims to naturalness and simplicity evokes that of Marie Antoinette, who, as I discussed earlier in this essay, toyed with the pastoral aesthetic without adopting its concomitant critique of *ancien régime* luxury and social structures. Sardanapalus' pastoral dress, then, is depicted as an empty form that lacks the power to change minds or reform societies. Through Sardanapalus' shepherd costume, Byron re-inscribes the "natural" style within the realm of meaningless fashion and disfiguring speech it is meant to transcend.

While in these senses the pastoral aesthetic is exposed as hollow and impotent (and thus associated with effeminacy), in a contradictory way Byron represents this aesthetic as dangerous and disruptive. By abandoning social structures, Sardanapalus leaves himself open to encroachments on his empire. Just before the banquet, Sardanapalus has this revealing exchange with Myrrha:

Sar. [...]

The hour invites, the galley is prepared,

And the pavilion, deck'd for our return,

In fit adornment for the evening banquet,

Shall blaze with beauty and light, until

It seems unto the stars which are above us

Itself an opposite star; and we will sit

Crown'd with fresh flowers like———

Myr.

Victims. (I.ii.551-510)

There is little doubt throughout the play that Sardanapalus' pastoral "effeminacy," as an abdication of patriarchal authority, weakens his standing, for the rebels cite the behavior of "The she-king/ That less than woman" as a reason to overthrow him (II.i.48-9). In their efforts to reform Sardanapalus, both Myrrha and Salemenes offer visions of a feudalistic society in which conformity to one's station assures social harmony and deviation leads to chaos. Myrrha, for example, encourages the king to cultivate

...civic popular love, self love,

Which means that men are kept in awe and law,

Yet not oppress'd—at least they must not think so;

Or if they think so, deem it necessary,

To ward off worse oppression, their own passions. (I.ii.537-41)

Myrrha here defines monarchy as a paternalistic system in which the ruler is motivated by *noblesse oblige* to act for the good of the people, while they are led to cooperate in their own subjection. Through such descriptions of benign rule, Byron summons an idealized image of an orderly and "decorous" society based upon different roles and classes woven together in a social tapestry. In his efforts to opt out of such a society—by dressing effeminately and styling himself as a shepherd—Sardanapalus lays his kingdom open to what Myrrha calls the "anarchy of sloth," where the absence of power naturally allows an underlying chaos to emerge (I.ii.584).

Byron depicts this chaos as in some sense inevitable: in a contradictory way, he frames it as both a consequence of the king's misdeeds and the natural result of a precarious cosmetic order. To some extent, the sense of precariousness in the play is

ironically the result of Byron's decision to have the revolution "explode and succeed in one day" in obedience to the unity of time. This compression of a long war into one day speeds up the action and evinces the sense of a rapidly changing world. With the Pre-Adamites in mind, it makes sense to see the end of the Assyrian empire as, on a social level, a sudden "crushing and inexorable/ Destruction and disorder of the elements,/ Which struck a world to chaos" (*Cain* II.80). By speeding up the action and depicting the abrupt annihilation of a centuries-old empire, Byron mirrors the pace of change in his own era. In Canto XI of *Don Juan*, Byron uses the suggestive image of a shattered globe of glass to describe the socio-political flux of his age. The narrator reflects on what Bernard Beatty calls the "bewildering events" of 1789-1815, declaring that he has seen enough change in seven years "Than might suffice a moderate century through/...Nought's permanent among the human race" (Beatty 236; Byron, *Don Juan* 82.652; 655). In an earlier stanza Byron ventriloquizes in the first two lines the aptly named eighteenth-century poet Edward Young, who mourns the world he knew in youth:

'Where is the world,' cries Young, at eighty ? Where

The world in which a man was born?' Alas!

Where is the world of eight years past? 'Twas there--

I looked for it--'tis gone, a Globe of Glass!

Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere

A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.

Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,

And dandies, all are gone on the wind's wings. (76.601-8)

In this satire of Latin discourses of transience, such as the *ubi sunt* (“where is”) and *carpe diem* traditions (“Carpe diem,’ Juan, ‘Carpe, carpe!’”), Byron finds an image for the changes of the century in the shattered “Globe of Glass” (86.681). In a double gesture Byron both globalizes the changes of the era in a sweeping view, and reduces the globe to a decorative thing of glass, once “glittering,” now “Cracked, shivered, vanished.” The list of obsolete types– “Statesmen, chiefs, orators”– parades a series of colorful figures that quickly vanish. The next stanzas continue with the *ubi sunt* theme: “Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows”; “Where’s Brummell? Dished”; “Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?” (77.609; 78.617; 79.625). In evoking these vanished figures, Byron’s narrator both welcomes political change– “I have seen nations like o’erloaded asses/ Kick off their burdens– meaning the high classes”– and expresses bewilderment at the rapid pace of change as well as regret for what is lost (84.671-2).

