

**THE BIRD IS THE FEELING: ROMANTIC NATURAL HISTORY AND ITS
SUBJECTS**

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“The Bird is the Feeling: Romantic Natural History and its Subjects” argues that Romantic natural history writers and the nonhuman objects of their work are mutually constitutive subjects. Unlike eighteenth and later nineteenth-century forms of natural history that consider the natural world as a set of discrete objects and species available for collection and cataloguing, the texts considered in this dissertation are primarily concerned with unexpected encounters and fleeting natural phenomena. The writers addressed express these unrepeatable encounters as a form of natural history that does the work of designating significant subjects and articulating their presence within distinct, subjectively constituted and construed environments. In reading the “natural history” journals, letters, and poems of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Henry David Thoreau, this dissertation frames the Romantic turn to nature not as a turn away from sociality and history but towards alternative forms of both. Intervening in a number of established strands of Romantic literary criticism and ecocriticism that read the Romantic speaking subject’s treatment of the natural world as primarily an instrument of ego-formation, “The Bird is the Feeling” celebrates the largely private, idiosyncratic efforts of Romantic authors to consider nature, history, and subjectivity in both human and nonhuman terms.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Weiger has a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her academic interests include ecocriticism, post-humanism, and transatlantic nineteenth-century literature.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my earliest and very dearest mentor, Faye Amo, who provided my first bed and accompanied me all the way here.

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INTRODUCTION

The “New” Nature Writing

In 2008 the literary magazine *Granta* published an issue of commissioned articles on what it called “The New Nature Writing.” In his opening letter to the issue, editor Jason Cowley described what the publishers were looking for:

[W]e were interested less in what might be called old nature writing—by which I mean the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer—than in writers who approached their subject in heterodox and experimental ways. We also wanted the contributions to be voice-driven, narratives told in the first person, for the writer to be present in the story, if sometimes only bashfully. The best new nature writing is also an experiment in forms: the field report, the essay, the memoir, the travelogue. If travel writing can often seem like a debased and exhausted genre, nature writing is its opposite: something urgent, vital and alert to the defining particulars of our times.¹

For Cowley, the defining particulars of our time are, to a great extent, determined by our existence in a kind of ecological end-times: “We know how our world is changing and what is being lost and yet we are powerless to prevent the change.” As such, many of the pieces collected in the issue can be read as elegies, and Cowley’s new nature writing is prospectively nostalgic: innovative in its forms and immediate in its perceptions, but wistful in its themes. Though compelling, Cowley’s description of the new nature writing as heterodox, experimental, urgent and “alert to the defining particulars” of the times makes it sound less like “new” nature writing than it does like an old form of nature writing—not the “lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer” Cowley imagines, perhaps, but rather romantic natural history writing (a new tradition of its own). Romantic natural history writing—characterized by its heterodoxy, its

¹ Jason Cowley, “Editor’s Letter,” *Granta 102: The New Nature Writing*, Summer, 2008, unpaginated, <<http://www.granta.com/Magazine/102/Editors-Letter>>.

necessary experimentalism, its attendance to particulars, and its first-person (sometimes bashful) narrators—was also responsive to a world that seemed to be both radically expanding and slipping away, and to an experience of time as both unimaginably extensive and finite. For the old nature writing as for the new, the only possible approach to this world is one that emphasizes the subjective, the particular, the momentary. As Cowley puts it (in terms that once again echo romantic evocations of nature as much as they do contemporary ones), this writing is “about the discovery of exoticism in the familiar, the extraordinary in the ordinary. [It is] about new ways of seeing.”

This dissertation reads new ways of seeing and describing in the journals, letters and poems of Dorothy and William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Henry David Thoreau. Beyond simply observing and describing features of natural objects, these “natural histories” record the meetings of mutually constitutive subjects, through which the unique forms of subjectivity available to natural phenomena inform and are informed by those available to the romantic poet, diarist, and naturalist. In this introduction, I present a brief sketch of natural history writing in the late eighteenth century before describing the preoccupation of romantic naturalists with unexpected encounters and fleeting natural phenomena. The writers I address in this dissertation express these unrepeatably encounters, I argue, as a form of natural history that does the work of designating significant subjects and articulating their presence within distinct, subjectively constituted and construed environments. This introduction also implicitly tracks the evolution of the dissertation project, which moved from an interest in the practice of natural history to an exploration of the ways it encouraged resonant and distinct forms of attention to and engagement with natural phenomena during the romantic period. Each chapter investigates the particular legacy of these forms of attention and engagement in a different author.

Natural History Notes

The title of Ashton Nichols' anthology *Romantic Natural Histories* is instructive in two ways: it periodizes natural history and, in its plural form, it suggests that natural history is not a simply categorized, or single, art (or science).² Characterized by a resistance to systemization and a sharply particularized, yet deeply contextualized, form of engagement with the material world, romantic natural history writing is distinguished by its multifariousness: sometimes private, sometimes public, sometimes amateur, sometimes professional, it participates in a number of different literary genres, often in the space of a single text. Common to natural history writing is a lively and diverse form of viewing, thinking, and writing about the local, like that inaugurated by Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* has shaped the approach of countless writer-naturalists in England and America since its publication. White's letters, written over the course of fourteen years, developed natural history as a material literary practice. At the heart of this practice is a commitment to authentic engagement with and faithful description of the natural world, with widely varying degrees of contextualization of the insects and flowers it describes. The witnessing of a particular flower or a particular animal can constitute an event in itself in romantic natural history writing. The natural history journals and letters that are the most frequent records of these events highlight their embedment in diurnal and seasonal patterns while nevertheless marking them as singular not only within the order of natural things, but also within the order of their observers' lives.

Close, sustained contact with a particular locale became one of the hallmarks of natural history after White's *Natural History of Selborne* (published for the first of many times in 1789). White opens his "Advertisement" to the letters of *Selborne* by explaining his conception of

² *Romantic Natural Histories: William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, and Others*, ed. Ashton Nichols (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004).

“*parochial history*” as consisting of “natural productions and occurrences as well as antiquities,” and he urges “stationary men” to “pay some attention to the districts on which they reside” and to “publish their thoughts respecting the objects that surround them.”³ Although some of the naturalists who published their letters, journals, and observations thereafter expressed reservations about the usefulness of their subjective observations of limited areas, most also rested their claims to authority upon their regular engagement with the world in their immediate vicinity. In *Country Rambles in England, or, The Journal of a Naturalist* John Knapp testifies to the influence of White’s *Selborne* on his own confidence in this regard: “[*Selborne*] early impressed on my mind an ardent love for all the ways and economy of nature, and I was thereby led to the constant observance of the rural objects around me. Accordingly, reflections have

³ Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 3. “Parochial” natural history—practiced without specialized knowledge or terminology—had many advocates during this period. In his 1777 “Essay On the Application of Natural History to Poetry” John Aikin notes that his use of the term “naturalist” is not “confined to the adept in systems and proficient in names,” but is “intended to comprise every one who surveys natural objects with a searching and distinguishing eye; whether he consider them singly, or as parts of a system, whether he call them by their trivial or learned appellations.” (Printed by W. Eyres for J. Johnson, 1777), 48. As Theresa M. Kelley and Lynn L. Merrill point out in their studies of taxonomies, botanists and naturalists throughout the nineteenth-century made a practice of citing both the Linnaean and the “vulgar” or common names of plants and animals, usually by presenting the different appellations side by side, and sometimes by attaching indices to the back of their texts (Theresa M. Kelley, “Romantic Exemplarity,” in *Romantic Science: The Literary Forms of Natural History*, ed. Noah Heringman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). Lynn L. Merrill, *The Romance of Victorian Natural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)). Some naturalists and poets, however, lobbied for the common names of plants and animals as especially evocative in a way systematic taxonomies of naming could never be. In his 1829 *Country Rambles*, John Knapp praised the “names given of old to plants,” for the soothing effect they might have on the sick: “What pleasure it must have afforded the poor sufferer in body or in limb, what confidence he must have felt for relief, when he knew that the good neighbor who came to bathe his wounds, or assuage his inward torments, brought with him such things as ‘all-heal, break-stone, bruise-wort, gout-weed, fever-few’ . . . why, their very names would almost charm away the sense of pain!” And while John Clare’s most famous defense for using the common names of plants in his poetry was that he thought these best because he knew no others, elsewhere in his letters and journals he makes compelling arguments for the identity of local plants and flowers as bound up with their local, commonly used names, an issue I take up in chapter three.

arisen, and notes been made, such as the reader will find them.”⁴ For Knapp, *Selborne* leads to a love of nature, which leads to a “constant observance” of surrounding objects, which leads seamlessly to the spontaneous production of reflections, their inevitable rendering in notes, and the reading of these notes by readers who find them. Knapp thus lightly glosses with an air of inevitability a notion of natural history as a material practice that leads to the production of literary texts.⁵

In practice, field naturalists often split their time between observation and the all-important collection of *specimens*, which Anne Larsen defines in “Equipment for the Field” as:

objects of natural origin that had been prepared in ways that allowed them to be examined, compared to similar objects and described in a concise, informative manner. They were manageable pieces of the natural world that could be bought, sold, exchanged, transported, catalogued, displayed and consulted by many people. Specimens were not, however, natural objects: they were artificial things designed and constructed by naturalists to answer various scientific needs.⁶

⁴ John Knapp, *Country Rambles in England, or, The Journal of a Naturalist* (Phinney: Buffalo, 1853). Digitized by the Canadian Libraries’ Internet Archive, not paginated.

⁵ It might seem odd that Knapp’s account of the production of his natural history notes omits a period of reflection or systemization, during which the naturalist might be expected to weigh evidence, conduct experiments, etc. However, Knapp’s account is in keeping with the emerging separation in the nineteenth century of “field naturalists” (who spent their days combing beaches and woods and describing their encounters with natural phenomena) and “closet naturalists” (who spent them indoors, contemplating specimens and producing reports). At least, this is how Georges Cuvier hoped naturalists would see the distinction. Cuvier was dismayed by the tendency of amateur naturalists, or field naturalists, to keep the interest of their readers in mind. He argued that the naturalist (at least, the professional one) had a right to bore his readers in the interests of scientific utility. But as Jean-Marc Drouin and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent point out in their essay “Nature for the People,” the textual productions of amateur and professional naturalists were typically quite similar. The work of professional natural historians was as likely to contain narratives as the work of popular ones, and popular texts were scarcely less detailed and capacious than their professional counterparts. Despite this similarity in the textual productions of field and closet naturalists, the division between them widened as a response to the emergence of professional positions for natural historians at museums and universities, and to the rapidly expanding, increasingly global field available to naturalists for exploration, which necessitated a division of labour.

⁶ Anne Larsen, “Equipment for the Field,” *Cultures of Natural History*, 358. Larsen goes on in her article to describe the various “guidebooks” for beginners to natural history such as John Lettsom’s *Naturalist’s and Traveller’s Companion* (1774) and Edward Donovan’s *Instructions for Collecting and Preserving Various Subjects of Natural History* (1799) which provide detailed, stomach-churning accounts of how to skin and protect small dead animals from putrefaction.

Specimen collecting is indeed one of White's main activities in *The Natural History of Selborne* (readers acquainted with his reputation for benevolence toward all creatures might be surprised by the number of death warrants for certain birds that White distributes to his neighbours). White frequently shuttled such specimens, sometimes somewhat "mutilated" (for which he apologized) through the mail for the benefit of his correspondents. Not all natural history exchanges were so time-sensitive in this particular regard. While White and others did send decomposing specimens through the mail, they also sent lively accounts of specimens of a different sort: descriptions of encounters with natural phenomena that were differently time-sensitive.

Something More than Natural: Natural History as Phenomenology

A route of evanescence
With a revolving wheel;
A resonance of emerald,
A rush of cochineal;
And every blossom on the bush
Adjusts its tumbled head,—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy morning's ride.⁷

Over the course of several years, Emily Dickinson sent the above poem to about six different recipients (the poem was sometimes titled, sometimes not). In two of the letters, she prefaces the lines with a short, suggestive query or phrase that offers up the poem as an object or specimen of sorts. For the version she sent to Sarah Tuckermann, she included the question "I send you only a Humming Bird—/ Will you let me add a few Jasmin in a few days?" To Mabel

⁷ Numbered 1463 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961).

Todd, she wrote: “I cannot make an Indian Pipe but please accept a Humming Bird—.”⁸ Both notices play on the poem’s status as the representation of a hummingbird, a bird whose flight—figured so enigmatically in the poem and in its very name (“*humming*” *bird*)—could never make it through the mail. Instead, the hummingbird Dickinson introduces is a live object in motion along “A Route of Evanescence / With a revolving wheel—,” its very color (that brilliant cochineal) registered as a “rush.” Dickinson’s poem thus presents not merely the representation of an object, but rather a representation of its movement and its lively being.

As Judith Pascoe explains in the opening chapter of her book *A Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors*, this rare thing—the humming bird in motion—was a much coveted object of naturalists in the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. Native only to the Americas, hummingbirds had a special allure for British naturalists, who usually encountered only their skins, stuffed tight with cotton, sometimes fastened with a bit of glue to the stem of a branch for exhibition purposes (the preservation of these skins was itself a significant advancement, as Pascoe points out; new practices in taxidermy made it possible). The brilliant colors of the stuffed hummingbirds were still bright, but they lacked the “Resonance of Emerald” Dickinson describes, created by the reflection of light on a moving object (though, in his display for the London Zoological Gardens in 1851, John Gould attempted a rotating case of the stuffed birds, hoping that the light might catch their wings as they passed, mimicking this effect). For Pascoe, whose book explores “resonant objects” and cultures of collecting during the romantic period, the stuffed hummingbirds that were the stars of nineteenth century cabinets epitomize “the romantic pursuit of perfect and permanent beauty . . . intertwined with collectors’ materialistic pursuits,” which were realized only in “a diminished fashion—not

⁸ Notes to the poem in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

levitating in glittery splendor, but stuck on a branch or stiffly prone in a cabinet drawer.”⁹

The “stiffly prone” humming bird might seem emblematic not only of collecting practices during the romantic period, but also of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century natural history practices more widely. Indeed, with its traditions of cataloguing and display, of categorization and accounting, the dead bird is an apt emblem of one kind of natural history during this period, but Dickinson’s “rush of cochineal”—the humming bird in motion—is perhaps a figure for a different kind. Unlike forms of natural history that considered the natural world as a set of discrete objects and species available for collection and cataloguing, many romantic writers and naturalists were interested in cataloguing—through extended written description—unrepeatable events and experiences in the natural world. The flight of the humming bird (ephemerality embodied) could not be reproduced, but it could be described, and many romantic writers and naturalists (like Dickinson) lingered over these descriptions, carefully recounting the fleeting appearance of natural phenomena in specific moments of encounter. This interest in phenomenality can be linked, perhaps, to the transition of romantic natural history from its early endeavours to catalogue natural objects in cabinets of curiosities and to account for the rapidly increasing number of known species of plants and animals on earth to a concern with their relationships within a system of uncertain bounds. During this period natural history became, as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it, “truly historical for the first time.”¹⁰ Like Mitchell, Tilottama Rajan links this shift to the discovery of fossils as documents of the history of nature, forms of “animal visibility” in Foucault’s words, that introduce “memory into nature, entwining future potential

⁹ Judith Pascoe, *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 52.

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, "Romanticism and the Life of Things: Fossils, Totems, and Images," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn, 2001), 175.

with the traces of trauma and loss.”¹¹ Naturalists began to gain a sense for the traces of earth’s past in its present forms and began reading these forms of “animal visibility” as documents of its non-anthropological history.¹²

This investment in the history of nature brought with it an appreciation for naturalists’ and writers’ own experiences in the field as history: natural history journals and poems of the romantic period read as histories of encounter, careful records of the fleeting appearance of particular phenomena in specific, unrepeatable moments that resist categorization. The enthusiasm of Romantic naturalist-writers for these moments is akin to what Rei Terada has named, in her recent book *Looking Away*, “phenomenophilia.” Terada defines phenomenophilia as the cultivation of “particularly ephemeral perceptual experiences” that “figure the possibility of fleeting relief from the pressure to endorse what Kant calls the world ‘as is.’”¹³ Terada’s phenomenophile lingers in object perception, “looking away at something too slight to present a demand—some wavering reflection or trick of light” about which one might only say that it is “not nothing.”¹⁴ Terada’s ideas are applicable to the “looking away” practiced by romantic writers and naturalists, who often linger in the space before, or beside, the determination of what a particular appearance “really” is, preferring instead the appearance as appearance. In this dissertation, I describe a version of romantic natural history that records the perception of natural phenomena that seem both unearthly and untimely. As Dorothy Wordsworth puts it, these

¹¹ Tilottama Rajan, “Spirit’s Psychoanalysis: Natural History, The History of Nature, and Romantic Historiography,” *European Romantic Review* Vol. 14 (2003) 189.

¹² For example, Charlotte Smith practices this kind of reading in *Beachy Head* in her speculation about the origins of “the strange and foreign forms / Of sea-shells.” In lines 370-90 (including a long footnote) Smith posits several different possibilities as rhetorical questions, preferring their open-endedness to the explanations attempted in the natural history books to which she had access. *Beachy Head*, in *Romanticism: an Anthology*, edited by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 131-32.

¹³ Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3-4.

¹⁴ Terada, 18.

episodes are "something more than natural."

A memorable instance of phenomenophilia appears in a 1775 letter to naturalist Daines Barrington sent by Gilbert White and published in *The Natural History of Selborne*. In the letter, White recalls a scene he witnessed one late summer day more than thirty years previous. Despite its distance in time, White recalls the scene vividly and at length:

I rose before daybreak: when I came into the enclosures, I found the stubbles and clover-grounds matted all over with a thick coat of cobweb, in the meshes of which a copious and heavy dew hung so plentifully that the whole face of the country seemed, as it were, covered with two or three setting-nets drawn one over another . . . As the morning advanced the sun became bright and warm . . . About nine an appearance very unusual began to demand our attention, a shower of cobwebs falling from very elevated regions, and continuing, without any interruption, till the close of the day . . . On every side as the observer turned his eyes might he behold a continual succession of fresh flakes falling into his sight, and twinkling like stars as they turned their sides towards the sun.¹⁵

In the first part of the letter above, White preserves the morning as visual fantasia. Though he acknowledges that the appearance of the land on the morning he remembers is due to an unusually heavy preponderance of cobwebs, he emphasizes the scene as a changing spectacle for "the observer" by figuring the webs alternately as nets, rain, snow and stars, all glittering in the sun on that particular morning; "Neither before nor after was any such fall observed." He reserves the remaining two short paragraphs of the letter for a reflection upon the production of gossamer by small spiders that is more in keeping with many of his other letters, but even then he cannot help but wonder why the spiders should have taken "*that day* such a wonderful aerial excursion." Throughout the letter, he "toggles" between a conception of the scene as a glittering and wonderful apparition and one as a rare, but explicable, illusion. The spectacle allows White the luxury of dwelling within an unusual appearance, without pressure to resolve or explain it. At the same time, White does not strenuously resist his consideration of the small spiders' whose

¹⁵ *Selborne*, 175-56.

handiwork produced the spectacle. The two considerations persist beside one another as distinct, but equally worthwhile, ways of observing and describing the phenomenon. In this dissertation, I argue that phenomenal appearances invite their observers to experiment with unusual ways of observing and describing. These unusual modes of observation and description afford, in turn, a glimpse of the infinite variety of ways of being (and of being a subject) in the world.

Natural History and its Subjects

This dissertation considers the multiple ‘subjects’ of Romantic natural history: the subjects observed, the subjects observing, and the nature of subjectivity itself. In emphasizing the subjects of natural history I take the focus off its objects, its potential objectification of nature, and the notion of objectivity itself. The literary forms of Romantic natural history I read in this dissertation instead bring to prominence the challenges of the observing subject and the difficulty of defining and describing natural subjects that refuse to stand still or to remain constant over time.¹⁶ These natural histories stage meetings between observing subjects and other nonhuman subjects that have taken up residence in the world. In considering these nonhuman others as themselves actors and subjects, the Wordsworths, Clare, and Thoreau create worlds that are not bifurcated along the lines of active subjects and inert, static objects. At the same time, these authors do not collapse the differences between themselves as subjects and the subjects they observe. Their natural histories are still very much about the lives of selves and the lives of others—variations on the “privacy of a life in nature” that Thoreau contemplates in “A

¹⁶ I provisionally define a subject in this dissertation as any being, thing, or place capable of asserting itself as an individual whose particular history and characteristics prevent its ever being entirely ‘subject’ to definition by any other.

Natural History of Massachusetts.”¹⁷

What Onno Oerlemans describes in *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* as the central paradox of the Romantic interest in the physical during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was also a central paradox of natural history: even as it was “spurred by advances in geology, biology, medicine, and travel, it led also to the contrasting awareness that the physical world was less comprehensible and more alien than [romantic authors] hoped it would be.”¹⁸ Conversely, natural history exposed the possibility that our sensory experiences, our emotions even, had naturalistic explanations common to all animated nature, a possibility that inspired a new sense of community between all beings (think of the human pleasure Wordsworth cannot help but see in the birds and twigs around him in “Lines written in early spring” and Coleridge’s “one Life within us and abroad”). But as John Berger points out in his essay “Why Look at Animals?” romantic natural history also heralded a new era of animal invisibility. “Until the 19th century,” he writes, “anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal,” but with the disappearance of animals in our daily lives and our acceptance of animals as objects apart from ourselves—without spirit, experience, and secrets—they became increasingly marginalized, increasingly irrelevant.¹⁹ In drawing the Romantic subject both further from and closer to its natural subjects, various forms of natural history

¹⁷ Privacy is key to the notion of human and non-human subjectivity I will develop in this dissertation. The notion that non-human creatures and even landscapes could cultivate privacy may subscribe to an anthropomorphic notion of subjectivity, but the varieties of privacy cultivated by these natural subjects, I argue, consists in forms of (non)communication, secrecy, and separateness specific to nonhuman others. This privacy is different from but related to that described by Pierre Hadot in *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*. In the essay, Hadot tracks the notion of a hidden or secret nature from Heraclitus’ aphorism, “What is born tends to disappear,” through Goethe, who believed that the veil of Isis serves not to hide, but to reveal, through a diffusion of transcendental light, the secrets of nature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006): 259.

¹⁸ Onno Oerlemans, *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

¹⁹ John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” *About Looking* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 11.

became agents of distance and proximity.

The writers and texts I engage in this study take this paradox as a keystone of their work, aiming to engage animals, plants, landscapes and ecosystems that seemed both more and less like ourselves than ever before (the more we discovered about the natural world the more we discovered our commonalities with it, but these discoveries necessitated the removal of nature from ourselves as an object of study and coincided with a period of decreased daily contact with nature). I argue that certain forms of romantic natural history strove to bring nature back into prominence for us by highlighting its distance, by emphasizing its most mysterious aspects, and by accepting that the terms of our engagement with it cannot be determined entirely by ourselves. They do this in part by entertaining the possibility that what we do not know about the natural world is key to its continued significance for us: it pulls us back to it, pursues us, and forces an engagement that, in Geoffrey Hartman's formulation, amounts at times to a "nature haunting" akin to that experienced by the boy of *The Prelude*, who is pursued by "huge and mighty Forms" in his dreams the night following his stealing of a boat.

Focusing on romantic natural objects as potential subjects allows me to develop a reading of the romantic "turn to nature," a movement I believe is neither a simple turn away from the problems of culture and history nor always an attempt to track the growth of the self (one's own personal history) in or through nature. The power and pervasiveness of these readings in romantic criticism has generated a conception of nature as either a screen for social concerns or a blank space for the formation or projection of the romantic subject/poet, resulting in widespread acceptance of Alan Liu's claim that there is no nature. While Liu means to refer to the fact that the nature of "nature" is culturally constructed, the belief that "there is no nature" also seems to betray an insensitivity to the existence of others and to nature as the NOT ME, what Emerson has

ranked as “all that is separate from us.”²⁰ In their journals and poems, romantic naturalists advance and recede from their object/subjects, recording their successes, failures, and encounters with forms of subjectivity no less strange (and active) than their own. In doing so, they necessarily reformulate their own power and significance as acting and observing subjects, and it is for this reason, I argue, that their natural histories are also personal histories.

Carriers of Significance: Nature, History, and Environment

In broadening the focus of natural history to include personal histories, I deliberately open up the potential of the word “natural.” My attempt to redefine the sense of nature in natural history is caught up in attempts by some ecocritics to eliminate the use of nature as a categorical term in favour of more precise, or at least less vexed, terms. Lawrence Buell, for example, prefers “literature of the environment” to nature writing, and Angus Fletcher and Timothy Morton prefer the “environment poem” and “ambient poetics,” respectively, to nature poetry or a poetics of nature. While I sympathize with their desire to do away with a problematic term and to practice ecocriticism and “Ecology Without Nature” (the title of Morton’s book), the idea of nature and the province of the natural are as suggestive as they are confounding.

Robert Pogue Harrison’s conceptualization of nature is perhaps most promising in helping reimagine “nature” in relation to natural history. In an essay on Wallace Stevens, “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” Harrison proposes that nature refer to the *relation* that emerges through the meeting of sense imagination and phenomenon (thus “nature” is

²⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry* edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 2001), 28.

wherever and whenever this meeting takes place).²¹ For Harrison, nature is a “correlative matrix” and nature is not one term of the correlation, but the correlation itself. Harrison’s specific goal is to identify this as an American form of nature where that correlation is always originary (between an American Adam and his Eden), but it resonates more generally for me with natural historical practices in which the meeting of sense imagination and phenomena is always felt to be in some sense originary (the meeting producing an instance of nature for the first and last time).

Harrison’s account of nature as a correlative matrix, as responsive to and defined through meetings of sense imagination with phenomena, resonates with more recent formulations of vitality and the environment by theorists including Jane Bennett (whose work I address in the second chapter) and Giorgio Agamben. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben discusses the work of early ecologist Jakob von Uexküll, who believes that “[n]o animal can enter into relation with an object as such.”²² As I discuss in chapter three (on John Clare’s understanding of creatures within distinct literary, historical, and natural contexts), Uexküll believes that no animal can enter into any such relation because there is no object *as such* or even any objectively fixed environment. Instead, Uexküll imagines an infinite variety of perceptual worlds. Each sensing creature has its own perceptual world, which is populated only by those things that are “carriers of significance” for it. These carriers of significance are not “objectively and factually isolated, but rather constitute a close functional—or, as Uexküll prefers to say, musical—unity with the animal’s receptive organs that are assigned to perceive the mark (*Merkogen*) and to

²¹ Robert Pogue Harrison, ““Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,”” *New Literary History*, 30.3 (1999), 661-73.

²² Uexküll, quoted in Giorgio Agamben’s *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 39.

react to it (*Wirkorgan*).”²³

Uexküll’s *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans* (a founding text of biosemiotics), includes many lengthy descriptive forays into a number of discrete animal worlds. In one, Uexküll describes a blind and deaf tick who awaits the arrival of her prey, signalled only by her registration of the scent of butyric acid given off by all animals. For the tick, the scent of butyric acid is a carrier of significance. The precise temperature of mammalian blood, and the texture of mammalian skin are others. These are, in fact, the only significant markers Uexküll believes the tick is capable of registering. Agamben comments that the tick is “united to these three elements in an intense and passionate relationship the likes of which we might never find in the relations that bind man to his apparently much richer world. The tick *is* this relationship; she lives only in it and for it.”²⁴ As Uexküll puts it, “[e]very subject spins out, like the spider’s threads, its relations to certain qualities of things and weaves them into a solid web, which carries its existence.”²⁵

Directly after his discussion of the tick and its environment (radically constrained in perceptual space and time from a human perspective), Uexküll reflects that “we comfort ourselves all too easily with the illusion that the relations of another kind of subject to the things of its environment play out in the same space and time as the relations that link us to the things of our human environment. This illusion is fed by the belief in the existence of one and only one world, in which all living beings are encased. From this arises the widely held conviction that there must be one and only one space and time for all living beings.”²⁶ Despite Uexküll’s belief

²³ *The Open*, 41.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁵ Jakob von Uexküll, *Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: with a Theory of Meaning*, translated by Joseph D. O’Neil (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 53.

²⁶ *Foray*, 54.

that all beings exist in separate environments with distinct experiences of space and time, his forays into the lives of others (“excursions in unknowable worlds”) demonstrate a willingness, even eagerness, to imagine inhabiting these environments and perspectives.

In a 2011 plenary speech for a conference on “Romanticism and Evolution,” Gillian Beer described a similar eagerness on the part of Charles Darwin to imagine a plant’s experience of time.²⁷ She referenced, in particular, notes for Darwin’s descriptions of the slow movements of tendrils, which he prepared for his study of “The Movements and Habits of Climbing Plants.” Beer was particularly taken with Darwin’s thirty-six hour study of the progress of a single tendril as it extended out to curl around a post, a progression Darwin painstakingly detailed. While Beer acknowledged that she could not be sure Darwin was present with the plant the entire thirty-six hours of its extension, she was nevertheless struck by his incredible and singular act of patience—his willingness to “subject himself to the temporality of the plant,” observing its unfolding, waiting patiently for its vegetative embrace of the post. Darwin, Beer memorably proposed, “accompanied the plant on its slow process through time.”

In the following chapters, I track this notion of an observer’s accompaniment of various creatures and natural phenomena through time and space. The challenge to that accompaniment arises out of the dissonance of human and nonhuman experiences of the world. For Agamben, this dissonance means that “the fly, the dragonfly, and the bee that we observe flying next to us on a sunny day do not move in the same world as the one in which we observe them, nor do they share with us—or with each other—the same time and the same space.”²⁸ Despite not sharing the same times and spaces, this dissertation suggests that there is nevertheless a sense in which

²⁷ Gillian Beer, “Plants, Analogy and Perfection: Loose and Strict Analogies,” *Romanticism and Evolution Conference*, University of Western Ontario, Canada, 12 May, 2011.

²⁸ *The Open*, 40.

we can accompany one another in the way Beer imagines—an accompaniment that implies as little as adjacency or coincidence, and as much as sympathy or love. If we take the meetings between sense imagination and phenomena, between receptive organs and carriers of significance, and between individual creatures with others as the “nature” in natural history, then natural history becomes, in effect, a record of encounter.²⁹

Against pervasive formulations of the natural world as a more or less unchanging background to our dynamic, human one, the versions of natural history I develop through readings of the Wordsworths, Clare, and Thoreau present a continually shifting social, environmental, and personal landscape where background and foreground are difficult to distinguish. These natural histories address the problem Sharon Cameron raises in *Writing Nature* of constructing a “history” of poetic images—images that change over time and with the perspective of an observer unable to perceive the same subjects in the same way as time passes.³⁰ I address the extent to which the natural histories of the Wordsworths, Clare, and Thoreau attempt to conserve their meetings of subjects as poetic images or as what Saree Makdisi has called, with reference to Wordsworth’s spots of time, “imagistic space-times that might . . . rescue from the backdrop of a developing landscape those frames or images that defy transformation through their ability to remain as images.”³¹ Though the natural histories I describe may catalogue these spots of time with some hope of their preservation, I do not believe their projects fit as neatly into conservationist models as Jonathan Bate has suggested in *The*

²⁹ According to Timothy Morton, this type of shifting natural history might be considered without nature: “Ecological thinking that was not fixated, that did not stop at a particular concretization of its object, would . . . be ‘without nature.’” *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 24.

³⁰ Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau’s Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 35.

³¹ Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

Song of the Earth. Over the course of this dissertation, I address the feasibility and value of various forms of conservation within the context of the natural histories I develop, which spring from meetings of subjects that can never be repeated and may only be partially catalogued, recorded, or represented.

I take my evaluation of the subjects of Romantic natural history as a unique opportunity not only to re-imagine the subjectivity of natural objects but also to revisit the Romantic observing subject, who has been both celebrated and maligned for his interiority. As Theresa Kelley points out in “Romantic Interiority and Cultural Objects,” Romantic interiority has been read negatively “as the guarantor of self-absorption or philosophical solipsism” and positively as the guarantor of the “freedom and difference from nature” achieved through the Kantian sublime.³² Depending upon our reading of the Kantian sublime and its portrayal in Romantic poetry, however, even this “positive” reading fails to redeem Romantic interiority because the freedom and difference from nature achieved is at the cost of the subjection of nature: as Frances Ferguson points out, “[t]he sublime . . . established nature as the instrument for the production of individuality.”³³ In my chapter on Clare especially, I undertake a re-evaluation of the role of nature in the sublime production of individuals and subjects, such that nature is not conceived as a mere instrument. This “ecological sublime”³⁴ might indeed be founded upon the possibility of natural objects as subjects; the “terror” Burke associated with the sublime may be connected to what Stanley Cavell has called the “terror of the independent existence of other

³² Theresa M. Kelley, “Romantic Interiority and Cultural Objects,” in *Romanticism and Philosophy in an Historical Age*, edited by Karen Weisman (August 1999) for the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, edited by Orrin N.C. Wang, web, accessed April 2008.

³³ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime* (New York, 1992), 130.

³⁴ Christopher Hitt, “Toward an Ecological Sublime,” *New Literary History*, 30.3 (1999), 603-23.

minds,” whether or not those minds are human.³⁵

The Bird is the Feeling

In *The Country and the City* Raymond Williams discusses a shift from what he calls the descriptive natural history of Gilbert White and other eighteenth-century naturalists to the rich lyricism of the Romantic poets, a shift he believes brought about the “green language” of Wordsworth and Clare. Williams’s emphasis is on the “lonely creative imagination” of the late eighteenth century poet, who sets out to transform through “his own natural perception and language” nature and man. In reading a verse of Clare’s on a lark, Williams describes the transformation the poet achieves through description as “the investment of nature with a quality of creation that is now, in its new form, internal; so that the more closely the object is described, the more directly, in a newly working language and rhythm, a feeling of the observer’s life is seen and known, and the bird *is* the feeling, in the created poem.”³⁶ Williams’s description of this transformation seems remarkable to me in its elegance and nuance, but it also seems unfortunate, presenting the bird as useful for little more than giving the poet back an image of himself.

Despite my reservations about this aspect of Williams’s argument, I remain invested in green language conceived somewhat differently—in the idea of a “newly working language and rhythm,” as Williams puts it, that might simultaneously evoke the life of a bird *and* the life of a feeling while avoiding the use of the bird as merely another disposable natural resource. This dissertation explores how the bird’s depiction in that green language might convey less a feeling

³⁵ Stanley Cavell, quoted in Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

³⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973), 133-34.

of the observer's life than a feeling of the shared, but dissonant, experience of life between bird and poet in a moment of fleeting encounter.

Chapters

My first chapter, “‘A love for things that have no feeling’: Dorothy Wordsworth’s Significant Others,” develops a theory of love as an ethical relation to human and nonhuman others. In readings of the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals, I explore the various ways in which Wordsworth is responsive to objects and things that seem to distinguish themselves to her, standing out from their surroundings to catch her attention as individuals worthy of careful and extended engagement. Through the terms of this engagement, a tree is not simply an elm tree but what she calls “a creature by its own self”; a waterfall not only stands “upright by itself,” but also is “its own self.” Drawing on the post-humanist discourse of authors including Donna Haraway, I identify these objects and things in Wordsworth’s work as “significant others.” I also propose that Wordsworth’s work is less about fixity or even the conservation of experience, as some readers have claimed, than it is about the evolution of ethical relationships between beings that are inter-subjectively constituted. In this chapter I bring the aesthetic and natural historical discourses of the Romantic period into conversation with current post-humanist and ecocritical ones, illuminating the ways in which Dorothy shapes herself as a writing subject in relation to nonhuman others.

William Wordsworth’s relation to a world he peoples largely with “rocks, and stones and trees” is the concern of a chapter entitled, “The Influence of Natural Objects: Wordsworth and the Poetry of Nature.” In readings of the two-part *Prelude* and poems from *Lyrical Ballads*, I consider the status of objects, things, animals, and immaterial natural phenomena such as echoes and reflections in Wordsworth’s poetry. Wordsworth’s own emphasis on the accidental

nature of these things—their role as everyday, “collateral objects,” quotidian and unremarkable parts of experience—might seem to suggest that the objects themselves are insignificant or interchangeable. However, while the objects and things that play roles in his poetry are not always remarkable in themselves, they are nevertheless vital, affective agents with the ability to speak to the poet through the passage of time, doubling and redoubling their affective power and vitality. Drawing on the complexity of Wordsworth’s treatment of agency, subjectivity, and responsiveness with regard to nonhuman creatures and things, I develop a reading of what political theorist Jane Bennett might call “vital materiality” in Wordsworth’s work. Against readings of Wordsworth’s work that focus on the steady ascent of Wordsworth’s imagination over natural objects, I engage moments in the poetry that dwell upon communications from the natural world that playfully engage, trouble, and disturb the poet as they miss their mark, fail to be transmitted, or are deeply reticent of interpretation.