A similar sense of melancholy and confusion hangs over Byron’s journal entries during the time he was composing *Sardanapalus* and over the play, whose dandiacal hero is associated with ephemerality. It is significant that in *Don Juan* Edward Young ends his list of vanished “species” with dandies, and that, with brutal offhandedness, Byron’s narrator later states that Beau Brummell is “Dished” or “done for” (from the expression “done and dished”) (“dish, v.1.”). In Young’s catalog of social types, the dandy is the one most associated with the ephemeral. The nineteenth-century French writer Jules Barbey D’Aureville remarked that Brummell became prince of his time by mastering the most transitory feature of a society: its manners. Manners, D’Aureville argues, are the part of mores that leaves no debris, an “aroma too subtle to be conserved” [“l’arôme trop subtil

pour qu'il se conserve"] (50). Since the dandy's art is composed of movement, it cannot be captured: like the orator, the great actor, and the conversationalist, Brummell is nothing but a name. D'Aurevilly compares Brummell's name to a brilliant reflection in a mirror, and asserts that if a historian does not appear for him, glory will be for Brummell yet another mirror that retains no trace of a former image (54). In writing by his contemporaries, Brummell's metonymic association with transient fashion and trivial objects makes him the figure for ephemerality. Byron admired Brummell and, as critics like Laura George and Tony Lynch have recently argued, Brummell and the dandies wielded power and were not easily dismissed as frivolous. However, Byron was writing Canto IX of *Don Juan* and *Sardanapalus* after a ruined Brummell had fled to Calais in 1816 (the same year a disgraced Byron left England for the continent), and in this context Brummell's ephemeral art represents for Byron the transience of the age and the sense of "cultural acceleration" to which the rhythms of fashion contributed (Campbell 14).

As I have argued throughout this chapter, Byron compares traditional rhetorical structures to customary dress, which contrasts with rapidly changing and chaotic modern fashion. In *Sardanapalus*, Myrrha and Salemenes' attempts to restore regal "awe and law" by re-equipping the king with his crown and scepter allegorize Byron's own efforts to reinstate the "law" of rhetoric as an ordering principle (I.ii.538). These efforts are inconsistent, and, indeed, Byron's own sartorial style contradicts the distinction between customary dress and fashion. Articles of exotic dress like the togas and turbans he mentions in the *Letter to Murray* become mere fashionable costumes in Byron's hands, and one of the most famous contemporary portraits of the poet depicts him turbaned in

Albanian dress as part of the fashion for oriental styles that helped inspire *Sardanapalus* and George IV's Brighton Pavilion. Along similar lines, the distinctions between dress and fashion or *Kosmos* and chaos in *Sardanapalus* ultimately unravel, with the mirror scene in Act III serving as a nodal point for these conflicts. Importantly, the battle that reaffirms Sardanapalus' heroic masculinity occurs offstage and is reported by other characters, and the climactic moment is displaced onto the scene in which Sardanapalus calls for a mirror and arms himself for battle in a way that rescripts the epic arming of the hero as frivolous adornment. The mirror itself was an important symbol of the nineteenth-century dandy, who was frequently depicted in satirical cartoons grooming at his dressing table (See figure 3). The frequent linking of the mirror and the dandy is exemplified by Austen's use of the trope in *Persuasion* (1818), when the dandified Sir Walter Eliot's tenant Admiral Croft remarks that his landlord "must be a rather dressy man... Such a number of looking-glasses!" (84).⁵³ In *Sardanapalus*, by contrast, Byron evokes the mirror not to satirize "effeminate" self-absorption (or not only for this reason) but rather to summon the fluid forms of identity associated with the dandy, and, indeed, to absorb apparently stable traditional signifiers into the realm of elusive fashions.

⁵³ As Elizabeth Fay argues, "How we look to ourselves becomes a topic of concern in a world increasingly populated by windows, pier glasses, and small mirrors, as well as the venues of assembly such as theaters, ballrooms, promenading spaces, and parks" (3).