My third chapter, “Shadows of Taste: John Clare’s Tasteful Natural History” argues that John Clare’s distinctive form of natural history is based upon a nuanced understanding of the tastes and instincts of creatures within shifting contexts and upon their presentation by a naturalist-poet Clare refers to in his poetry and natural history letters as the “man of taste.” My discussion differs from much work by Clare scholars inspired by John Barrell’s *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, and it also extends, complicates, and departs from ecocritical readings that foreground Clare’s rooted sense of self and place. Instead, I emphasize Clare’s sense of the fluidity of human and nonhuman subjects, arguing that “taste,” for Clare, concerns the sublime adaptation and persistence of literary and ecological communities through time, a “joyous heritage” of change in which all creatures share.

In my final chapter, “Natural History in a New Sense,” I read Henry David Thoreau’s

early natural history writing—including “The Natural History of Massachusetts” and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*—as an effort to come to terms with his brother’s death and to imagine the place of loss in natural histories of multi-layered time scales. I read the *Week*, in particular, as an attempt to weave together varied personal, national, anthropological and ecological histories that, despite unfolding along different timelines, are all a part of the evolving fabric of natural history. Together with readings of loss in Emerson’s essay “Experience” and Wordsworth’s sonnet “The world is too much with us,” this chapter explores environmental losses that are equally difficult to recognize and adequately experience.

CHAPTER 1

“A love for things that have no feeling:” Dorothy Wordsworth’s Significant Others

I would not circumscribe your love

Dorothy Wordsworth, “Loving & Liking: Irregular Verses
Addressed to a Child”³⁷

*Because truths we don’t suspect have a hard time
making themselves felt, as when thirteen species
of whiptail lizards composed entirely of females
stay undiscovered due to bias
against such things existing,
we have to meet the universe halfway.
Nothing will unfold for us unless we move toward what
looks to us like nothing: faith is a cascade.*

Alice Fulton, “Cascade Experiment”³⁸

The speaker of Dorothy Wordsworth’s poem “Loving & Liking: Irregular Verses Addressed to a Child,” “would not preach . . . Yet would . . . give some plain directions, / To guide your speech and your affections” (ll. 2-3). These directions concern the distinction we should make between “loving” the creatures we look at and “liking” the creatures we eat, but the larger concern of the poem is the bounds of love, which the speaker steadfastly refuses to draw:

“I would not circumscribe your love,” she says:

It may soar with the eagle and brood with the dove
May pierce the earth with the patient mole

³⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth, “Loving and Liking: Irregular Verses Addressed to a Child,” in *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, edited by Susan M. Levin (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2009). Levin notes that William published the poem in 1832, 1835, and 1836, and dated its composition 1832. Levin presents a working copy of the poem from Dorothy’s Commonplace Book, as well as the version presented in this chapter, which was published in 1836 with “Poems Founded on the Affections.”

³⁸ Alice Fulton, “Cascade Experiment,” *Powers of Congress* (Sarabande Books, 2001).

Or track the hedgehog to his hole
Loving & liking are the solace of life
They foster all joy, & extinguish all strife. (ll. 50-54)

The boundlessness of this love, I believe, reflects the natural history Dorothy develops in her Alfoxden and Grasmere journals. This form of natural history *describes* without *circumscribing* a series of appearances that are rarely classifiable and often something “more than natural.” I will begin by tracing out what Mary Ellen Bellanca has called a “lost context” for the journals—the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cultures of natural history—and then discuss the ways in which Wordsworth’s natural history is both more expansive and more peculiar than these.

I am particularly interested in investigating the ways in which Dorothy’s writing is not simply about nature, but is suffused by a concern to elaborate a polite relation to the environment that does not depend upon the static being of discrete living creatures or even upon herself as a static human subject. Instead, hers is “[a] love for things that have no feeling,” things that invite and sustain her attention through natural accidents that reveal them as other-worldly, something more than the sum of the parts that have distinguished them, including light, wind, and geographical situation.

Though Wordsworth’s life and writing have long been spoken of as relational (built upon her relationships to Grasmere, to William, to human neighbours and vagrants, and upon the physical relation of her body to the earth in walking and to house-hold objects during house-hold chores), few critics have considered her relationships to particular trees, sheep, and other natural appearances as meaningful in themselves. Although romanticists including Susan Levin and Anne Mellor have spoken of Wordsworth’s construction of herself as a subject in relation to the world generally and critics including Elizabeth Fay and John Worthen have written at length on the relation of her writing to William’s and Coleridge’s work, Dorothy’s relationship to her

environment—one that exhibits a finely developed environmental consciousness—has too rarely been specifically analyzed outside the discourse of the picturesque and sublime, despite general agreement that Wordsworth’s writing is not at its best when it most clearly strives to evoke these categories. Moreover, despite the prominence of nonhuman creatures and things in the journals, critical conversation tends to pool largely around Wordsworth’s homemaking, her relationship to her brother, and the marriage plot of the *Grasmere* journal, edging out Dorothy’s attention to birds, trees, sheep, and other nonhuman phenomena. I am interested in the ways Dorothy designates these things within the Grasmere landscape as what Donna Haraway has called “significant others.” Drawing on a variety of psychoanalytic, post-human, and vital materialist discourses, I read Dorothy Wordsworth’s remarkable ways of looking as an ethical praxis she might refer to as “love.”

The Naturalist’s Eye

In *Daybooks of Discovery*, a study of eighteenth and nineteenth century nature diaries, Mary Ellen Bellanca points to the characteristics Wordsworth’s journals share with “natural history writing and topographical works; with poetry, science primers, and other books by women interested in botany; and with other nature diaries.”³⁹ These characteristics include a “fascination with the facticity of nature” that asserts itself in startlingly matter-of-fact prose; a careful recording of what living things do, or simply *are*; an itemization of particular things seen in the field; and an unceasing interest in the weather and seasonal change. Perhaps most helpfully, Bellanca points out that Dorothy’s validation and celebration of the quotidian is of a piece with the forms of natural history popular at the time. Most notably, Gilbert White called

³⁹ Mary Ellen Bellanca, *Daybooks of Discovery: Nature Diaries in Britain, 1170-1870*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007) 109.

upon “stationary men” to “pay some attention to the districts on which they reside[d],” and hoped, with *The Natural History of Selborne*, to induce his readers to “pay a more ready attention to the wonders of the Creation, too frequently overlooked as common occurrences.”⁴⁰

The detail of Dorothy’s journals and the vigour of her descriptive prose also, some would say primarily, served to feed her brother’s poetry—a process through which the common occurrences Dorothy describes are converted or revealed as wonders of William’s creation. In *Becoming Wordsworthian* Elizabeth Fay describes this tandem composition as one through which Dorothy’s “collection of details and words, impressions, and rhythms feeds William’s imagination; when he rereads the journals, the literal helps him imagine what Dorothy saw in his absence or what he did not notice. He then turns the literal into the abstract . . .”⁴¹ Fay describes Dorothy’s entries as “disturbingly particular, “ and “oddly objective,” but the language she uses to describe the material Dorothy provides her brother—a “*collection of details and words, impressions, and rhythms*”—gives away its necessarily subjective, if not abstract, character. Like all naturalists, Dorothy is the curator of the details she presents: her entries are a “collection” of appearances and occurrences depicted in words that, despite their simplicity, bear the fine impress of those appearances upon an observer’s mind and echo in the rhythm of language the rhythm of the walks Dorothy, her brother, and Coleridge took together as they talked, observed, and worked. Thus, between the surface “literalness” of Dorothy’s journal entries and the abstraction of her brother’s poems, there is space for creative play.

The particular mode of seeing and collecting detail valued by Dorothy echoes that of natural historians following Gilbert White. It required neither a Claude glass nor a microscope,

⁴⁰ *Selborne*, 3.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Fay, *Becoming Wordsworthian: A Performative Aesthetic* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 206.

but instead searched openly and broadly for whatever might catch and keep its notice, whether it be a particular flower or a pattern in the clouds. The very first entry of the *Alfoxden Journal* begins with this mode of seeing and documenting:

Alfoxden, 20th January 1798. The green paths down the hill-sides are channels for streams. The young wheat is streaked by silver lines of water running between the ridges, the sheep are gathered together on the slopes. After the wet dark days, the country seems more populous. It peoples itself in the sunbeams. The garden, mimic of spring, is gay with flowers. The purple-starred hepatica spreads itself in the sun, and the clustering snow-drops put forth their white heads, at first upright, ribbed with green, and like a rosebud when completely opened, hanging their heads downwards, but slowly lengthening their slender stems. The slanting woods of an unvarying brown, showing the light through the thin net-work of their upper boughs...⁴²

Writing on this passage, Sarah Zimmerman notes the roving eye of the observer, and Dorothy's arrangement of the scene in paragraph form. Zimmerman associates this arrangement with the picturesque mode, but the passage is more characteristic of the field naturalist's assortment of objects and observations in a text that concerns a particular locale. Both Gilbert White and John Knapp begin their natural history letters and journals with an opening prospect of their hometowns. And while, as Zimmerman says, arrangement of the prospect requires Dorothy's "authorial distance from the objects of her attention,"⁴³ almost every detail she remarks upon also implies her close and sustained familiarity with the landscape and the particular objects mentioned in the scene. Such familiarity is a requirement of the type of Romantic natural history initiated by White's *Selborne*. The give-away of the speaker's embeddedness in the scene she describes is the cottage garden, which appears mid-way through the section, apparently just beneath her feet, from which she can get a view of the hills and, more minutely, of the white

⁴² Dorothy Wordsworth, *Dorothy Wordsworth: The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, edited by Pamela Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴³ Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 125.

heads of the snow-drops in the garden. We are also subtly cued into Wordsworth's long-standing familiarity with the scene she describes by her astute rendering of this particular seasonal period, one that is not yet spring, but a "mimic" of it as the atmosphere transitions out of the "wet dark days" preceding it. Just as Dorothy's familiarity with the landscape has earned her the freedom to look alternately between far objects and near ones, her familiarity with the place over time allows her to look backwards and forwards through the seasons, and to sense in the present notes of what has been and what is yet to come.

The freedom to play with appearances, mingling the familiar and the unexpected, the literal and the abstract, is one that John Worthen suggests may have been opened up through Coleridge's and Dorothy's mutual interest in the relationships between natural history, observation, and figurative language. As Worthen observes in *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons & the Wordsworths in 1802*, Dorothy's journals were a portion of the larger poetic project of Coleridge and William, which coalesced as an inter-mixture of the natural and supernatural in their *Lyrical Ballads*, but which was built upon innumerable walks, conversations, and correspondences to which Dorothy was integral.⁴⁴ How to treat scientific or naturalistic knowledge was a concern they all shared. Coleridge, in hoping to "improve [his] stock of metaphors" by attending lectures on chemistry and physiology, may at first have shared the opinion of John Aikin (to whose *Monthly Magazine* Coleridge contributed).⁴⁵ Aikin argued in his 1777 "Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry" that the "insipidity of Modern Poetry" was owed largely to its authors' lack of interest in and knowledge about the

⁴⁴ John Worthen, *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ *Romantic Natural Histories*, 220. For more on Coleridge's interest in natural history, see Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

natural world, whose animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms (especially the animal kingdom, he believed), might “afford matter for pleasing and even sublime speculation . . . give animation to the objects around them; and, viewed in comparison with human kind . . . suggest amusing and instructive lessons.”⁴⁶ Before 1797 and 1798, Coleridge’s entries did indeed include observations of nature culled to “suggest amusing and instructive lessons” regarding human kind. These were composed in zen-like metaphorical quips, through which “owls that wake all night to catch mice” were impressed into service as “[m]en anxious for this world.”⁴⁷

But around the same time Dorothy began her first journal, Worthen observes, Coleridge’s notebooks began to include “genuine observations of the natural world.”⁴⁸ Worthen quotes one such entry, which Coleridge made in early spring, 1798: “The subtle snow in every breeze rose curling from the Grove, like pillars of cottage smoke.” In its attention to a particular natural event—to the action of wind on snow and its relation to another homely appearance—this entry seems closer in spirit to Dorothy’s *Alfoxden Journal* than it does to some of Coleridge’s other entries and the work of other Romantic naturalist poets, such as Charlotte Smith, whose poems on animals and insects are highly humanistic. Eschewing arguments regarding the directionality of influence, Worthen concludes, at the least, that Dorothy’s “Journal was conceived as her own exemplary account of how to look at the world.”⁴⁹ Coleridge’s well-known appraisal of Dorothy as a “perfect electrometer,” whose information was “various” and whose eye was “watchful in minutest observation of nature,” indicates his impression of the subtlety of her responsiveness to

⁴⁶ “An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry,” 34.

⁴⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Anima Poetae*, in *Romantic Natural Histories*, 235.

⁴⁸ Worthen, 54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

the astonishing variety of things she encountered.⁵⁰ One gets the sense that, while Coleridge looked on their walks for the material of metaphor and Wordsworth walked, lost in composition, Dorothy walked with the attention of one who expects to meet some—though not some particular—thing.

A Natural History of Encounter

Because Dorothy did not expect to meet something in particular, the things she did meet were always unexpected, and sometimes inexplicable. They were often things as simple and unrepeatable as the appearance of a reflection of light on water. On an August evening in 1800 recorded in the *Grasmere Journal*, for example, John and Dorothy separated from their brother, William, who was composing, and walked further on:

We walked over the hill by the firgrove. I sate upon a rock & observed a flight of swallows gathering together high above my head they flew towards Rydale. We walked through the wood over the stepping stones . . . We had a very fine walk by the gloomy lake. There was a curious yellow reflection in the water, as of corn fields—there was no light in the clouds from which it appeared to come.⁵¹

Dorothy's slight narrative trajectory suggests, despite the fact that the party originally set off to Rydale for letters, that John and Dorothy were pulled toward Rydale by the swallows, and were rewarded for following them by the "curious yellow reflection" without a source, an appearance that is as inexplicable as it is unrepeatable. The mildness of the entry, like most of those in the journals, indicates a willingness that the event remain unexplained. It is simply recorded. Indeed, Dorothy's expectations in the field were not quite the same as the professional or even recreational expectations of the 18th-century field naturalist, who might set out each day in

⁵⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a letter to Joseph Cottle, June 29th, 1797, in *Biographia Epistolaris*, vol. I (Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 131.

⁵¹ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 18.

anticipation of gaining some particular new knowledge about the world. With respect to what she wished to see and what she wished to report, Dorothy makes no note. Her walks are instead often purposive in unrelated ways: they are made to get the mail (as above), to gather sticks, or to accompany Coleridge, her brother, or a visitor. In the retrospective space of the journals, the accomplishment or disappointment of these tasks receives some note, but the daily entries evidently exist, nevertheless, to record the accomplishment, or disappointment, of meetings with unexpected creatures, events, and turns in the weather. It is Dorothy's openness to meeting these phenomena half-way (using her attention and perspective to engage them), that allows her to create a natural history of encounters that is determined by the relationship of subjects and objects over time, where those subjects and objects are not pre-determined entities. On March 1st, 1798, for example, Dorothy records in her *Alfoxden Journal* the curious relationship of the "shapes" of things over the course of a morning:

We rose early. A thick fog obscured the distant prospect entirely, but the shapes of the nearer trees and the dome of the wood dimly seen and dilated. It cleared away between ten and eleven. The shapes of the mist, slowly moving along, exquisitely beautiful; passing over the sheep they almost seemed to have more of life than those quiet creatures.⁵²

Here, over the course of several hours, a landscape's inhabitants shift and change, come and go. The shapes of the trees and the "dome of the wood" stand out in relief against an obscured background. Their presence as distinguishable objects in the foreground allows Dorothy to decipher that the mist is composed of discrete "shapes" as well, shapes that in their lively contrast with and proximity to the sheep, take on and even outshine the creatureliness of those sheep. The relationships of shapes in the scene—the trees, the wood, the mist, the sheep—

⁵² *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 148.

determine those shapes and also determine how Dorothy sees and describes their evolution through time as they slowly move and clear away.

Precisely through their evolving relationships to one another, these very different elements (wood, air, moisture, mammal) come to be distinct shapes: they take up space in the world; they move and change; they capture the attention of a viewer. In Dorothy's radical natural history, these "shapes" take on the individual character and significance of active subjects, without taking on the traditional characteristics associated with the subject in Western philosophy—subjects who are free, autonomous, self-sovereign, rational and, most of all, human. Instead, subjects in Dorothy's natural history exist through their relationships to one another. Dorothy, like these other subjects, designates or describes spaces for their interaction. In contemporary terms, these spaces and systems of relationality might be called "ecosystems," but even that term seems to undercut the capaciousness of Dorothy's particular form of ecology, which takes into account not only living creatures, whom we might call after animal rights philosopher Timothy Regan, "subjects-of-a-life," but also non-living phenomena that move with and affect the world of appearances as surely as do their living, animate counterparts.

To consider objects and non-living things as subjects might strain both metaphysical and aesthetic boundaries, but this is clearly a project Dorothy engages in the journals, which are alive to the possibilities of chance, perspective, and the uncanny. Her writing reveals an abundant faith in the significance of the world of appearances; what might look like nothing to others is revealed in her writing as a rapidly changing environment that loses itself as quickly as it is formed. She records its natural history—even when that history is nothing more, and nothing less, than the relationship of shapes as she witnesses it.

Describing Relations to Significant Others

Many readers have noticed the extent to which Dorothy formulates herself as a subject in *relation to* other entities and have admired and spoken eloquently about her writing of relatedness without necessarily regarding it eco-critically. In particular, Anne Mellor in *Romanticism and Gender* has theorized the difference between William's construction of a disembodied, poetic self "rendered possible . . . only by the arduous repression of the Other in all its forms," and Dorothy's "self writing," through which an embodied self that is "interactive, absorptive, constantly changing, and domestic" is produced in profound connection to its environment.⁵³ But we might pursue the nature of this profound connection more rigorously if we are willing to take seriously not only Dorothy's "self writing," but also her attempts to elaborate the peculiar self-hood of nonhuman others and even non-living others and phenomena that come about as a compound effect of light, air, and matter. On May 4th, 1802, for example, Dorothy and William walk towards a waterfall: "It is a glorious wild solitude under that lofty purple crag. It stood upright by itself. Its own self & and its shadow below, one mass—all else was sunshine."⁵⁴ Here, again (as in the passage about the shapes of trees and mist, above), Dorothy distinguishes the waterfall and its shadow as a discrete thing: a "mass" in relation to "all else" in the scene. The effect of sunlight and shadow on Dorothy's observation is the appearance of a mass that is "its own self" in relation to everything else. The slight difficulty of designating the referent for "it" throughout the passage seems deliberate. The anomalous appearance that is its own self is not quite crag, not quite waterfall, not quite shadow, not even "solitude;" conditions conspire, along with Dorothy's perspective, to highlight and differentiate

⁵³ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), 156. In the chapter following this one, on William Wordsworth, I challenge Mellor's characterization of William's poetic self, suggesting that he goes to great lengths to engage, rather than to repress, nonhuman others within his environment.

⁵⁴ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 95.

a suddenly distinct and singular figure from its background even when that figure is not nameable.

Filmmaker Werner Herzog has commented upon the “mysterious stardom” of such phenomena with reference to scenes from his film *Grizzly Man* that stand out with sharp and unusual distinction despite not featuring either Timothy Treadwell, the “grizzly man,” or any grizzlies. Herzog saved these scenes from hundreds of hours of footage shot by Treadwell. He comments that, in many cases, they seem to have been captured simply because Treadwell left his camera on too long, having forgotten to turn it off. One of the most memorable of these scenes presents a group of long grasses on a rainy day, battered intermittently by strong and unpredictable gusts of wind. Similarly, Dorothy’s journals seem to be the result of an eye that never closes, and of a commitment to present even the most quietly inscrutable scenes she witnesses. The world of Dorothy’s journals is peopled by animated flora, wind-blown banks of trees, and flocks of sheep, and the passages quoted most from the journals have that unplanned-for stardom: a kind of critical impenetrability that nevertheless invites—even insists upon—our rapt and patient attention in part because of their inscrutableness. In reading Dorothy’s spare descriptive passages, our experience is reminiscent of the experience Dorothy describes of meeting and engaging nonhuman phenomena. The reader or observer in each case is, in a certain sense, star-struck. This may explain why these passages of the journals are almost universally praised by readers, but left curiously untouched. Much critical discussion of particularly enigmatic passages from the journals slips into rapt restatement and paraphrasing and then, respectfully, refrains from further inquiry or turns to passages of the *Grasmere Journal* in which interactions between humans are described.

However, we need not read only those passages concerning humans in Dorothy’s journals

to get a sense of the particular kinds of sociality she develops through her descriptions of the land around the Wordsworth cottage. That “description” includes both her daily walks as “descriptions” of the terrain and her written “descriptions” of those walks in the journals. Both varieties of description—the kinetic and the literary—designate significant others without circumscribing the boundaries of what those others can do and be. What might seem to be limiting activities and attempts to circumscribe the boundaries of a domestic space by walking the same trails day after day and writing about roughly the same activities, are in fact attempts to engage the world on its own terms, looking for difference in what might appear to an impatient eye to be sameness, and inviting that difference into an ever-expanding and permeable domestic sphere that is designated not by four walls or even a series of familiar walking pathways, but by a congenial openness to the unexpected. Thus Dorothy’s writing and walking do not so much “affirm a unity of interest and experience . . . by confirming boundaries,” as Robin Jarvis suggests in *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel*, as they continually look for ways of opening experience and its boundaries up, tracing the outlines between the external and the internal, the alien and the familiar.⁵⁵

In “Dorothy Wordsworth: Grounds of Writing,” Meena Alexander is concerned to explore how “[Wordsworth’s] sense of her own body might have required her to frame the landscape in a certain fashion, to suggest how gender might be constitutive in what she saw.”⁵⁶ Alexander points out, first, that Dorothy often walked behind William and Coleridge when the trio walked together, and that their conversation would float back to her without the necessity of her participation. She also contrasts the energy of William’s walking with Dorothy’s own. For

⁵⁵ Robin Jarvis, *Romantic Writing and Pedestrian Travel* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 164.

⁵⁶ Meena Alexander, “Dorothy Wordsworth: the grounds of writing,” *Women’s Studies*, vol. 14.3 (January 1988), 208, note 3.

Alexander, William's walking is characterized by its tendency to crowd out perception in favour of creation. Famous for composing while walking, William pushes aside Nature to make room for his poetic creations, and to "[cross] out what came first" as he crosses the ground, marking it with his footsteps and cancelling Nature's status as "originative existence." Taking up Derrida's reading of Freud, Alexander calls William's "demonic" walk "pathbreaking:" an activity through which "[w]hat exists must be cut through, crossed out, so that with the track of difference, meaning can come into play."⁵⁷ William's walk and his composition, as Alexander describes it, is thus jointly destructive and creative, and both these actions serve the psyche and act as assertions of the freedom of the poetic imagination.

Dorothy's walks, Alexander points out, do not assert the self so strongly. Alexander reads Dorothy's walks as "escape routes, covert flights from the societal bounds set upon her domestic being;" they are "an edge of freedom from domestic and psychic enclosures."⁵⁸ At the same time, Alexander believes that Dorothy is compelled by an innately feminine need to find shelter outside the home, safe places to ride out storms and retreat from "the burden of a social self, female and irremediably subsidiary to her brother's authorship."⁵⁹ Ultimately, Alexander does not believe that Dorothy's walks in nature, her relationship with William, and the cottage at Grasmere provide her with a firm ground for writing and describes Dorothy's later madness as "groundlessness."

I view Dorothy's "flights" from the cottage somewhat differently. I believe Dorothy envisioned her project in the journals as part of, but distinct from, William's project. Because the image of Dorothy at William and Coleridge's heels presented by Alexander stands out so

⁵⁷ Ibid., 199.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 200, 202.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 204.

vividly within her article, we may forget in reading it that Dorothy frequently walked alone and that even when she did walk with William, she often departed from him so he could compose and she could continue walking, a physical enactment of the split in their endeavours.⁶⁰ While it seems clear that what Virginia Woolf described as the “one being” of Dorothy + Nature + William did not provide Dorothy with the grounds of her writing (as, perhaps, it did for William), I think we can view Dorothy’s walking and her writing as distinct from, though part of, that “one being.”

The *Grasmere Journal* had its beginning in May 1800 with Dorothy’s desire to “give Wm pleasure,” upon returning from a trip to visit Mary at Gallow Hill with John. The decision to write takes its form as a resolution: “I resolved to write a journal of the time till W & J return, & I set about keeping my resolve because I will not quarrel with myself, & because I shall give Wm Pleasure by it when he comes home again.”⁶¹ The opening entry is emblematic of the *Grasmere Journal* as a whole, as the opening entry of the *Alfoxden Journal* is of that series of reflections. Both tell us something about the balance of description and detail in that particular journal, and hint at the roles of persons and things in each. The *Alfoxden Journal* memorably begins with a lush, detailed description of the landscape, whereas the *Grasmere Journal* begins with the above statement of purpose, a lament upon John and William’s departure, an account of the flowers growing in the wood, and a mention of two women she encountered separately that day. This mixture of reflection, declaration, and description is characteristic of the *Grasmere Journal*, as is the attention it pays to both persons and things.

Dorothy’s resolution to write her journal during William’s absence is a lure for many

⁶⁰ The image I would like to evoke here is of William, pacing in place, and of Dorothy, departing from him to continue describing an ever-expanding and changing territory.

⁶¹ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 1.

readers, one that tends to provoke readings of the journal as primarily “for” William. These readings are often helpful in elaborating the joint labour of writing in the Wordsworth household, and in teasing out their larger poetic and domestic projects. Nevertheless, Dorothy in fact makes the resolution for herself. Indeed, there is something delightfully resistant about Dorothy’s resolution and the entry as a whole. The entry is propelled not so much by Dorothy’s resolve to give William pleasure as it is not to “quarrel” with herself; Dorothy resolves to resist resistance and keep a journal of her days. Shunting aside her quarrelling self, the resolution manifests itself in the curious absence of a self-reflective voice throughout the journal. This continues the transparent narration of the *Alfoxden Journal*, but it also introduces the narrator as a split self, capable of division and also capable of choosing not to recognize itself as such. I believe this may be the foundation for Dorothy’s success as an environmental writer. The self who quarrels—the reflective, the self-critical, the posturing self—is summarily dismissed from the journal and in her place is a perceiver with a mysterious, sometimes stubborn tendency *not* to think or write *herself* through descriptions of the natural world. The first entry begins:

May 14 1800 [Wednesday]. Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner at ½ past 2 o’clock—cold pork in their pockets. I left them at the turning of the Low-wood bay under the trees. My heart was so full that I could hardly speak to W when I gave him a farewell kiss. I sate a long time upon a stone at the margin of the lake, & after a flood of tears my heart was easier. The lake looked to me I knew not why dull and melancholy, the weltering on the shores seemed a heavy sound.⁶²

The first part of this opening—Dorothy’s description of William and John’s departure and her subsequent sadness—is straightforward. Though Dorothy did not often describe her emotional states so explicitly, the stark loneliness, the fullness of heart, and even the flood of tears seem natural here. The turn in the passage comes only in the last sentence, in the four words “I knew

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1.

not why.” To any reader of sensibility or of William and Coleridge, it seems clear that the reason the lake looked dull and melancholy to Dorothy is that she herself was dull and melancholy owing to the departure of her brothers. Yet, Dorothy resists this reading of the scene. It is that resistance that makes her a particularly effective environmental writer and that propels her approach to the nonhuman world. Resisting a reading of the natural world that simply gives her back herself, Dorothy is open to the potential oddity of environmental experience and to the non-identity of nature with herself.

In “Unspeakable Weather, or the Rain Romantic Constatives Know,” Anne-Lise François reflects upon the paratactic lists of Dorothy’s journal entries, in which “weather conditions that might normally be experienced as iterative, continuous states of being—the moon shining on the water—acquire the ‘finished feeling’ of datable, completed, non-repeatable actions.”⁶³ François also remarks upon the “absence of any deictic shifters cotemporal with a protagonist’s consciousness,” and “the absence of all explicit emotive address, appeal to or demand made on a second person: they show no interest in engaging in argument, in making their report the basis for a debatable claim or the beginning of a story or conversation.”⁶⁴ Indeed, it is that absence of an interest in making a debatable claim that may enable another feature of Dorothy’s writing upon which François remarks: the way in which the entries sustain a sense “of the ordinariness or naturalness of . . . close nonrelation by the acuity with which they sometimes note the disjuncture between simultaneous, coincident experiences of the natural world.”⁶⁵ Dorothy notes this disjuncture by not remarking upon it at all, by instead simply putting alongside one another

⁶³ Anne-Lise François, “The Rain Romantic Constatives Know,” in *Phantom Sentences: Essays in Linguistics and Literature Presented to Ann Banfield*, edited by Robert S. Kawashima, Gilles Phillippe, and Thelma Sowley (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 155.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-56.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

the “simultaneous, coincident” experiences she describes. She rarely provides any connective tissue in these paratactic lists, eschewing even minimal assertions of cause and effect, of difference and sameness, or of any relationship at all. This is true not only of her remarks upon the weather, but also upon her remarks regarding her own mood, which receive the same treatment François describes (they, too, “acquire the ‘finished feeling’ of datable, completed, non-repeatable actions”). We can therefore come away from the journals feeling that Dorothy has endeavoured to communicate very little about herself and her own internal states even though her entries are littered with references to her mood (“I was afraid of being disappointed,” “I was quite out of spirits,” etc.).

If Dorothy’s journals do not assert *herself* strongly, they do nevertheless render *a* self in relation to many others. Dorothy’s perspective informs every aspect of the journals without seeming to be its sole or even necessarily central subject. Just as she is able to survey the landscape and distinguish within it multiple points of interest, multiple centers for reflection and orientation, she is also able to see herself within a larger human and nonhuman community whose members are variously engaged with one another. In both the *Alfoxden Journal* and the *Grasmere Journal*, Dorothy sketches individuals within intersecting communities. She is concerned to identify how these people and things relate to each other (however oblique or minimal these relations may sometime be), and also how they generate and sustain one another within specialized systems of partnership, domesticity, and politeness. The ecologies of significant others Dorothy identifies populate the journals. Their intersections may at times be more apparent to Dorothy than they are to her journal’s readers (who often wonder at the lack of explicit transitions in her entries between accounts of her cooking and health, descriptions of the landscape, and concern for William).

Indeed, Dorothy's journals play out an obsession with how to consider individuals and communities, the relationship of parts to wholes, specimens to species, waves to water, etc. Dorothy memorably spatialized her fascination with the transitivity of interpersonal relationships in a diagram she drew on May 15th, 1802 of the names of each individual in their circle:

S T Coleridge
Dorothy Wordsworth William Wordsworth
Mary Hutchinson Sara Hutchinson
William Coleridge Mary
Dorothy Sara
16th May
1802
John Wordsworth

We can imagine tracing lines of relation between these various names, marking brothers, sisters, friends, men, women, collaborators (significant others, all). I imagine Dorothy's pathways and walkways, those travelled well and those travelled little, the seats and observation points, the landmarks and the buildings in much the same way. In walking between them, Dorothy is connecting them, exploring their boundaries, describing potential relationships, reinscribing favourite paths and places with the power of attention and regard in the journals. In this way, contrary to Alexander's reading of the Wordsworths' walks, her excursions are neither demonic creative erasures of the landscape nor flights from a beloved cottage in search of an alternate refuge, but rather attempts to describe on foot various intersecting rings of relation between persons and things.

In fact, Dorothy's walks and their tendency to connect or blur the lines between the domestic and the wild, the private and the openly visible, have elements in common with the activities she describes of two local women. On Saturday the 19th of June, 1802, Dorothy remarks in her journal upon a number of solitary human figures in the Grasmere landscape. Wordsworth hears about the first, a Quaker woman, from Coleridge, who reports during a visit

that, “there being no quaker meeting held at Keswick,” the woman “used to go regularly alone every Sunday, to attend the meeting-house & there used to sit & perform her worship, alone, in that beautiful place among those fir-trees, in that spacious vale, under the great mountain Skiddaw!!!”⁶⁶ The repeated exclamation points indicate a kind of gleeful consternation and also applause for this solitary worship. As Coleridge and Dorothy conceive it, the vale, its fir-trees, and the mountain are as much the setting for this worship as the meeting house. The woman’s visitation, in fact, seems to orient them around it, as witnesses to her pilgrimage.

Dorothy reports in the same entry that a Miss Hudson of Workington would plant flowers far beyond her home’s garden: “She said ‘O! I love flowers! I sow flowers in the Parks several miles from home & my mother & I visit them & watch them how they grow.’”⁶⁷ Miss Hudson, Wordsworth points out, “was a very ordinary young woman, such as in any town in the North of England one may find a score.”⁶⁸ (That being the case, Dorothy reasoned, it would be wise for botanists not to be deceived upon finding garden flowers far afield.)

The two activities Dorothy describes exemplify a rural expansion of domestic and sacred space well beyond the home. Both Miss Hudson and the Quaker woman inhabit the space beyond their homes as though they are responsible for it, despite being outside the clear responsibilities of their own homes or the judgment of human neighbours. Despite being alone, the Quaker woman performs her worship every week, and although the flowers she has planted are far from her household, Miss Hudson travels to “visit” them and watch their progress. Their visits speak to a kind of responsibility to place that is arresting, and an extension of domestic labours and recreation beyond the space of the home. As Kurt Heinzelman suggests in his essay,

⁶⁶ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 111.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

“The Cult of Domesticity: Dorothy and William Wordsworth at Grasmere,” Dorothy and William admired what William calls in the *Prelude* the “ancient homeliness” of Lake District families, who worked both inside and outside the home, literally carrying the objects of their labour from the inside, out and vice versa in the days and evenings (William would commemorate that labour in “Michael”). Dorothy and William’s version of that homeliness included the transport of poetry from the outdoors (where it often found its source and was composed) to the indoors (where it was transcribed). Reading, of course, was both an indoor and an outdoor activity as the light and the weather demanded. When an outside one, it would often take place in familiar spots or “seats” in the landscape, to which William and Dorothy returned with the fondness and the ease with which one might settle into an old sofa.

I am tempted to call the visitations of Miss Hudson and the Quaker woman missions or excursions, but the words imply a willingness to leave home and not come back again, and overshadow their simple regularity. Instead, these visitations are undertaken as just that: as meetings from which the women will return again. Coincidentally, Dorothy hears the stories of the visits during visits to her own home. During one, Coleridge tells the Quaker woman’s story, and Miss Hudson herself relates her story to Dorothy during another. Their visits form a part of the network of neighbourly meetings between people and things she describes throughout the journals.

To describe that network as a purely human one would be a mistake. Instead, it is just a part of the unique community Wordsworth constructs of places, objects, and persons in the journals. The “visit” is both an overture of friendliness and proximity, and an acknowledgment that the closeness extended is defined by its transitoriness and by the separability of the parties concerned. The “polis of many simultaneously possible households” Kurt Heinzelman

highlights in his essay is, I argue, a polis of both persons and things.