Figure 4
“Dandy” (1820)

Sardanapalus is not a dandy in the tradition of Brummell, whose trademark style was one of austerity and exquisite correctness, but, as part of the diverse taxonomy of “effeminate” men, he shares in the nineteenth-century dandy’s association with frivolous objects and transient fashions (George). In the mirror scene, Byron links social instability to the metonymic association of characters with their dress. Throughout the play characters are systematically identified with and displaced by their dress and the props they wield—for instance, the rebel Arbaces is referred to as “a mere tool, a kind/ Of human sword”—, and this is especially true of the King (V.i.460-1). The King is rarely referred to as an embodied being but instead defined by his flowing robes, his crown of

flowers, the signet ring he hands off to Salemenes, and the scepter and the sword he refuses to use. In this sense, he resembles Milton's infernal spirits, who are "armed" without being embodied, and so expose the potential hollowness of ornament. The identification of the King with his dress and symbolic objects also associates him with the nineteenth-century dandy. As Laura George argues, the "fop"—a term she uses as shorthand for an array of identities in different historical moments—is typically seen as proximate to the "thing," especially frivolous and impotent things: for example, the eighteenth-century fop was often metonymically represented as a perfume bottle or snuffbox, while the nineteenth-century dandy was known by what was seen as his ridiculous high stiff collar. Byron, she contends, "increasingly makes an exploration of the man of fashion, his proximity to things, and in fact the proximity to things of all of us a more and more central and explicit aspect of his poetic project." Sardanapalus is repeatedly referred to as a "thing" by his critics (Arbaces calls him "the effeminate thing that governs") and is more specifically associated with silk, which, as I noted earlier in this essay, may refer to George IV's un-monarchical habits of dress (II.i.95). As well as alluding to the domestic labor of spinning and weaving evoked in Diodorus' history and the myth of Hercules, Sardanapalus' alignment with silk is both metonymic and metaphoric: it identifies the king by what he wears as well as compares him to this soft, free-flowing, and slippery material. Along with silk, Sardanapalus is systematically connected to objects he alternately wields and rejects, such as the crown, the scepter, the sword, the signet, or the helmet, which he refuses to wear in battle.

In these uses of metonymy, even the powerful implements of monarchy and soldiery are dismissed as slight and castaway objects. In the mirror scene, Sardanapalus does not arm himself like an epic hero, but adapts the ritual to his “effeminate” habits of dress and adornment:

Sar. (Looking at himself).

This cuirass fits me well, the baldric better,

And the helm not at all. Methings, I seem

(flings away the helmet after trying it again).

Passing well in these toys; and now to prove them. (III.i.163-5)

By dismissing arms as “toys” and flinging away the helmet, Sardanapalus transforms the typical accouterments of heroism into mere ornaments easily discarded. By identifying Sardanapalus with contingent “things” and trivializing even the most powerful of these objects, Byron adverts not only to the threat of reification but also to that of transience. While Laura George focuses on the reification of the dandy as an empty ornament and therefore a nothing, I want to argue that in *Sardanapalus* the problem is not just the character’s materialization as a thing, but an association with ornamental things that assimilates him into the realm of ephemeral objects and changing figures. In representing the king in this way, Byron maps the instability of his own historical moment, which was influenced and reflected by the rapid rhythms of fashion, onto an ancient Assyrian tale. At their most frightening, the changing figures Byron evokes form a “chaos of all loathsome things,” recalling Milton’s vision of hell as a place populated by ever-mutating creatures (IV.i.159). Byron represents this transience through figures of metonymy that

locate Sardanapalus within a web of shifting associations, and so making his identity multiple and decentered. Whereas in older traditions the warrior-king might be more firmly identified with his crown, scepter, and sword, in *Sardanapalus* Byron exploits the metonymic web of associations to unground social identity, and consequently the legible order of the world.

In the *Letter to Murray* Byron rehearses the classical analogy that rhetoric is the dress and ornament of thought, and within this context the figures of dress and ornament in *Sardanapalus* can be read as figures of figures. Seen in this light, the dynamic of mirroring and the recurrence of metonymy in the play exemplify the inconsistencies of Byron's efforts to restore tangible rhetoric as an ordering principle. As Byron's use of metonymy suggests, the figures summoned to restore an orderly *kosmos* are in perpetual motion, and so the orderly world they instate risks falling into a "crushing and inexorable/Destruction and disorder" (*Cain* II.80-1). Associated with an array of moveable objects, Sardanapalus remains a "texture of inconsistencies"—to return to Wolfson's phrase—, never developing a coherent identity based on the ancient models Byron attempts to restore. In this sense, Sardanapalus is a Romantic figure "Misplaced" in a classical tragedy, and thus indexes the "warring elements" of Byron's drama (IV.i.332; II.i.545).