The power of descriptive walking and writing for Dorothy is akin to what Susan Stewart has described as the “capacity of narrative to generate significant objects and hence to both generate and engender a significant other,”⁶⁹ but Wordsworth’s relation towards significant others is better evoked in the comparatively passive action of describing those others than in generating them. “To describe” can be “to form or trace by motion” (*OED*), a nice ambiguity that suggests that the thing described is partially generated and also partially found or distinguished by the describer. The world described is similar to William’s “mighty world / Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, / And what perceive,”⁷⁰ but Dorothy’s eye and ear seem slightly better (or at least, differently) attuned than her brother’s to the existence of other subjects in the world, capable of doing the same. Dorothy recalls a particularly comical example of her awareness of the existence of animal minds in an entry in the *Grasmere Journal*, in which she remembers walking through the fields of Rydale vale, and then stopping and sitting “for an hour afraid to pass a cow. The cow looked at me, and I looked at the cow, and whenever I stirred the cow gave over eating.”⁷¹

Dorothy’s most extended consideration of particular animals occurs in early summer 1802, just before Dorothy and William travel to Calais to meet Annette Vallon and to Gallow Hill to bring Mary Hutchinson home to Grasmere. In this often cited series of entries, Dorothy reflects upon the activity of a pair of swallows residing at the Wordsworth cottage. It is tempting to read Dorothy’s account of the swallows’ endeavours to build a nest as a metaphor for her own

⁶⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), xi.

⁷⁰ William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) ll. 106-108.

⁷¹ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 58.

hopes and fears regarding the Grasmere household. She first mentions the swallows on June 16th, a typical day in Dorothy and William's household, which they spent walking to Rydale for letters, reading them, writing replies, and sitting in the orchard. Dorothy has been watching for signs of the changing season—the “first ripe strawberries” and the honeysuckle. She notes that two swallows have been flying near the sitting-room window, and muses that they may be “wishing to build.” Even more boldly, she guesses (rightly) that they will “not have courage for it,” but will build at her own room window. Following these surmises, Dorothy indulges in more characteristic descriptive prose, an account of their activity:

They twitter & make a bustle & a little chearful song hanging against the panes of glass, with their soft white bellies close to the glass, & their forked fish-like tails. They swim round & round & again they come.

She will revive this description later in the narrative of the swallow's endeavour, as a kind of lament, but at this time takes pleasure in their progress, a slight, repetitive and playful activity that Dorothy mimics in the rhythm of her prose, “round & round & again,” and in the generation of a swimming metaphor out of her description of the birds' tails as “fish-like.” In describing their movement as a swimming “round & round,” Dorothy evokes an enclosed fish tank, turning the window inside out such that it is not just a window onto the world outside, but also a window into a second, domestic space. At next mention, the swallows are indeed building very busily under Dorothy's window, and we hear of them again, perhaps, as the “little Birds” whose twittering sounds “very gloomy” to her one still morning as she awakes.

On the 24th of June, disaster strikes: the nest the birds built collapses. Heinzelman believes the “rebuilding of this nest becomes the metaphorical ground upon which Dorothy

stages her anxieties about the coming changes in the Wordsworths' domestic arrangements."⁷²

Indeed, we can read Dorothy's account of the birds' tentative visits to the cottage, their scouting of a location for the nest, and their decision to build upon Dorothy's own ledge as a kind of analogy for the domestic activities of Dorothy and William settling at Grasmere. Their decision to rebuild their nest after it falls is analogous to Dorothy's and William's agreement that they should reconstitute the domestic space at Grasmere to include Mary after the wedding.

Yet, this reading, so satisfying in its own way, and perhaps comforting to Dorothy as well (if indeed it occurred to her), is unique in its mere possibility: most other episodes Dorothy records in the journals regarding birds, trees, geographical landforms, and the weather are not so easily read as projections of her own feelings or situation. These things are never simply analogies for Dorothy's interior states or for her experiences. They do not perform her anxieties. The swallows in this case are emotionally touching because they literally touch the Grasmere cottage and the domestic space within it, and that proximity seems to force from Dorothy an uncharacteristic and unexpectedly direct outpouring of sympathy towards the birds when she notices that their nest has collapsed. Dorothy records the events of the morning:

When I rose I went just before tea into the Garden, I looked up at my Swallow's nest & it was gone. It had fallen down. Poor little creatures they could not themselves be more distressed than I was I went upstairs to look at the Ruins. They lay in a large heap upon the window ledge; these Swallows had been ten days employed in building this nest, & it seemed to be almost finished—⁷³

The appropriative "my" in the first line is characteristic of Dorothy's tendency to claim only those things and persons with whom she has sustained contact and upon whom she has lavished special attention as her own. It also draws a ring around the nest, including within a concentric

⁷² Kurt Heinzelman, "The Cult of Domesticity: Dorothy and William Wordsworth at Grasmere," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, edited by Anne Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 68.

⁷³ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 115.

circle the home-space of the Grasmere cottage and the broken nest outside the window-pane. Ruined, the nest calls up for Wordsworth a full awareness of its significance. The two journals themselves seem to do this kind of commemorative work for the households at Alfoxden and Grasmere. Here, as in the journals as a whole, the potential for the loss of a household and its loved objects inspires a special attention to detail and to the power of description to hold and enliven them. The “forked fish-like tails” of Dorothy’s first description of the birds reappears here, as does the description of their “soft white bellies.” The “many & many a time” Dorothy recalls watching the birds since their first visit even echoes in its phrasing the “round & round & again” of the birds’ activity in her first description of them. Here, in remembrance, she describes them:

I had watched them early in the morning, in the day many & many a time & in the evenings when it was almost dark I had seen them sitting together side by side in their unfinished nest both morning & night. When they first came about the window they used to hang against the panes, with their white Bellies & their forked tails looking like fish, but then they fluttered & sang their own little twittering song. As soon as the nest was broad enough, a sort of ledge for them they sate both mornings & evenings, but they did not pass the night there. I watched them one morning when William was at Eusemere, for more than an hour. Every now & then there was a feeling motion in their wings a sort of tremulousness & they sang a low song to one another.⁷⁴

The forked tails and the white bellies of the birds are the two most vivid details Dorothy relates about them, repeated in both accounts. Their vividness in her visual memory is partially due to the fact that, as she points out, the birds would “hang” against the glass, “close to the glass,” the most vulnerable portion of their anatomy literally pressing up against their attentive observer’s vision. The cheerfulness of the birds’ song to one another mutates into a lower, more tentative one in the second passage, as if in recognition of the loss to come. In the passage, Dorothy

⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

comes as close as she ever does in the journals to ascribing feelings and a narrative tale to nonhuman creatures.

It is also one of the only opportunities Dorothy takes to describe at length an extended relationship with particular creatures in her environment. Dorothy's prose takes on the transitional effects of a constantly changing environment so well in part because she is herself continually in motion. Her visitation to various sites in the area is regular, but not continuous, and most of the phenomena she records are necessarily short-lived: the appearance of a single wave, the particular gesture of a tree in the breeze, or the sheen of a plant in the sun. In some ways, the lives of the birds that build outside her windowpane are not significantly different (they, too, are transitory), but in others they are distinctly different. We might read, in Dorothy's description of the birds' white bellies and forked, fish-like tails, what Timothy Morton, borrowing a term from Derrida, has called a "re-mark," a "very small flicker" in an environmental text that "flips an 'objective' image into a 'subjective' one."⁷⁵ The re-mark, Morton explains, is minimalistic—it does not shout "metaphor!" The re-mark instead simply "makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks."⁷⁶ In this passage, the window seems to inspire in Dorothy a slight flicker from her generally objective observations of nature to this slightly more subjective one. The particular details she repeats—the birds' pressing themselves against the glass, their coming into view "round & round & again" within its closed frame—are details that call up not just the birds, but also the glass window, a portal to the birds' lives that is also a barrier to it. Her sympathy for the birds' vulnerability and their failure is similarly a part of, but also apart from, her sense of the changes at the Grasmere household.

When the birds appear again in the journal, it is without an explanation for where or how

⁷⁵ *Ecology Without Nature*, 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

they have rebuilt. Nevertheless, they do appear again, in a nest, singing low to one another. They are also mentioned among the things that Dorothy regrets leaving when she departs for Calais: “I must prepare to go—The Swallows I must leave them the well the garden the Roses all—Dear creatures!! they sang last night after I was in bed—seemed to be singing to one another, just before they settled to rest for the night. Well I must go—Farewell.—”⁷⁷ The new nest and the birds’ communications are a synecdoche for the Grasmere household and the brother-sister pair within it, her farewell to them collapsing into a larger farewell to the place and the time. Yet, Dorothy’s appropriation of the pair of swallows in this way is characteristically gentle. The birds, their lives, and their song remain distinct from hers. Their song seems to be to one another (not to her), and Dorothy does not try to interpret it further or use it to ventriloquize her own emotion.

The Swallows’ nest, when it rested precariously upon the window ledge, might be as apt a figure as any for the potential metaphoricity of the creatures and things Dorothy describes in the journals. The birds’ lives press upon Dorothy’s own, and she responds with an attentive care mindful to the ways in which those lives are different from her own and largely inscrutable to her. Despite this partial inscrutability, she is open to the ways in which their lives relate to hers in a series of physical and metaphorical ways. The birds are good to think about and also good to think—and feel—with.

Patience and Perspective: Distinguishing Invitations for Engagement

The subtlety of Dorothy’s engagement with nonhuman animals and appearances is akin to the “politeness” Donna Haraway believes is possible within “ecologies of significant others,”

⁷⁷ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 119.

where the matter of “responsiveness” does not depend upon whether or not nonhuman creatures are capable of “responding” to humans (as opposed to reacting to them), but upon whether or not humans are capable of “responding” to invitations extended by nonhuman others to participate in “alternative forms of engagement.”⁷⁸ Dorothy’s journals develop an extended praxis of polite engagement with significant others, one that recognizes and accepts the invitations of nonhuman others for such engagement. This openness to an alternate form of engagement is the “love” described in loving and liking. The viability of this form of politeness depends upon Dorothy’s ability to *distinguish* invitations for engagement (an activity she describes throughout the journals), and her capacity to sustain that engagement through an extended period of present and retrospective perspectival patience.

Dorothy’s gaze often begins by looking in the abstract, looking into a scene where there is “nothing distinguishable,” whether because the sky is for a time “spread over with one continuous cloud” or because the sea is “at first obscured by vapour.” Conditions within or conditions without, however, often shift to allow her to distinguish something in particular: the “moon burst[s] through” an “invisible veil,” a single sheep appears among a flock lying down, or, among continuous birdsong, she “distinguish[es] the notes of a blackbird or thrush.” Dorothy’s “distinguishing” combines in one action perception and differentiation, while also, and importantly, noticing particularly and “honouring with special attention”⁷⁹ the things that have largely distinguished themselves to her, hailing her regard. Elaine Scarry has described this as the power of beautiful things. In *On Beauty and Being Just* Scarry muses: “At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts away from the neutral back-ground as though coming forward to welcome you—as though the object were designed to

⁷⁸ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20, 74.

⁷⁹ From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “distinguish.”

‘fit’ your perception.’⁸⁰ Scarry’s greetings are not unlike the “invitations” Haraway believes become apparent within ecologies of significant others.⁸¹ Scarry and Haraway believe that beautiful things and significant others always, in Scarry’s words, “carry greetings from other worlds within them.”⁸² While Haraway’s attention is most often upon living animals, Scarry considers the invitations for attention and corresponding ethical demands of objects, persons, creatures, and creative works that she says exchange the “gift” of aliveness through their interaction with a perceiver. “Beauty,” she says, “seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness or (in the case of objects) quasi-aliveness of our world.”⁸³ The aliveness or quasi-aliveness of the world suffuses Wordsworth’s journals, where everything seems to be in perpetual motion, constant only in the sense that it is always changing. Dorothy’s vision is marked by a patient faith that any scene, any thing, might at any moment distinguish itself for attention, a creature not only of space, but also of time.

Dorothy’s unique sense of the temporality of beings might explain the oddity of number in many of her journal passages. Dorothy often employs methods of accounting for water and air, for example, that make those elements numerable. Thus, when she recounts seeing a heron in the water, she describes it this way: “It beat and struggled amongst the water, when it flew

⁸⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9.

⁸¹ In drawing together Haraway and Scarry’s approaches, I do not wish to gloss over their differences, which are significant. Here, I want merely to emphasize the similarity between Scarry’s greetings and Haraway’s invitations. Scarry and Haraway differ, however, in their consideration of whether or not these greetings are in any way designed to “fit” the perceptions of their observers. While Scarry asserts this fit for beautiful things, Haraway argues persistently and persuasively against the necessity of any such fit for our ability to accept the invitations of nonhuman creatures and to engage them. Indeed, Haraway argues that no such fit is possible and that it is nevertheless our ethical obligation to find a way to engage with nonhuman others.

⁸² Scarry, 47.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 90.

away, and was long in getting loose.”⁸⁴ Here, the water seems to be made up of many parts, and it is “amongst” these parts that the heron seems to struggle in getting loose. Similarly, in the *Grasmere Journal*, she describes “watching the breezes.” The breezes become visible and countable in their effect on the lake:

We amused ourselves for a long time in watching the Breezes some as if they came from the bottom of the lake spread in a circle, brushing along the surface of the water, & growing more delicate, as it were thinner & of a paler colour till they died away—others spread out like a peacocks tail, & some went right forward this way & that in all directions. The lake was still where these breezes were not but they made it all alive.⁸⁵

The aliveness of the lake in the breeze, the death of the breezes as they become spindly—all demonstrate a patience on their observers’ part (as usual, the Wordsworths watch for “a long time”) and a concept of life and being that is not limited to “life” traditionally conceived, but is rather an effect of disparate elements acting upon one another. Life, for Dorothy, is energy, and this energy moves between things for the patient observer through time.

For Wordsworth the observer, perspective is often a matter of patience through time; recognizing an invitation for engagement can involve abstention from a rush to judgment about what an appearance *is*. Many descriptive passages in the journals seem to depend for their interest upon what Emily Dickinson might call a “certain Slant of light,” or some other strangeness in the scene that prevents the observer from making out exactly (at least in ordinary terms) what it is that is being observed. Onno Oerlemans points to this aspect of Dorothy’s writing in a chapter from *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* on travel writing. Oerlemans’ argument regarding Dorothy’s journals is that their perspectival difference from her brother William’s works is not so much due to gender as it is to genre, and that Dorothy is most

⁸⁴ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 28.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

of all engaged with the genre of travel writing in her journals. Those features of Dorothy's writing Oerlemans cites as markers of travel writing include her faithfulness to detail and her ability to "communicate the sensation of discovery or personal revelation—the reality, we might say of moving through unfamiliar landscape—through the reproduction of detail."⁸⁶ But these features of Dorothy's *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* are also prominent in the *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals* and are also markers of some natural histories. A recurrent theme among the popularizers of natural history during the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries was that the discoveries to be made in the natural world were simply boundless, and that, as Gilbert White famously insisted, "[m]en that undertake only one district are much more likely to advance natural knowledge than those that grasp at more than they can possibly be acquainted with." Indeed, one of the most wonderful and perhaps most Romantic procedures of the practice of natural history writing is to make that with which we are best acquainted—in Dorothy's case the sheep of Grasmere—most strange:

*Thursday 29th [April] . . . As I lay down on the grass, I observed the glittering silver line on the ridges of the Backs of the sheep, owing to their situation respecting the Sun—which made them look beautiful but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind—as if belonging to a more splendid world.*⁸⁷

Dorothy is straightforward in citing the position of herself, the sheep, and the sun as the cause of the particular effect she sees, but her patience with the scene, and her appreciation of its accident, is such that the meeting—the observation, the reflection, and the recollection—is permitted to stretch to unusual length, while the description revels in, rather than foreshortens or explains away, its strangeness. The creatures observed emerge in the passage as "animals of another kind," constituted as that other kind through the relation of the reclined observer and the

⁸⁶ *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, 181.

⁸⁷ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 93.

“situation” of the creatures “respecting the sun.” The other-worldliness of the scene marks it as one of special relation and Dorothy’s ability to see it as such also marks the acceptance of an invitation to engage the sheep at Grasmere as something other than the sheep at Grasmere: as creatures capable of provoking a response. Donna Haraway might describe the provocation of the scene as a “possible invitation, a possible introduction to other-worlding.”⁸⁸

The *Alfoxden* and *Grasmere Journals* catalogue these invitations to other-worlding. Oftentimes, they come from elements within the broader landscape. At other moments, a well-known tree introduces itself as a new creature, a creation of light and wind and distance. Dorothy’s often-quoted description of a “favourite birch tree” stands as a particularly striking example. Dorothy and her companion are stopped short by it, as it yields to the wind in the sun:

Tuesday 24th [November] . . . as we were going along we were stopped at once, at the distance perhaps of 50 yards from our favourite Birch tree it was yielding to the gusty wind with all its tender twigs, the sun shone upon it & it glanced in the wind like a flying sunshiny shower—it was a tree in shape with stem & branches but it was like a Spirit of water—The sun went in & it resumed its purplish appearance the twigs still yielding to the wind, but not so visibly to us. The other Birch trees that were near it looked bright & chearful—but it was a Creature by its own self among them . . .⁸⁹

The tree becomes a “creature by its own self” among other trees in the moment Dorothy describes through a confluence of factors: the sun shines, the wind blows, and, most importantly, the Wordsworths have caught and accepted an invitation to witness its individuation from the other trees at a distance of fifty yards. They are “stopped at once” and have the patience to acknowledge a favourite birch as “a spirit of water”: another unique specimen for a natural history that tracks an alternative, “more splendid world.”

Dorothy’s interest in a world that is “more splendid” than our own and that is “more than

⁸⁸ Haraway, 20.

⁸⁹ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 40.

natural” amongst her descriptions of birds and flowers conveys an interest in the world of appearances and the significance of her looking. This significance is both metaphysical and ethical; it has the power to distinguish subjects and the ethical obligation to get them right, in a sense, and to consider them justly. Dorothy’s entry of February 26th, 1798 in the *Alfoxden Journal* is as a complex play of competing appearances and descriptive impulses:

A very clear afternoon. We lay sidelong upon the turf, and gazed on the landscape till it melted into more than natural loveliness. The sea very uniform, of a pale greyish blue, only one distant bay, bright and blue as a sky; had there been a vessel sailing up it, a perfect image of delight. Walked to the top of a high hill to see a fortification. Again sat down to feed upon the prospect; a magnificent scene, *curiously* spread out for even minute inspection, though so extensive that the mind is afraid to calculate its bounds. A winter prospect shows every cottage, every farm, and the forms of distant trees, such as in summer have no distinguishing mark. On our return, Jupiter and Venus before us. While the twilight still over powered the light of the moon, we were reminded that she was shining bright above our heads, by our faint shadows going before us. We had seen her on the tops of the hills, melting into the blue sky.⁹⁰

Dorothy’s writing in this passage shows her characteristic scrupulousness in accounting for the position of the viewers of the scenes she describes: she and William lie “sidelong upon the turf;” they walk; sit again; walk again. As they do, their gaze shifts from one that looks straight upon a landscape tilted on its side, to one looking out, searching for an edge, to one that looks ahead to get a sense of what is above. Each perspective challenges its viewers, offering a different form of disorientation, requiring time and some imaginative energy to reach any kind of resolution. The only perspective that does not seem to reach such a resolution is the one that yields in fear (this is the view from the top of the hill, which is “so extensive that the mind is afraid to calculate its bounds”). Here Dorothy calls up the discourse of the sublime, but only half-heartedly. More interesting to her is the effect of winter, which has stripped the scene bare and

⁹⁰ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 147.

made it “*curiously* spread out for even minute inspection.”⁹¹ We get the sense that Dorothy craves that effect, that she does in fact have the patience and interest necessary to catalogue “every cottage, every farm, and the forms of distant trees, such as in summer have no distinguishing mark.” Distinguishing, as I have argued, is a primary activity of the journals. The act of looking, for Dorothy, is the act of distinguishing and to distinguish is partially to call something into being,⁹² to people a “more splendid” world with appearances that are “more than natural” because they are a collaboration between subjects, objects, and conditions. In her careful accounting of the position of herself, the sun, the moon, and the season, Dorothy accounts for the appearance of specific things under specific circumstances, including the direction of her gaze. Her creatures and landscapes also seem to push gently back against that gaze: to make her think about where the moon was, and where it might be at a later time; to think that a scene might be improved by a “vessel sailing,” but to be reminded that there is not one in it; to submit to a sky that does not hold its shape. Her patience, discrimination, and openness, I argue, are markers of her ethical relation to a world that does not exist solely for or by virtue of her viewership, but that arises in concert with it. Perception and description, for Dorothy, enable the being of individuals that would not otherwise exist. As Karen Barad notes in the preface to *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of*

⁹¹ “Curious” is an unexpected but apt word choice. In this context, the word designates the scene as one that entices interest and it also draws on the definition of curious objects as intricate or subtle: they not only invite, but sustain care or attention. An older use of “curiosity” associates the word with connoisseurship, especially of certain natural history subjects (*OED*).

⁹² In *World Spectators*, Kaja Silverman speaks of the ways in which looking “bring[s] things into the light,” or brings things into being. For Silverman, “being” is “not ‘truth’ or ‘reality,’ but rather that ‘more-than-reality’ with which phenomenal forms shine when they are allowed to appear.” By “more-than-reality,” Silverman may refer to the set of contingencies clinging to each thing in the world as it appears to different spectators at different times and from different vantage points. While Silverman gives the spectator the power of creation (making looking a conjuring-into-being), Dorothy seems less certain that it is “we alone who determine whether the world will appear.” (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 7.

Matter and Meaning: “Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.”⁹³

The kinds of polite relations Dorothy catalogues and extends in her journals allow for the fulfilment of that “entangled intra-relating.”

Finely Aware and Richly Responsible

Though Dorothy fairly frequently indulged in some imaginative juggling of the landscape and its built elements during her walks, her conclusion near the end of the *Alfoxden Journal*—“Happily we cannot shape the huge hills, or carve out the valleys according to our fancy”—seems best to describe her opinion of the modification of natural spaces. It also seems to bear on her descriptive representations of her environment, which labor for accuracy in ways that many readers find disturbing. In a close reading of Dorothy’s revisions, Pamela Woof finds a pattern of additions, substitutions, and deletions that suggest “a habit of mind, a concern, even to obsession, with truth.”⁹⁴ Dorothy’s “pedantically truthful eye,” as Woof describes it, is highly invested in the accuracy of her descriptions of events and natural objects. This level of accuracy and detail, by contrast, rarely occurs in Dorothy’s correspondence. Woof believes the difference is attributable to audience: a letter to Mary, for example, would rightly include few details about the landscape, whereas a journal entry written with William’s composition in mind would. Indeed, William did mine Dorothy’s entries for material for his own verse, selecting some of her most enigmatic details and phrasings for his use. Dorothy in her letters is a human, social being conveying deaths, births, illnesses, and publications. As part of William’s poetic project and as part of her own natural history, Dorothy’s journals record a different sector of life altogether, one

⁹³ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), i.

⁹⁴ Woof, 37.

both more and less remarkable, and one that lived in its details.

Nevertheless, Dorothy's awareness of the uniqueness of the things she sees is directed not simply towards the objects themselves, but towards her relationship to them. That is, the details she presents in the journals are as much about her perception of an object as they are about the object itself. Although Virginia Woolf is right in reflecting that Dorothy's "plain statement proves to be aimed so directly at the object that if we look exactly along the line that it points we shall see precisely what she saw,"⁹⁵ she is right not because the object itself is revealed in some way, but because Dorothy's perception of it is. Indeed, the details of her description come not so much from a superfluity of information about the colour, size, fragrance, or feel of particular objects as it does from her subtle delineation of her experience of those characteristics. In her reading of Dorothy's description of the daffodils beside the lake, for example, Pamela Woof finds that Dorothy's revisions highlight her sense of the interaction of elements in the scene, elevating the wind "into a conscious partner of the dancing flowers." Dorothy does this by making additions to her initial description of the wind as a "furious" one that "seized [their] breath." The additions specify that the flowers "laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the lake. This wind blew directly over the lake to them."⁹⁶ The additions, without plainly stating that the wind is a "conscious partner of the dancing flowers" (as Woof does), nevertheless show the reader how to see the relation of the wind and the flowers the way Dorothy does.

In this way, then, the reader of Dorothy's journals is treated to an awareness of what it is like to experience Grasmere without Dorothy herself announcing in plain terms precisely what she feels, or precisely what it is like to be her as she walks. What Virginia Woolf calls Dorothy's "point[ing]" seems to be a very graceful form of environmental writing requiring, or

⁹⁵ Woolf, 37.

⁹⁶ Qtd. in Woof, 40.

inspiring, a reader who learns through the text how to imagine the possibility of inhabiting another's subjectivity. In "What is it like to be a bat?" Thomas Nagel suggests that it is not possible for us to imagine experience from another being's perspective. He chooses as his example a bat largely because the echolocation of bats allows them to experience the world differently than any human can. No matter how hard we try, he claims, we will never get further than imagining what it would be like for ourselves—our own consciousnesses—to inhabit the mind and body of a bat; we will not get much further, in other words, than dressing ourselves up in a bat suit. What Dorothy's writing suggests to readers is that that act of imagination is nevertheless worthwhile. Knowing precisely and conveying precisely how she sees, Dorothy gives the reader the opportunity to see as she does. Additionally, her investment in perception and description and her awareness of their possibilities and limitations lead her to an appreciation of the variety of phenomena in the world around her. She is only able to describe these phenomena as she experiences them. Nevertheless, she does not artificially circumscribe the bounds of her own experience. Instead, she opens her awareness as widely as possible, entertaining even those appearances and details that are inexplicable to her.

The accumulation of accurate detail in the journals is a significant aspect of her felt responsibilities toward the community of persons and things she constructs in the journals. Distinguishing the invitations of nonhuman others for attention is the foundational act of Dorothy's ethical natural history. The second is giving that attention, and the third is describing it justly. In her article, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," Martha Nussbaum reads Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* as a work of moral philosophy, one that examines the nature of moral attention and knowledge, and the possibility of improvising what we are morally required to do without relying on rules of duty. James's

characters are, of course, human, and Nussbaum's argument is directed towards moral human subjects. Nevertheless, Nussbaum describes the constraints of the Jamesian artist in terms that resonate with the constraints Dorothy seems to feel in recording her observations of nonhuman beings. Nussbaum's comments on James's moral philosophy stress moral knowledge as a product of precise perception and rendering:

Moral knowledge, James suggests . . . is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling . . . A responsible action, as James conceives it, is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic.⁹⁷

In these passages, Nussbaum speaks about the moral duties of the characters James creates and the responsibilities of the writer as he crafts them. Her reading of James has inspired ethicists interested in the treatment of nonhuman animals, such as Michael Allen Fox and Lesley McLean, who consider what it means to be “finely aware and richly responsible” in a world made up of humans and animals in “Animals in Moral Space.”⁹⁸ It seems to me that Nussbaum's reading of James is also applicable to the moral space Dorothy Wordsworth describes. The duties of the Jamesian artist as Nussbaum describes them are ones we can feel the pressure of in her journals. Moral knowledge as perception and moral action as its correct expression is at the heart of Dorothy's environmental ethic. Like the artist Nussbaum describes, she does not “feel free to create just anything at all: [she] imagines [herself] as straining to get it right, not to miss

⁹⁷ Martha Nussbaum, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Literature and the Moral Imagination,” in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 152, 154.

⁹⁸ Michael Allen Fox and Lesley McLean, “Animals in Moral Space,” in *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*, ed. Jodey Castricano (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008). There are also traces of Nussbaum's reading of James's conception of moral responsibility in her own writing on justice for nonhuman animals.

anything, to be keen rather than obtuse.”⁹⁹ At the same time, Dorothy’s treatment of natural subjects departs from Nussbaum’s aesthetic, one in which objects demand a very particular, and especially “artistic,” response. The artistic response presumably involves extensive, detailed descriptions. Dorothy’s descriptions—sparse, minimal, often merely constative—might seem to fall short of this artistic response. They are nevertheless often highly “context-specific,” “nuanced,” and “responsive.”

Indeed, a large portion of Dorothy’s keenness seems to lie in her fairly low interest in species classification and description or in generalized natural historical knowledge. Instead, the knowledge Dorothy is interested in collecting is about the specific organisms and phenomena she encounters. Where Gilbert White might write, for example, “*Query*. -Does each female cuckoo lay but one egg in a season, or does she drop several in different nests according as opportunity offers?”¹⁰⁰ (a question that refers not to a specific female cuckoo but to all females of the species), Dorothy will ask instead, “Observed some trees putting out red shoots. *Query*: What trees are they?”¹⁰¹ Thus, even when Dorothy is interested in learning a name for a species as a whole, her interest is generated by a regard for individual plants or creatures she has seen. Both Nussbaum and Scarry reflect upon the extent to which seeing and engaging things and people as individuals determines our ethical relation to them. “Within the confined circumference of beholder and beheld,” Scarry writes, there is “a reciprocal salute to the continuation of one another’s existence . . . and of one’s own responsibility for the continuity of existence.”¹⁰² Similarly, in an endnote on “particularity” in “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,” Nussbaum describes “love” as an “attachment to the particular” that contains the thought that “this person is

⁹⁹ Nussbaum, 163.

¹⁰⁰ *Selborne*, 120.

¹⁰¹ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Alfoxden*, February 5th, 1798.

¹⁰² Scarry, 92.

not replaceable, is the only one who will occupy exactly this relation.”¹⁰³ Dorothy, in her capacity to distinguish creatures, things, and appearances as individuals, recognizes that they are not replaceable and that their relationship to her is singular and not repeatable. That is, it is not the “thing itself” that is important to Dorothy, but her particular, unrepeatable relationship to it. A sudden awareness of the particularity of an individual flower and its relation to herself, for example, seems to motivate one of the most strange and memorable actions Dorothy records in the journals, on a day in mid-winter in Grasmere:

I found a strawberry blossom in a rock, the little slender flower had more courage than the green leaves, for *they* were but half expanded & half grown but the blossom was spread full out. I uprooted it rashly, & I felt as if I had been committing an outrage, so I planted it again—it will have but a stormy life of it, but let it live if it can.¹⁰⁴

The strawberry flower, braving what must have been a warm period in late January (not yet spring), catches Dorothy’s eye, as any harbingers of coming seasons seemed to. It distinguishes itself from the green leaves around it, the attention-grabbing blossom apparently calling out to be plucked. Though it might seem an odd comparison, we can associate the “outrage” Dorothy feels her action to be with William’s “merciless ravage” of branch and bough in “Nutting.” William attributes the “sense of pain” he feels upon this ravage (or upon reflecting upon it) to a somewhat lame “spirit in the woods,” which he beseeches a “dearest Maiden” to heed in her pathways through the trees.¹⁰⁵ Dorothy’s regret and her subsequent decision to restore the flower

¹⁰³ Nussbaum, 167.

¹⁰⁴ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 61.

¹⁰⁵ In lines that William would eventually attach to *Nutting*, it is less a spirit in the woods that William designates as a monitor of one’s behaviour towards nonhuman creatures than it is a spirit of attachment, and in that respect the siblings’ accounts of ethical relationships between human and nonhuman others comes closer. The lines (first written in late 1798) also foreshadow the “rash,” almost accidental, uprooting Dorothy would describe:

I would not strike a flower

to the ground, however, seems motivated not by some supervising spirit, but by a sudden awareness that the same qualities that caused her to uproot the flower—its striking appearance and its seeming invitation for attention—are what require her to allow it to continue its existence.

Years later, Dorothy seems to associate her noticing of the “little slender flower” in very late winter/early spring and her belated decision to save and restore it to the ground after she unthinkingly uprooted it, with “love.” The action of noticing, uprooting, re-rooting, and recording the act in the journal, is an extension of the ethical obligation she commemorates in “Loving and Liking.” Indeed, we can hear echoes of that episode in the poem’s second stanza, where she entreats her child auditor to make a distinction between loving and liking “things that have no feeling”:

[Do not] blush if o’er your heart be stealing
A love for things that have no feeling:
The spring’s first rose by you espied,
May fill your breast with joyful pride;
And you may love the strawberry-flower,
And love the strawberry in its bower;
But when the fruit, so often praised
For beauty, to your lip is raised,

As many a man will strike his horse, at least
If from the wantonness in which we play
With things we love, or from a freak of power,
Or from involuntary act of hand
Or foot unruly with excess of life,
It chanc’d that I ungently used a tuft
Of meadow-lillies, or had snapp’d the stem
Of foxglove bending o’er his native rill,
I should be loth to pass along my way
With unrepov’d indifference,—I would stop
Self-question’d, asking wherefore that was done.

William’s turning between possibilities for the same behaviour Dorothy would describe (is snapping the foxglove an act of “wantonness,” a “freak of power,” an “involuntary” act?) suggest that there is a certain undecideability about the reasons we treat things ungently, even when (or because) we love them. *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, eds. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 312, ll. 1-12.

Say not you *love* the delicate treat,
But *like* it, enjoy it, and thankfully eat. (ll. 27-38)

“Spring’s first rose” here seems to take the place of the strawberry flower. It too, appears as a first mark of spring and steals the heart of the observer. Moreover, the rose inspires in the observer’s breast a “joyful pride,” a kind of ownership or guardianship of the flower by virtue of its sighting. The strawberry fruit, on the other hand, is destined for consumption. The contrast between loving and liking here, in its division between those things we eat and those we do not, may strike us as somewhat absurd, but embedded within the poem’s monotonous rhyme and pedantic tone is the scene Dorothy described on January 31st and much the same lesson: the things we love are unique, and they require our attention, patience, and care. The things we like and the things we eat, by contrast, are interchangeable.

Dorothy’s ethic of love is ultimately differentiable from Scarry’s notion of justice through aesthetic admiration or Nussbaum’s notion of moral knowledge through perception because Dorothy’s “love for things that have no feeling” provides no clear prescription for moral action. Instead, “love” is defined simply by its capaciousness, its willingness to admire and to let the other inside, to engage it, and to *live* through that relation.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ In her response to my reading of Dorothy’s passage on the uprooting of the strawberry flower, Anne-Lise Francois points to the “brutality” of Dorothy’s final resolution to let the flower “live if it can” once she has transplanted it. She wonders at Dorothy’s readiness to uproot, consume, and destroy the flower as well as the edibles she mentions in “Loving and Liking,” and asks what this might mean for Dorothy’s relevance to an environmentalist and animal-based ethics. Though I have not addressed these important points directly in this chapter, I have attempted to suggest that the “love” Dorothy describes might include, in its capaciousness, brutality and even certain forms of indifference. Incidentally, at the time of this writing a 21st-century version of “Loving and Liking” was published in the op-ed section of the *New York Times* (May 28th, 2011). In “Liking is for Cowards. Go for What Hurts” Jonathan Franzen posits “liking” (the essential activity of the Facebook user) as “commercial culture’s substitute for loving” in a techno-consumerist age. Consumer products, unlike things in the natural world, are designed to be likable: to be “allies and enablers of narcissism.” They are not indifferent to us, nor do they trouble us. By contrast, Franzen claims, the things we love (human and natural) can be profoundly indifferent to our wishes and profoundly troubling (as we can be to them). Both Wordsworth’s poem, written for children, and Franzen’s essay, originally presented as a commencement speech, advocate for love as an ethical

Dorothy's skilful descriptions, neither literal nor abstract, neither pure matter nor pure meaning, describe without circumscribing a world of relations. "Loving and liking" takes many forms in the *Journals*, resulting in a dissolution or melting of the heart that lets other, undetermined, beings in. "Upon the side of Loughrigg my heart dissolved in what I saw," she writes on June first, 1800, in the *Grasmere Journal*, "I was not startled, but recalled from my reverie by a noise as of a child paddling without shoes. I looked up, and saw a lamb close to me—it approached nearer & nearer, as if to examine me & stood a long time."¹⁰⁷

form of engagement with the world's inhabitants in their particularity, with an emphasis not on the terms of that engagement, but on the sheer necessity of it.

¹⁰⁷ *Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 28.

CHAPTER 2

The Influence of Natural Objects: Wordsworth and the Poetry of Nature

What then does the Poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting upon each other . . .

– Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*¹⁰⁸

Just as a reader familiar with Dorothy Wordsworth's journals might call up from memory the particular objects and things starring in her journal entries—a birch tree glinting in the sunlight, sheep with glowing ridges on their backs, a pair of swallows—a reader familiar with her brother's poetry of the same period might also readily recall the objects and things that live in his poems. They include spear-grass waving against a wall, a battered thorn and a pool three feet long and two feet wide, hooting owls, a sheep, a hawthorn, and a girl with a pitcher upon her head. Many of these objects appear in the writing of both brother and sister: a field of daffodils, the thorn, the pair of swallows, and a particular appearance of the moon, shuttling through a "blue-black" vault in the sky on one particular evening. I have called the natural objects featured in Dorothy's journal entries "significant others": things that have stepped away from their surrounding landscapes to invite her polite engagement. This chapter examines the role of objects, things, animals, plants, sounds, and appearances in William's work. Without consistently or dogmatically referring to these things as a single class (the "nonhuman," the "natural," or the "material," for example), this chapter nevertheless works to develop a theory of affect, agency and interaction between the speakers of William's poems and their nonhuman subjects.