Within the world of "warring elements" crafted by Bryon, Myrrha comes to represent a feminine principle of unity, for Byron associates her with the cosmetic harmony of older social models. As I stated earlier in this essay, throughout the play Byron evokes images of spinning and weaving and identifies Sardanapalus with this

domestic labor: in Diodorus' account, Sardanapalus is said to have spent his days "spinning purple garments and working the softest of wool," while in Byron's play Sardanapalus' scepter is said to have "turn'd into a distaff"; he is called a "silkworm" and "A king of distaffs!" by the rebels; and Myrrha compares him to Hercules wielding Omphale's "vile distaff" (Cox and Gamer 265 n.14; Byron I.ii.325; II.i.345; III.i.220). Despite these associations with the feminine labor of spinning and weaving, Sardanapalus is not a unifying ruler who spins the various threads of his populace into a coherent tapestry. Instead, as Arbaces and Beleses complain, he wears out the fabric woven by his ancestors: the line was "a brave one," Beleses points out, and Arbaces replies: "And is a weak one— 'tis worn out—we'll mend it" (II.i.53-4). In the classical tradition, weaving is often portrayed as the feminine equivalent of poetic composition, in the sense that the weaver interlaces different threads to form a whole. Instead of Sardanapalus, it is Myrrha who is associated with the work of making a whole from many parts. In his dream Sardanapalus sees death as a descent into formlessness and assimilation into the "chaos of all loathsome things," but Myrrha defines it as

The only thing common to all mankind,
So different in their births, tongues, sexes, natures,
Hues, features, climes, times, feelings, intellects,
Without one point of union save in this,
To which we tend, for which we're born,
And thread the labyrinth of mystery, call'd life.

Sar. Our clew being well nigh wound out, let's be cheerful. (V.i.231-7)

Referring to Ariadne's "clew," the ball of thread that helped Theseus thread his way through the Minotaur's labyrinth, Myrrha offers Sardanapalus a linear path through a complex web, as well as an end point. The pace of the lines speeds up as she lists the varieties of mankind, suggesting chaos, but slow down as she guides Sardanapalus to the "one point of union" that weaves them together in cosmetic harmony.

While Myrrha offers the possibility of cohesion, if only in death, as the king's "Myrrha" or "mirror" she also reflects his multiple identity. Myrrha and Sardanapalus' ancestor Semiramis are chiral reflections of the king—"masculine" women" in relation to an "effeminate" man—as well as moving figures who help shape the king's behavior through dynamic mirroring relationships (Christensen 280). According to Diodorus, Semiramis was an ambitious and capable leader who built cities and allowed the arts to flourish. Assaulted by a eunuch by order of her son, Semiramis didn't punish the son but instead passed on the throne to him and disappeared, metamorphosing into a pigeon according to some accounts (105-116). However, Byron—possibly drawing on the Roman historian Justinus or Voltaire's *Semiramis*—preferred a version of her narrative in which Semiramis' son slays her for incest (Cox and Gamer 295 n.90). Transforming her into a nightmare figure, Byron creates an atmosphere of horror and disgust surrounding the gender instability she represents. When Salemenes chastises Sardanapalus with the story of how his female ancestor led the Assyrians to the shores of the Ganges before retreating to Bactria, Sardanapalus replies that

...she had better woven within her palace

Some twenty garments than with twenty guards

Have fled to Bactria, leaving to the ravens,
And wolves, and men—the fiercer of the three,
Her myriads of fond subjects. Is this glory?
Then let me live in ignominy ever. (134-6)

Through the figure of chiasmus, Sardanapalus reverses the grammatical structure of the first clause in the second one, inverting the order of the verb and the object (so that “she had better woven...twenty garments” becomes “than with twenty guards... have fled”). The word “myriads” phonologically summons the mirroring reversal of images, as well their multiplication (Sardanapalus later says in reference to his sons, “I have...multiplied my image”) (I.ii.400). Sardanapalus makes a series of substitutions across the two clauses, replacing “fled” with “woven,” “Bactria” with “palace” and “guards” with “garments.” In doing so, Sardanapalus attempts to rhetorically banish Semiramis across the gender divide and relegate her to domestic labor. The crossing structure of his lines, however, suggests the possibility of travel back and forth across the divide, and this is precisely the crisis of the play as manifest in Sardanapalus’ dangerous “effeminacy.” In Sardanapalus’ dream Semiramis appears as a nightmare figure who renders Sardanapalus passive with her aggressive kisses, and is associated with images portending his death by water and fire: she flings down goblets full of blood whose “poisons” flow like a “hideous river,” and directly after the encounter Sardanapalus is thronged by “a chaos of loathsome things” as though in Hell (IV.i.152). The crossings of mirror effects thus become linked to death in the sense of perpetual flux, with Semiramis acting as a kind of Gothic *doppelgänger* who externalizes the hero’s multiple selves.