¹⁰⁸ William Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, edited by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 752.

Many of the poems and fragments I treat in this chapter were composed in Alfoxden in 1798, the year Dorothy began keeping a journal and the year the Wordsworths began living together near Coleridge. That year, Wordsworth and Coleridge conceived the *Lyrical Ballads* project and Wordsworth began drafting *The Prelude* and related autobiographical poetry. They also embarked upon an ambitious program of reading, which included Erasmus Darwin's long treatise on the laws of organic life, *Zoonomia*. Much of the experimental work Wordsworth produced during this period features either an object or series of objects, and proposes a theory of life and "the common range of visible things."¹⁰⁹ In the poems, Wordsworth explores the feeling, responsiveness, agential and even representational capacities of nonhuman things. And he troubles easy distinctions between the living and the nonliving, the human and the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate.

In *Wordsworth's Poetry*, Geoffrey Hartman refers to this time as the Alfoxden period, during which Wordsworth began to produce poems based on "various impressions in situ." "It is perhaps the first time," Hartman proposes, that "a poet has kept his eye so steadily on the object (which is also a subject, himself) and attempted a direct transcription of his personal response to nature."¹¹⁰ In recording "only insubstantial experiences, momentary spells or sensory fixations," Wordsworth tests whether these things can themselves be a poem, rather than an ornament to it, Hartman says. Hartman does not believe that Wordsworth's attempts were successful, but he

¹⁰⁹ William Wordsworth, the Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799, in *William Wordsworth: The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979), l. 216.

¹¹⁰ Hartman's parenthetical assertion that the object is also a subject and that that subject is "himself," assumes that the poet does not or can not consider his objects as themselves potential subjects. This chapter considers the reverse: that Wordsworth can and does imagine the potential subjectivity of his subjects and that this is a primary concern of his poetry during this period. Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 163.

does believe they led Wordsworth toward “genuine nature poetry.”¹¹¹ The low value Hartman implicitly places on “nature poetry” and his belief that Wordsworth’s fragments are not successful are a strange platform for his further reading, which more positively evaluates the period as a turning point in Wordsworth’s career as a poet (a statement he draws from Wordsworth himself). Hartman is particularly interested in what he sees as a revelation in Wordsworth’s thinking about nature and history upon his return to Alfoxden, which he argues led Wordsworth to recognize the continuity of the present with the past and the continuity of the self with the natural world. Wordsworth’s sense of these continuities, Hartman suggests, led him to a more generous conception of place and the self: if nature and the self are one and continuous everywhere, inspiration can be found anywhere; if the past is recoverable in the present, Wordsworth need speak only of the present.

Hartman associates this generous expansion of world and self with generalities and it is for this reason, perhaps, that he is disconcerted by Wordsworth’s attempts during this period to name and describe in detail particular things (over which, Hartman says, Wordsworth “lingers embarrassingly”). Hartman sees Wordsworth’s interest in particular things as a step backward into an obsession with particular place. In this chapter, I revise Hartman’s appraisal of Wordsworth’s treatment of natural objects to propose that, in describing natural objects, Wordsworth sought not only to record his personal response to nature, but to explore those objects as potential subjects (a project that does indeed produce a potentially embarrassing lingering over apparently insignificant objects). Additionally, I claim that Wordsworth’s poetry is motivated (rather than impeded) by his fascination with the complex, interrelated lives of particular things on the one hand, and the sheer existence of things in general, on the other. In

¹¹¹ Hartman, 164.

this fragment written upon his return to Alfoxden, for example, it is the recognition of particular trees and hills that inspires a forgetting of those particular things and a forgetting of a particular self in favour of the “ebb and flow” of life:

To gaze
On that green hill and on those scattered trees
And feel a pleasant consciousness of life
In the impression of that loveliness
Until the sweet sensation called the mind
Into itself, by image from without
Unvisited, and all her reflex powers
Wrapped in a still dream [of] forgetfulness.

I lived without the knowledge that I lived
Then by those beauteous forms brought back again
To lose myself again as if my life
Did ebb and flow with strange mystery.¹¹²

In his deictic pointing to “that green hill” and “those scattered trees” Wordsworth begins in a particular place and the opening imperative, “To gaze,” suggests a repeated activity, a return to *that* green hill and *those* scattered trees that inspires, in turn, the experience of forgetfulness as repeated and called forth by those particular things. The hill and trees, in other words, inspire their own forgetting as the speaker is called away from external images by the “sweet sensation” of life that they inspire. This process is described as physical rather than associative; the “pleasant consciousness of life” is less an idea than it is an “impression” of loveliness and the impression is registered as a “sweet sensation.” There is no distinction between thought and feeling, idea and impression. In the second part of the fragment, the process is repeated again as an awareness of “beauteous forms” brings the speaker out of unselfconsciousness only to return him to it. Hartman reads the fragment as an articulation of “the one Life, within us and abroad” as “activated by changing polar distinctions.” As he very gracefully puts it: “Outer and inner,

¹¹² *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford, 1967-72), 341.

active and passive, subject and object are felt as a fluctuation expressed by the doublets of Wordsworth's style: I lived I lived, again again, myself my life, ebb and flow."¹¹³

The phrase "those beautiful forms" (the ones that bring the speaker into and out of consciousness of himself) also encapsulates a continuous division or fluctuation in Wordsworth's thinking during this time about the significance of particular objects and things (named and described) and objects and things in general, which he often refers to as "objects," "forms," or "things." In the phrase "those beautiful forms," Wordsworth points to both: "those" forms specifically, but as "forms" or generic shapes of things. The specificity of Wordsworth's general forms is telling. In his return to Alfoxden (as Hartman suggests), Wordsworth sees in natural forms the continuity of past with present and of the individual subject with its environment. In that sense, the particular objects and things he encounters are irrelevant; they exist primarily as a testament to what Paul Fry has called, in *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are*, "the ontic unity of all things."¹¹⁴ But Wordsworth also points to specific things. He names, describes, recalls, and engages with them in their specificity and in these cases they are awarded notice simply for being what they are: they could have been anything, but Wordsworth deems significant that they are the *particular* things they are.¹¹⁵ In his attentiveness to their

¹¹³ Though Hartman presents this gentle fluctuation as the end-point of the fragment's energies, he also reads the fragment as one in which Wordsworth "passes beyond" a specific place or object, a movement that is also a turning inward (177-78). This movement is characteristic of Hartman's reading of Wordsworth and is an excellent and sympathetic account of much of Wordsworth's poetry, but its implicit privileging of the inner over the outer, the general over the specific, is one I challenge in this chapter.

¹¹⁴ Paul Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

¹¹⁵ Wordsworth's interest in the particular arises out of his larger exploration of memory and character formation. It is also part of his interest in perception and aesthetics, as it is for Elaine Scarry, who believes that "beauty always takes place in the particular" because our attention is only called and held by specific things. Citing Proust, Scarry also states that beauty is particular as opposed to synthetic; it can only be recognized when it is special, even unforeseeable (*On Beauty and Being Just*, 18-19). In this chapter, I do not focus on the beauty of the particular things Wordsworth describes in many of his fragments, but (like Scarry's beautiful things) their sheer singularity and the unexpectedness of their

particular existence and his fascination with their forms of interrelating Wordsworth is not unlike his sister Dorothy. His experiments with Dorothy in radically open forms of perception (described in the previous chapter), his poetic collaboration with Coleridge, and his reading of Darwin's *Zoonomia* all shaped his regard for and engagement with things, objects, and forms during this period. In these general references, he focuses attention on the shifting, amorphous character of what he calls the "active principle" of things or the power of things to influence one another. In other instances, he looks closely at these forms of agency at work in particular scenarios, describing the energies and interrelationships of wind-swept leaves, balls of snow, and breathing flowers. In the processes of their active lives things, for Wordsworth, suggest patterns of repetition, analogy, transmission and reception that can be received as the poetry of nature, as well as evoked and emulated in his own verse.

This chapter reads a selection of Wordsworth's poetry (written at Alfoxden and, later, at Grasmere) to elaborate his belief in the creativity and collective agency of plants, animals, and nonliving things. During this brief experimental period Wordsworth was open to a kind of vital materialism that has as much in common with *Zoonomia* as it does with contemporary posthumanist political theorist Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*. The emphasis in *Vibrant Matter*, *Zoonomia*, and *Lyrical Ballads* alike is on exploring what Bennett calls "the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things."¹¹⁶ But Wordsworth's materialism is also uniquely Wordsworthian in its emphasis on things not only as effective, but as creative, stimulated by an impulse to "make / Some other being conscious of their life" through processes of enticement, expansion, and repetition. Wordsworth favored the word "impression" to

appearance distinguishes them to Wordsworth as worthy of poetic treatment. My discussion of "The Thorn" in this chapter elaborates on these points.

¹¹⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

describe the effects of these processes. His objects and things are impressive and impress-able, touching one another in both a literal and a figural sense. Indeed, in taking up Erasmus Darwin's theory that all forms of life, even plants, experience the world through sensation and that these sensations are registered and repeated in ideas and dreams, Wordsworth resists making a distinction between material, sensory experience and the world evoked through the creative imagination. For Wordsworth, nonhuman things produce, through their relationships to one another, a poetry of daily life characterized by repetition, analogy, and expression and punctuated by accident, surprise, and play.

In this chapter, I link Wordsworth's interest in descriptive poetry to natural history writing and consider his engagement with Darwin's *Zoonomia* in "Lines Written in Early Spring." I then move to Wordsworth's fascination with the transformation or enchantment of particular objects in the world and on the page through transitory natural phenomena and the influence of the imagination, respectively. Positing the relationship of natural phenomena and the imagination not simply as analogous, but also as richly interactive, I conclude with a reading of two lesser-known fragments and several spots of time episodes to evolve a theory of Wordsworth's playful, creative engagement with assemblies of human and nonhuman actors and his evocation of these assemblies in his poetry. This account of Wordsworth's dynamic and interactive relationship with a world of "vibrant matter" counters a pervasive characterization of Wordsworth as a poet who merely "fill'd all things with himself / And made all gentle sounds tell back" his own tale.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ In "The Nightingale: A Conversational Poem" (written for *Lyrical Ballads* in April, 1798), Coleridge describes "youths and maidens most poetical" who have fallen prey to this narcissistic mistake, calling the Nightingale's song a "melancholy strain" in a reflection of their own mood, rather than of the bird's actual sounds (which Coleridge deems joyful). Coleridge's criticism was not necessarily directed at

The Application of Natural History to Poetry

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Coleridge seemed particularly motivated to explore how a better understanding of natural history might inform the *Lyrical Ballads*, and both he and Wordsworth may have read John Aikin's 1777 *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*. In that essay, John Aikin (brother of Anna Barbauld) discusses what he believed to be the sad state of modern poetry in terms very similar to those Wordsworth would later use in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*, which had been charged with treating "uninteresting subjects."¹¹⁸ Like Wordsworth, Aikin believed the "insipidity of Modern Poetry" was due not to any particular subject matter, but to an inept, unobservant, and unrefreshing treatment of subjects, particularly natural ones. Wordsworth's vow to "look steadily at his subject" might be considered a direct response to Aikin's complaint that the description of natural objects had degenerated to the point that they were "faint, obscure, and ill characterized . . . owing to a too cursory and general survey of objects."¹¹⁹ Aikin and Wordsworth's pieces also hold in common a contempt for the lazy passage of particular figures, phrases, and associations through the work of generations of poets. Both writers, at least in this context, see such borrowings as shortcuts to the work of original observation and reflection required of any poet. Thus, Wordsworth "[abstains] from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets, till such feelings of disgust are

Wordsworth, but it does seem representative of a particular version of Wordsworth we think we know. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Nightingale," *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 795, ll. 20-21.

¹¹⁸ Robert Southey, "Review of *Lyrical Ballads*, with a Few Other Poems," *The Critical Review* 24 (Oct. 1798): 197-204. Rpt. in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*. Ed. Laurie Lanzen Harris. Vol. 9. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 23 June 2010.

¹¹⁹ "An Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry," 10.

connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower,”¹²⁰ and Aikin urges poets to drop the erroneous representations of nature that writers “of every age have adopted,” from “the song of the dying swan” to the “halcyon’s nest; the crocodile’s tears; the pelican’s feeding her young with her blood; and the whole existence of the phoenix.”¹²¹ Though Wordsworth is primarily concerned to eradicate trite associations and worn, ornate diction, and Aikin to rid descriptive poetry of tired and incorrect descriptions of the natural world, both authors grasp for a poetry that might more brilliantly and, in some sense, more truly express nature.

Like his sister’s journal entries, the emphasis in many of Wordsworth’s descriptions is less on the features of natural objects than it is on their animation. He aims for an evocation of their lively being even when they are not living, in a strict sense. In a relatively lengthy fragment, “The wind sent from behind the hill,” Wordsworth describes in detail the appearance of fallen oak leaves in a hail storm. In these lines, the leaves are animated by the hailstones, which cause them to “skip and hop:”

See where the heavy hailstones drop
The withered leaves they skip and hop,
There’s not a single breeze of air –
Yet here, and there, and every where
Along the smooth and spacious floor,
Beneath the thick and verdant bower,
The wither’d leaves jump up and spring
As if each were a living thing.
This long description why indite
Because it was a pleasant sight.¹²²

¹²⁰ “Preface,” 748.

¹²¹ Aikin, 24.

¹²² This fragment and others cited hereafter are included in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, edited by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 283-84, ll. 13-22. As the editors point out, “The wind sent from behind the hill” was likely composed in the same sitting as Wordsworth’s first draft of “The Thorn” on March 19, 1798.

Wordsworth's imperative, "See where the heavy hailstones drop," calls on his reader to envision this action and to marvel with him at the animation of the dead leaves. Pointing "here, and there, and every where," he slows the pace of the verse to the registration of three discrete points of contact where particular hail stones hit particular leaves. Beyond those adjectives included in his description of the "smooth and spacious floor" of leaves below the speaker's feet and the "thick and verdant bower" above him, the speaker uses few adjectives in his description, directing his reader's attention instead to particular points in space and to the action of the hailstones and leaves, evoked in a succession of punchy verbs: drop, skip, hop, jump and spring.

Surprisingly, the last two lines of the poem offer a diffident apology of sorts for this extended descriptive romp and a simple explanation for it: the sight was pleasurable. The playful verbs used to describe the action of the leaves imply that their activity, too, was pleasurable.

In his anthology, *Romantic Natural Histories* (which intersperses Romantic poetry and prose with a variety of scientific reports, travel writing, and natural history of the same period), Ashton Nichols persuasively links the apparently anthropomorphic tendencies of Romantic poetry with a revolutionary scientific interest in the common roots of pleasure and pain in both human and nonhuman animals. Nichols stresses that "pleasure," in particular, was a common concern of Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, Oliver Goldsmith and Erasmus Darwin.¹²³ Darwin, especially, explored pleasure as a principal of reproduction, and happiness as the common property of all living things.¹²⁴ The poetry of Darwin's *Temple of Nature*, for

¹²³ Ashton Nichols, introduction to *Romantic Natural Histories*.

¹²⁴ Interestingly, as Tim Fulford explores in his article "Coleridge, Darwin, Linnaeus: The Sexual Politics of Botany," in *The Wordsworth Circle*, 1997 Summer, 28 (3), 124-30, Coleridge himself may have chastised Darwin for his salacious portraits in "The Loves of the Plants." Coleridge seems to have been concerned to protect what he felt was an important distinction between human and vegetable love. It is not clear, nevertheless, that Coleridge was particularly vexed by scientific inquiries into the possibility that all sensation and emotion might be traced to the same material causes.

example, describes in purple terms the “sexual Pleasures” of a series of heavily anthropomorphized varieties of flowers, but explains in painstaking scientific prose the source material for each of his wildest, most poetical articulations. Darwin, Buffon, and others also discussed more generally the capacity for happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure held by all life forms. Darwin extended this idea most widely by suggesting that the general economy of nature over time generated more and more happiness, the product of an endless cycle of death, decay, and reanimation, through which ever more organisms enjoyed the benefit of life. This cycle of joy and happiness (as well pain), Darwin believed, included human beings.

By the 1790’s, as Nichols points out, poetic descriptions of the natural world included comparisons between the human and nonhuman spheres that were not simply metaphorical, but that were also supported by the best observational science of the time. The Wordsworths and Coleridge were aware of this science, and may have connected it to their philosophical reading. As Adam Potkay argues, Wordsworth and Coleridge were very likely reading Spinoza’s *Ethics* over the summer of 1796. Potkay believes that Wordsworth absorbed Spinoza’s belief in “the bond between (one) life and joy,” while extending the “franchise of joy” beyond the human apprehension of God in nature to nonhuman creatures and things, who are also able to enjoy life and intuit, as Potkay puts it, “the interconnection of all things.”¹²⁵ The connection between joy and life is expressed most prominently in the *Lyrical Ballads* in “Lines Written in Early Spring.” It is in that poem, as well, that Wordsworth most deliberately considers the value of what may, or may not, be a form of anthropomorphism. In the “Lines” Wordsworth also seems to experiment with many of the ideas Darwin elaborates in *Zoonomia*, a treatise Wordsworth requested in

¹²⁵ Adam Potkay, “Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things,” *PMLA* 2008 March; 123 (2): 390-404.

1798.¹²⁶

The poem begins with the speaker in an easy and contemplative posture, “reclined, / In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind.”¹²⁷ The aural backdrop, “a thousand blended notes” is set behind the reclining speaker like a painted curtain, whose figures become differentiated and animated as the poem develops. Though the basis of the contemplative poem is analogy, likeness, and shared sensation, the speaker separates himself from the natural world he describes, even as he articulates his links to it, which he describes in the second verse:

To her fair works did nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it griev'd my heart to think
What man has made of man. (5-8)

As Potkay points out, the word *human* in the phrase “human soul” is a delimiting adjective: while designating the particular soul it describes as a human one, it also acknowledges that there are other sorts of souls. Thus, while differentiating the speaker from the “fair works” to which his soul is linked, it also links him to an en-souled natural world. In its peculiar phrasing, the line also imagines the soul’s physical relation to the body as a fluid that runs through the speaker, curiously distinct from the body yet coterminous with nature’s “fair works.”