In this way, Sardanapalus remains entangled in a web of contradictory meanings and shifting identities. Until his suicide, he sees death as a dispersal rather than a unification, as Myrrha depicts it. Recalling Byron's description of mind as a "sad jar of atoms" and humankind as "congregated dust," Sardanapalus refers to his last moments as "the last sands of life" and rejoices that his ashes will be "bone abroad upon/ The winds of heaven, and scatter'd into air" (*BMW* 1016-17; *Sardanapalus* V.i.404; 477-8). Indeed, Sardanapalus chooses fire as his instrument of death because it is an

...absorbing element,

Which most personifies the soul as leaving

The least of matter unconsumed before

Its fiery workings.... (V.i.433-6)

As Roderick Beaton has noted, Byron's plans for cremating Shelley and Williams in 1822 echo the death of Sardanapalus by fire, and Byron's remarks on cremation on this and another occasion shed light on the significance of death by fire in the play (110). Within days of the death of his mother and several friends, Byron praised the Roman ritual of cremation and, fearful of decomposition, declared that he could not "strip the features of those I have known of the fleshly covering even in Idea without a hideous sensation" (Qtd. in Beaton 109). Alluding to Shelley and Williams' decomposed bodies when they were disinterred for cremation, Byron wrote in Canto IX of *Don Juan* that smiling death

...strips from man that mantle (far more dear

Than even the tailor's) his incarnate skin,

White, black, or copper—the dead bones will grin. (12.94-6; Beaton 112)

These images of bodies stripped of flesh as though it were clothing—with the second passage in particular suggesting the story of Hercules and Nessus—evoke the threat of changeable form as hideous disfiguration that hangs over *Cain*, *The Deformed Transformed*, and *Sardanapalus*. Sardanapalus' choice of purification by fire can then be seen as a means of attenuating the horrors of disfiguration by purging him as far as possible of grotesque matter: although his form would still break apart, Sardanapalus envisions burning as the most spiritual of deaths because it leaves “the least of matter unconsumed” and allows him to scatter “into air.”

This notion of the destruction of matter to release spirit also appears in Canto XI *Don Juan*, where, in a critique of Bishop Berkley's theory that “there was no matter” (I.i), Byron's narrator declares:

...I would shatter
Gladly all matters, down to stone or lead,
Or adamant, to find the World a spirit,
And wear my head, denying that I wear it. (I.5-8)

What is satirical in *Don Juan*—theologues that deny matter in favor of spirit—becomes the subject of darker conflict in *Sardanapalus*, where burning matter into dust appears to the protagonist to be the only means of escaping its mutations, but with no possibility of a spiritual afterlife. This skepticism aligns with Byron's doubts about the immortality of the soul. In *Detached Thoughts*, Byron writes that while inclined to materialism in philosophy, Christian Materialism struck him as “deadly.” The idea of the resurrection of the body without the soul, he continues, is a demonic one: “The devil's in it—if after

having had a Soul—(as surely the Mind or whatever you call it—is)—in this world we must part with it in the next—even for an Immortal Materiality; —I own my partiality for Spirit” (*BMW* 1017; see page 10 note 8 above). This fear of a material rather than a spiritual resurrection helps account for the darkly messianic tone of “Buried and raised again” in the account of Sardanapalus’ dream of a “chaos of all loathsome things” (IV.i.159-61). In both cases, the source of anxiety is the possibility of living on not as an immortal soul but as changeable matter; of living on as something *other*, and of being deformed by being transformed, like Arnold or the Pre-Adamites in *Cain*. While in *Detached Thoughts* Byron raises and rejects the idea of existence as a disfiguring struggle from chaos to conformity, preferring the notion of a “creator” to that of a “fortuitous concourse of atoms,” in *Cain* and *The Deformed Transformed* he makes drama a testing ground for the materialist hypothesis (*Major Works* 1017). In *Sardanapalus*, meanwhile, Byron explores cyclical creation and destruction as both a metaphysical and a socio-historical phenomenon, founded upon a “fortuitous concourse” of historical circumstance that cyclically creates and destroys individuals and societies.

The individual powerlessness implied by this “fortuitous concourse of atoms”—or “dance of figures” in Auerbach’s words—demonstrates Byron’s skepticism about his contemporaries’ belief in the possibility of fashioning oneself or society anew. Having relinquished some of his earlier idealism, Byron was writing *Sardanapalus* and Canto XI of *Don Juan* in the wake of bewildering historical shifts as well as his own failure to effect political change (Kelsall 50). Rather than imagine revolution as the purposeful building of a utopia (Sardanapalus’ “green spot amidst desert centuries”), Byron depicts it as

continual flux and chaos (IV.i.513). In this context, Byron personifies the rapid changes of the age in the figure of the dandy so frequently identified with ephemerality in contemporary writing. Whereas the dandy's ascendancy had promised new modes of self-determination, his disappearance made him a mirror image of the vagaries of historical circumstance. Byron's own situation likely contributed to his skepticism about Sardanapalus' ability to refashion himself or his society. By 1816 Byron's fame and the image of himself he had crafted, aided his publisher John Murray as well as changes in commercial print culture, had soured into infamy. The fashion for Byron ended as suddenly as it had begun. The fickle mob having turned against him, he left his London home for the Continent amid the jeers of an angry crowd, a moment that could well have influenced the image of the revolutionaries closing in on the palace in *Sardanapalus* (Stott 3-4). Following such rapid reversals of fortune on global and individual levels, it makes sense for Byron to depict in *Sardanapalus* not a world being remade by idealistic reformers, but one yielding to universal flux and descending into chaos. While Martin Priestman observes that the Byron-Shelley circle struggled to reconcile "their twin devotions to political activism and a Lucretian materialism which enjoined apolitical retreat from a world so vulnerable to physical dissolution," Byron's depiction of revolution in *Sardanapalus* suggests he saw political agitation as another form of "physical dissolution" (298). The mob in *Sardanapalus* are hoarding "wolves" aided by a violent storm, and the revolution is thus driven by raw energy more than a rational program of reform. Spelling the end of a centuries-old empire, the rebels' victory represents another phase in the cyclical destruction and recreation of the world envisioned by Byron.

Although Byron announces in the “Preface” to *Sardanapalus* his project of restoring “the law of literature” and of developing a classical dramatic architecture, his play ultimately stages a descent into a political and aesthetic lawlessness as a consequence of the motion of figures that are meant to regulate a chaotic universe. Drama itself, as Byron acknowledges elsewhere, is associated with transience, and so an apt medium for depicting the fickle man of fashion and the world of flux he inhabits. D’Aurevilly grouped the dandy with “the orator, the great actor, the conversationalist, and all those wits who speak by the body to the body,” leaving no trace of their art (50). In Canto XI of *Don Juan*, the narrator ends his lament for the dissolution of the recent past by urging Juan:

But ‘Carpe diem,’ Juan, ‘Carpe, carpe!’
To-morrow sees another race as gay
And transient, and devoured by the same harpy.
‘Life’s a poor player,’—then play out the play,
Ye villains!’ (86.681-5).

In this context, the catachresis of the “carpe diem” mandate enjoins Juan to “seize” or “gather” what is by definition ungraspable: the transient age. The narrator then cites lines from *Macbeth* (combined with lines from *1 Henry IV*) in which *Macbeth* declares that

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing. (V.v.24-28)

Following Shakespeare in comparing life to an actor who spends a brief hour onstage, Byron once again associates death with mutability, in this case making the moving art of drama a metaphor for life's transient figures. In his *System of Oratory* (1759), John Ward traces the history of the word "Figure" to the stage, "where the different habits and gestures of the actors, suitable to the several characters they sustained, were called by the Greek σχήματα, and by the Latins *figurae*.... Now as the habits and gestures of our bodies are in a manner infinitely variable, so it is plain that the different forms of speech are almost innumerable" (33). In *Sardanapalus*, Byron foregrounds this relationship between drama and the constant motion and variety of figures, depicting a world in flux through dynamic mirroring and the metonymic implication of the protagonist in a shifting web of associations with various ornamental "props." In the end these accouterments of a decorous age are melted down into an undifferentiated mass along with the bodies of the king and his concubine, returning matter to its origins. As Beaton observes, this death by burning evokes the legendary phoenix and renewal by fire (Byron saw himself as a snake that had "sloughed off its old, burnt skin" when he renewed his commitment to revolution), but precisely what new figures will arise from the ashes remains unclear, and it is doubtful from Byron's representation of them that the revolutionaries will build a better society than the one they destroy. This suspenseful conclusion is aptly captured by the last image Byron offers in the play. In spite of the unities, *Sardanapalus* ends with an uncompleted action: "As Myrrha springs forward to throw herself into the flames, the Curtain falls" (V.i). Thus, in the last moments of the play, Byron depicts a character in the

midst of an action whose conclusion the audience infers but never sees, embodying the suspense entailed by a world of figures in perpetual motion.

CONCLUSION

The preceding chapters have shown that the relationship between Romanticism and classical rhetoric is one of continuity and difference. For Rousseau and Wordsworth, the notion of rhetoric as an organizing principle—the “dress” or “ornament” that produced an orderly civilization—was complicated by the ways in which they saw their own civilizations tipping in favor of chaos rather than *kosmos* because of the accelerating pace of cultural change. Instead of producing an orderly universe, the organizing structures of civilization seemed to be engaged in an arbitrary and unending process of transformation. In response, they proposed the fiction of a paradisiacal point of origin in which human intercourse was characterized by transparency, simplicity, and permanence. Yet they consistently encounter and foreground in their rhetoric the difficulties involved in imagining and articulating such a fiction using the very modes of expression they identify as disfiguring. In their writing, that ideal can only be glimpsed in fleeting moments through the deforming movements of language, broadly conceived as the structuring principles of civilized society. Even in moments when they reduce language as far as possible or remain silent—Wordsworth’s deference to the “naked name” of Shakespeare as a sufficient epitaph, or Rousseau’s refusal to “figure” before the king—those gaps or silences remain discursive and take on varying meanings precisely as interruptions of discourse. As one of the driving forces of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, Rousseau wrote prophetically of the ways in which cultural determination continually impaired any efforts to move beyond it and ascend to “naked” or “transparent” forms of expression. Meanwhile, Wordsworth wrote in the wake of the

French Revolution, its violent turns, and the global warfare it sparked, and therefore confronted an even more acute sense of cultural acceleration and a feeling of living in an increasingly crowded, globalized, and commercialized world whose ordering principles had proved forces of chaos. In this context, the reliability of language seemed as important as it was precarious.

Byron rebelled against these Wordsworthian and Rousseauvian ideas by resorting to older models of social and literary decorum. Goethe reportedly described him as “neither antique nor romantic, but like the present day itself”: he straddled two worlds, flouting classical decorum while maintaining its importance as the architecture of literary expression (Eckermann 211). He identified Wordsworth and others who adopted the “cant” of nature as babblers who had rejected articulate language and favored a chaotic uniformity that rendered the world illegible. While Wordsworth and Rousseau renounced the analogy of language as the “dress” of thought, Byron attempted to distinguish between rooted customary dress and arbitrary modern fashion as models for literary language. He sharply judged the ways in which the idea of natural simplicity had itself become a transient fashion among others. However, as his dramas demonstrate, the distinction between the figures that organize the world and those that throw it into chaos was a center that could not hold, particularly in light of Byron’s philosophy of the universe as being caught in an endless cycle of destruction and re-creation. His dramas therefore depict characters in a state of flux, who are continually being deformed by being transformed. In *Sardanapalus* in particular, Byron brings these ideas to bear on the historical and material conditions of life at the turn of the nineteenth century, displacing

those conditions onto an ancient tale. Through the figure of a dandified emperor who makes a mockery of once-meaningful symbols like the scepter and the sword and thereby brings down an empire, Byron confronts the ways in which older models of social organization had been diminished while newer models remained terrifyingly unknown.

In the English tradition, Milton is an important mediating figure between Classic and Romantic. In associating figure with fallenness and developing the character of Satan as a masterful orator worthy of Athens or Rome, Milton articulated a complex discourse of clarity and anti-rhetoric that Wordsworth would adopt in some of his early work. The paradigm of paradise and fall—Miltonic for Wordsworth and Calvinist for Rousseau—provided the Romantics with an important model for constructing an imaginary utopia of transparency and simplicity that could serve to accentuate the disfiguring nature of the social in an era of radical change. Yet by contrast with Milton, Wordsworth and Rousseau emphasized the confusion between paradise and the post-lapsarian world, and the ways in which any idea of paradise was overlaid with the irremovable veil of lapsarian thought and language. For Byron, meanwhile, Satan served as an important figure of protean transformation and opposition, who crystallizes the instability of “figure” as an organizing principle. As I argue in Chapter 4, Byron displaces these qualities onto human characters closely associated with the “satanic.”

Throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to demonstrate why the notion of “fashion” was a nexus allowing the Romantics, as well as Milton, to think through the relationship between meaning and expression. Wordsworth, Rousseau, and Byron understood that the classical analogy of language as the “dress” or “ornament” of thought

was, among similar kinds of comparisons, only a provisional and unstable means of giving shape to a vexed philosophical question. At the same time, they, like classical rhetors, identified “dress” as the visible exterior of civilization: an order of signs, like a language, that gave comprehensible form to social life, and so served as a useful comparison. Because of the way the fashion system had developed, that comparison had become a largely negative one for writers living in the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wordsworth and Rousseau in particular were anxious to disentangle poetic language from other social sign systems lest it become trammled by the same historical forces that produced “rapid successions of material objects” enhancing the sense of cultural acceleration (Campbell 133). For them, sartorial fashion and fashionable life were the most immediate signs of cultural change, hierarchy, confusion, and artifice. “Fashion” more broadly conceived included any ephemeral cultural phenomenon that produced temporary trends. The book trade, which I do not discuss at length in this project, was one of the important ways in which fashion and commercial culture impinged upon literary language. Advances in print technology could produce a “fashion” for a particular author or style of writing and make reading into a form of consumption like any other in a commercial society. The related phenomenon of celebrity could likewise create a vogue for writers like Rousseau and Byron, spawning imitations and superficial adoptions of their key ideas. Broadly conceived, fashion became the “other” against which writers struggled to define literary language.

The texts in which I have tracked the fate of the classical analogy of language as the “dress” of thought come from a wide range of genres, including epic and narrative

poetry (*Paradise Lost* and the *Prelude*), prose argument (the “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads* and the *Letter to Murray*), drama (*Sardanapalus*, *Cain*, and the *Deformed Transformed*), and the non-genre of autobiography (Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and *Essays Upon Epitaphs*). While excluded from this study, novels written around 1800 also provide a fruitful ground for examining the ways in which dress and other “ornaments” operate as emblems of a fundamentally incoherent modernity. For example, the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe and Mathew “Monk” Lewis abound with mysterious hooded and cloaked figures and use disguise and misdirection as plot devices sometimes seen as vulgar or lacking in finesse. In examining the relationship between Gothic and Romantic, Jerrold E. Hogle identifies the Gothic as a “rejected ancestor” that keeps haunting English Romanticism. He argues that the Gothic

...combines different symbolic orders (such as official Christianity and folk superstition) in ways that call attention to the incompatibilities, just as new critics later feared, *and* that this mode forces divergent styles together so much that it points up its own constructed (or ‘manufactured’) quality, of the exaggerated surfaces of its words and images (its figures), rather than leading the reader transparently through them to clear ideas and objects. The result for Coleridge is the absence of a unified ‘order of nature’ in Gothic works. (200-201)

In these ways, Hogle contends, the Gothic violates the aesthetic that the Romantics would develop of modes of expression that harmonize the artificial and the natural. The Gothic “reinforces the distance between its figures and their possible points of reference to the point that the ‘depth’ or associations behind any surface recede behind the

immediate sign rather than being unified with it” (201). In light of my reading of how Romantic writers like Wordsworth and Rousseau also foreground the discrepancy between figure and point of reference and the impossibility of transcending these discrepancies, it would be revealing to examine images of dress and disguise—particularly hollow images—as forbears of the troublesome aesthetic of “nakedness” with which the Romantics contend.

The novels of Jane Austen engage with similar questions in a very different style. *Persuasion* lives up to the promise of its title by foregrounding forms of rhetorical persuasion as they align with the material aesthetics of different classes at a transitional moment in British history. As Mary DeForest has shown, classical influences are very strong in this novel, which retells the story of the *Odyssey* in an inverted, “anti-heroic” way, focusing on the small and the domestic rather than the epic and historical. Another way in which the *Odyssey* weighs upon *Persuasion* is through the epic poem’s interest in storytelling, persuasion, and sometimes life-saving verbal ruses. Odysseus’ epithet of “polytropos” or the “many-minded man” in fact encodes the Greek word “trope,” indicating the linguistic “turns” of figure and narrative. An early scene in *Persuasion* sees the dandified Sir Walter Elliot (whom a plain-spoken, hard-bitten sailor later calls “a dressy man”) at the center of a group of characters who are attempting to persuade him to reduce his expenses now that extravagance has driven him to the brink of ruin. The proposed method of doing so is to let his house to a navy man returning home during what would be later known as the hundred days before Napoleon’s escape from exile and the resumption of war between England and France. In Austen’s comic rendition of the

scene, she highlights various methods of discourse and what they reveal about class at a precarious moment in history. Sir Walter Elliot is the embodiment of empty rhetoric, stating his objections to the navy in an apparently structured and logical form (“it is in two points offensive to me. First...; and secondly...”) and with anecdotal illustration. Yet these rhetorical structures frame specious and frivolous reasons for objecting to the navy: that it brings men of obscure birth into distinction, and that it disfigures them with lines and wrinkles and grey hairs. In this instance, Sir Walter’s preoccupation with appearance lines up with his observance of rhetorical forms lacking an underlying logic, making him a caricature of aristocratic men and a figure for increasingly precarious symbols of power. Meanwhile, the middle-class lawyer Mr Shepherd lives up to his name by attempting to “shepherd” Sir Walter toward the proposed solution through obsequious circumlocutions that make for lengthy dialogue but say little. In these and other ways, Austen, like Wordsworth, Rousseau, and Byron, invokes classical ideas about rhetorical form that take on different meanings at a particular juncture in history.

In light of the supposition that the rise of Romanticism and nationalist movements caused the death of rhetoric, these readings give renewed attention to the relationship between the Classic and the Romantic, and suggest the benefits of charting the posthumous fate of classical rhetoric through the Romantic period and beyond. As the works of Wordsworth, Rousseau, and Byron illustrate, classical analogies for how figures relate to thought and to the things of the world resurface in a variety of ways, and their mutations can serve as an index of how historical change comes to bear on aesthetic notions. My attention to the emergence of “fashion” as a threat to the literary thus offers a

way of thinking about the relationship of formal structure to what Jane Stabler calls “the shaping forces of history” (2). In the texts discussed in this study, the “shaping forces of history” coalesce in “fashion” as it made ineluctably visible the constant motion of the world and the difficulties involved in negotiating stable meanings.

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