¹²⁶ As Richard Matlak reports in *The Wordsworth Circle* (“Wordsworth's Reading of *Zoonomia* in Early Spring” 21 (1990): 76-81), Wordsworth requested a copy of *Zoonomia* “by the first carrier” in February, 1798 and Dorothy wrote that it “completely answered the purpose” for which Wordsworth requested it in mid-March (she did not specify that purpose, unfortunately). Several articles have appeared on Wordsworth’s treatment of *Zoonomia*, but my sense is that much more could be done. James H. Averill concentrates on its medical materialist influence on Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, citing *Zoonomia's* case studies on madness and obsession as a source for “Goody Black and Harry Gill,” “The Idiot Boy,” “The Thorn,” and others (“Wordsworth and ‘Natural Science’: The Poetry of 1798” in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 77 (1978): 232-46). Richard Matlak rightly sees *Zoonomia's* influence on Wordsworth as extending beyond the inspiration for specific poems to Wordsworth's biological understanding of life. In his very brief article in the *Wordsworth Circle* he sketches the influence of this understanding on Wordsworth's conception of nature's mental life, his ideas about the healthfulness of the body in relation to nature, and the “corporal texture of his inner-body imagery” (232).

¹²⁷ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 76 ll. 2-4.

The fluidity of the soul in this formulation resonates with Erasmus Darwin's descriptions of what he called the "two essences or substances" of all things. All things, Darwin proposed, consist of a substance "which may be termed spirit" and another, which he termed "matter." Darwin believed spirit possesses the "power to commence or produce motion," while matter possesses only the power to "receive or communicate it."¹²⁸ Darwin was careful, however, not to associate "spirit" with the immaterial or supernatural. In *Zoonomia* he makes clear that,

By the words spirit of animation or sensorial power, I mean only that animal life, which mankind possesses in common with brutes, and in some degree even with vegetables, and leave the consideration of the immortal part of us, which is the object of religion, to those who treat of revelation.¹²⁹

Though Wordsworth specifies a "human soul" in the second verse of "Lines Written in Early Spring," his evocation of that soul not necessarily as an immortal thing, but as a movement through the body suggests his interest in Darwin's project, as does his preoccupation with the lively pleasures of the birds, twigs, and flowers around him. The "spirit of animation" or "sensorial power" Darwin describes all beings possessing is very much at play in the "Lines," where the behaviour the speaker observes in the plants and birds around him is either in common, or identical with, his own (the speaker's tone suggests that he is tempted to consider their joy as in common with his own, rather than simply similar to it).

This temptation is the same with which Darwin begins *Zoonomia*. In his preface, he dramatically asserts the powerful benefits and dangers of analogical thinking:

The great CREATOR of all things has infinitely diversified the works of his hands, but has at the same time stamped a certain similitude on the features of nature, that demonstrates to us, that *the whole is one family of one parent*. On this similitude is founded all rational analogy; which, so long as it is concerned in comparing the essential properties of bodies, leads us to many and important discoveries; but when with licentious activity it links together objects, otherwise

¹²⁸ Erasmus Darwin, *Zoonomia; or, The Laws of Organic Life* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1794), 5.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

discordant, by some fanciful similitude; it may indeed collect ornaments for wit and poetry, but philosophy and truth recoil from its combinations.¹³⁰

The speaker of the “Lines,” who hears “a thousand blended notes” in a reclined posture is engaged in an activity of analogy that, if not “licentious,” is nevertheless leisurely, fanciful, and poetical. The charm of the speaker’s “sweet mood” is in fact a certain drift in the thinking it produces, through which “pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind” (3-4), and this drifting extends also from “nature” to “man,” and from the pleasures of the birds, flowers, and twigs that spread around the speaker to his own. Despite their ease, the directionality and plausibility of these analogies is in question throughout the poem, and it becomes unclear whether the analogies the speaker implicitly makes are observations of “fanciful similarity,” “rational analogy” or even true commonality. Both Darwin and Wordsworth seem interested in these varieties of analogical thinking as segments in a process, with inevitable turns from like to unlike or from similar to same in a process analogous to the evolution of natural forms (which Darwin would describe in detail elsewhere in *Zoonomia* and *The Temple of Nature*).

The second two lines of the second stanza initiate a tenuous division in the poem between feeling and thinking (and, later, divisions among sensing, thinking and doing). In this articulation, the heart grieves over what the mind thinks (“And much it griev’d my heart to think / What man has made of man” (7-8)). But in their phrasing, the lines also suggest that the heart itself may be a thinking organ and, in particular, the organ of analogical thinking, grieving over “What man has made of man.” From the tenuousness of an analogy made by a heart that thinks, Wordsworth moves in the middle verses to a series of variously confident, and qualified, assertions of the pleasures of the plants and birds around him:

Through primrose-tufts, in that sweet bower,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 1.

The periwinkle trail'd its wreathes;
And 'tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopp'd and play'd:
Their thoughts I cannot measure,
But the least motion which they made,
It seem'd a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there. (9-20)

Wordsworth's emphasis on the pleasures of sensation resonates with Darwin's arguments in *Zoonomia*. In particular, it reflects Darwin's argument that even plants pursue, and enjoy, these pleasures. Indeed, Darwin's "vegetables" are capable of "spontaneous motion" and are endowed with many "organs of sense" that distinguish varying degrees of moisture, light, smell, etc. They actively avoid pain, and seek out pleasure within the constraints of their limited mobility. In this vein, Wordsworth's twigs "spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air," and his flowers enjoy the breaths they take. Actions like these imply, as Darwin puts it, "sensation or volition," the basis for his belief that vegetables do not merely respond to irritants in their environment, but in fact have "ideas" of the external world like the ones humans formulate through their senses. Moreover, Darwin concluded that vegetable life is "furnished with a common sensorium belonging to each bud, and that they must occasionally repeat those perceptions either in their dreams or waking hours, and consequently possess ideas of so many of the properties of the external world, and of their own existence."¹³¹

¹³¹ Darwin, 107. An extended reading of *Zoonomia* with Wordsworth's poetry, which I have not developed in this chapter, might explore the compelling resemblance between Darwin's theory of the repetition of perceptions in "dreams or waking hours" as the source of self-consciousness with Wordsworth's interest in trance states and repetition as a source of consciousness. In a fragment composed at Grasmere in 1800, for example, Wordsworth writes, "when / Our trance

Wordsworth's description of animal sensation and volition in the "Lines" is a great deal more limited than Darwin's. Indeed, in the fourth verse, on the motions of birds, the speaker confines himself to those motions and an estimation of the birds' pleasure, declining to consider their thoughts: "The birds around me hopp'd and play'd: / Their thoughts I cannot measure" (13-14). The punning of "measure" as the ability to understand the birds' thoughts and as the ability to transcribe them in verse is a playful way of putting at arm's reach some of the speculations Darwin engages in *Zoonomia* and also a delicate suggestion that the birds' thoughts may truly be immeasurable—in some way beyond or outside the bounds of anthropomorphic analogical thinking, poetic fancy, or language.

The speaker bumps up against the limitations of various forms of knowing throughout the poem, as he struggles to reconcile what he sees, thinks, and believes. The middle section of the poem vacillates between these forms of knowing. In the third verse, for example, it is the speaker's "faith that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes." In the fourth verse, the speaker believes that the birds hop and play with what "seem'd a thrill of pleasure," and in the fifth verse the speaker "must think, do all [he] can," that there is pleasure in the spreading twigs as they stretch to catch the air. Thus the speaker moves from faith to surmise to thought (as if compelled to do so) in a series of observations that test the strength of what is a fundamentally anthropomorphic, or sympathetic, impulse. Wordsworth ensures, however, that we think of that impulse in a broader context by flipping the directionality of the speaker's analogical thinking to contemplate twice "[w]hat man has made of man," based upon his observations of nature. This

had left us, oft have we by aid / Of the impressions which it left behind / Look'd inward on ourselves, and learn'd perhaps / Something of what we are...by such retrospect we brought it [the "original impression of delight"] back / To yet a second and a second life, / While in this excitation of the mind / A vivid pulse of sentiment and thought / Beat palpably within us, and all shades / Of consciousness were ours." *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 323-4, ll. 12-24.

move seems at once ancillary and essential to the poem's exploration of nonhuman pleasure. In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker's lament hinges upon a strangely forceful evocation of the reflections that preceded it, but the verse is nevertheless consistent with the powerful ambivalence of the poem as a whole:

If I these thoughts may not prevent,
If such be of my creed the plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man? (21-24)

In this final verse and the one preceding it, thinking about the pleasure of nonhuman beings is something the speaker cannot avoid: he "must" think of it, and he "may not prevent" himself from doing so. Why should the speaker want to prevent these thoughts? In the context of Darwin's work, we can link such reservations to a possible unwillingness to fold "human" emotions such as pride, hope, and joy into the commonly available "pleasures" of all living beings, and emotions such as fear, anxiety, and disgust into "pains" ("all emotions," Darwin claimed, "arise out of the exertions of these two faculties of the animal sensorium").¹³² In the context of the poem, however, the resistance to believing in commonly held and available pleasures is expressly linked to the pain the speaker must feel, believing this, over the relative absence of such commonly available pleasures in human relationships. In this way, Wordsworth raises the stakes of the anthropomorphic thinking that the "sweet mood" he describes at the outset of the poem encourages him to indulge. He also cleverly turns the tables on critics of Darwin's work, who believed that acceptance of the material basis of all emotions would diminish the complexity and depth of human forms of love and joy. Instead, Wordsworth suggests that allowing—or requiring—ourselves to acknowledge the material, universal basis of

¹³² Darwin, 57.

pleasure and pain may require us to acknowledge the impoverishment of its human forms in comparison to its animal and vegetable ones.

Wordsworth revised the cryptic lines “If I these thoughts may not prevent, / If such be of my creed the plan” in 1820 to read “If this belief from Heaven is sent, / If such be nature’s holy plan,”¹³³ removing the reference to a “creed” and tentatively placing responsibility for the speaker’s thoughts with an external, religious source. While the 1798 version, with its “creed,” also identifies the poem’s logic as one depending upon a quasi-religious faith, “creed” (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes), may also more broadly apply to any individual or group’s system of belief that is capable of being expressed in a definite formula. Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, though not itself a formula, is a proof of the creed Wordsworth invokes in “Lines Written in Early Spring”—that nonhuman things think, feel, and act not only as passive registers of their surroundings, but as creative agents capable of expressing ideas, whether singly or in concert with others.

Impressive Objects and Things, Active and Efficient

The poem printed immediately after “Lines Written in Early Spring” in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* proceeds with that poem’s interest in nonhuman forms of expressivity, extending them to a nearly inert, “aged thorn.” This natural object straddles the boundaries between the living and nonliving, the animate and inanimate. “The Thorn” is important for our understanding of natural objects in the *Ballads* not only because it features a natural object in its title and is one of the collection’s featured poems (“The Thorn” was distinguished by a half-title page in the 1802 printing), but also because a rich store of material supplementary to the poem

¹³³ Revisions noted as footnotes to the reading text by editors James Butler and Karen Green, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 76.

attests to the centrality of the thorn as a compelling and creatively engaging object. Indeed, although we might think of the poem as being about the story of Martha Ray or its notoriously “garrulous” narrator, it does not seem to have had its origin in that story. At least, Wordsworth does not credit the “The Lass of Fair Wone” or any Scottish ballad (possible sources for this story) with inspiring its writing, and an early version of the poem presents, as Dorothy described them, merely “lines describing a stunted thorn”:

[On a] summit where the stormy gale
Sweeps through the clouds from vale to vale—
A thorn there is which like a stone
With jagged lichens is o'ergrown,
A thorn that wants its thorny points
A toothless thorn with knotted joints,
Not higher than a two years' child,
It stands upon that spot so wild;
Of leaves it has repaired its loss
With heavy tufts of dark green moss,
Which from the ground in plenteous crop
Creep[?]s upward to its very top
To bury it for ever-more.¹³⁴

This draft of the poem, like the extended version, relies upon repetition, apparent tautology, and cloying rhyme for its effect. Most all of the characteristics Wordsworth presents in this version of the poem also appear in the published version and two of the lines (“A thorn there is which like a stone / With jagged lichens is o’ergrown”) appear in almost exactly the same form in the published poem as a frequent refrain. Wordsworth would defend these features in a note to the poem included in the second edition of the *Ballads* as evidence of the “inadequateness of our own power, or the deficiencies of language” in communicating impassioned feeling. The “craving in the mind” induced by consciousness of this deficiency causes speakers to “cling to

¹³⁴ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 283, ll. 1-13.

the same words, or words of the same character.”¹³⁵ In the note to the poem, the particular speaker Wordsworth references is the “Captain of a small trading vessel” who he says narrates the story of Martha Ray, but the “craving in the mind” is evident in the draft of the poem, as well (though there is no reason to believe Wordsworth already envisioned that speaker as the sailor he would later describe). This may be because Wordsworth was, as he explains in his Fenwick note to the poem, responding even in the draft version of the poem to a creative imperative to make a deep impression on his readers by representing a simple object. In the Fenwick note, Wordsworth describes encountering the thorn and his desire to write about it:

Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day a thorn which I had often past in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, ‘Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment.’ I began the poem accordingly and composed it with great rapidity.¹³⁶

One of the “inventions” Wordsworth ultimately employed to fix the thorn as an impressive object in his readers’ minds was the story of Martha Ray, but in the initial version of the poem Wordsworth attempted only to describe the thorn and the storm. In the descriptive draft, the storm opens the scene, drawing the reader’s attention as it drew Wordsworth’s on Quantock hill. In the final version of the poem, however, the storm drops out of the description and the story of Martha Ray (as told by its superstitious narrator), takes its place in enhancing the interest and impressiveness of the thorn for readers of the poem. As Wordsworth describes it in the Fenwick note, his object in writing (and, presumably, revising) the poem was not to describe the thorn as it appeared in the storm, but to emulate the effect of the storm on the thorn: to transform the stunted object into an impressive one for his readers in the same way that the storm transformed

¹³⁵ Wordsworth’s advertisement for the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 351.

¹³⁶ “Notes to Lyrical Ballads,” *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 350.

it into an impressive one when he passed it on that particular day (never having noticed it before).

According to Coleridge, he and Wordsworth viewed such transformations or enchantments as “the poetry of nature.” In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes this poetry:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination. The sudden charm which accidents of light and shade, which moonlight or sunset diffused over a known and familiar landscape appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. *These are the poetry of nature.*¹³⁷

Coleridge’s final, italicized, statement is delightfully ambiguous. It is difficult to designate what “these” might refer to, or whether the poetry “of” nature refers to poetry about nature or poetry by nature. Two possible, differing, readings of the line are that accidental natural phenomena are nature’s poetry, and that faithfulness to and imaginative modification of nature produces the best poetry about it. The two readings are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, though Wordsworth and Coleridge may have differed somewhat in their understanding of “imagination,” there is a consistency in these passages and others in their recognition that the role of imagination in composing poetry and the role of accidental phenomena in composing effects in nature are the same: that both produce “impressive effects out of simple elements.” In his note to “The Thorn,” Wordsworth notes that imagination is the faculty that has the power to produce these impressive effects, and that he intended his “superstitious” narrator to have more than a usual share of it.

¹³⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton University Press, 1983) Volume II, Chapter XIV, 5.

Throughout these passages by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the activity of the imagination is described as akin to the activity of a natural world that continually casts as novel its most basic and enduring elements, and that produces intangible, unrepeatable, yet noticeable effects. As noted earlier, Wordsworth's favoured term to describe these effects was "impressive:" the impressive effect, object, or event is one that leaves its shape, imprint, or indentation in the mind or material with which it interacts, but which may or may not itself be traced. Throughout his writing of this period (in the *Lyrical Ballads* and in the two-part *Prelude*), Wordsworth describes the power of nature and its objects as "impressive," a term he uses variously as adjective and as verb to refer to their relative importance and to the nature of their actions. Thus, in "Expostulation and Reply" there are "Powers / Which of themselves our minds impress," and, in "Tintern Abbey," nature works to "impress" the mind with "quietness and beauty." In the two-part *Prelude*, Wordsworth finds natural objects and forms that have been "impressed" with the "characters / Of danger or desire" by certain "Powers" and, alternatively, "Collateral objects and appearances" that have been impressed with "quaint associations" that become legible only after "maturer seasons" call them forth. He finds in minds, words, and objects the impressions of other minds, words and objects in stunning circles of influence that reverberate between boys and their playthings, people and their environments, poems and their readers. Wordsworth stresses that these impressions are often missed or forgotten, and that their transmission is often distorted, but he is nevertheless fascinated by them.

"The Thorn" is itself an impressive examination of the relationship between objects, things, words, and passions. In his "note" to "The Thorn," Wordsworth explicitly considers words "not only as symbols" of passion, "but as *things*, active and efficient, which are of

themselves part of the passion."¹³⁸ Words become a working part of passion and thought, taking up space in the realm of feelings and ideas, not merely on the page.¹³⁹ Giving words this space also makes them subject to further transformation by their placement in shifting associative networks of understanding. Words become part and parcel, or "part and power" to use Wordsworth's phrase, of the discovery and creation of fresh understandings of how our ideas and feelings are related in the association of experiences, objects, feelings, and ideas. As Frances Ferguson puts it in *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit*,

The relationship between words and things and thoughts which underlies representational schemes of language shifts to become a relationship between things and word-things and thoughts because of Wordsworth's concern with the interest of the mind in words "as *things*, active and efficient." Words become themselves entities which the mind delights in, not merely vehicles through which the mind arrives at the entities of the world.¹⁴⁰

Word-things become not less expressive or mutable given their materiality, but more so. Word-things allow the poet's "nearly obsessive return" to them just as he returns to particular objects, events, and characters throughout *Lyrical Ballads*. That return, as Ferguson points out, is to be seen "less as poverty than as an intensity which explores all aspects of the individual words and objects."¹⁴¹ Wordsworth makes this return not only to particular words, but also to phrases and to particular associations he has made between words and ideas. Near the end of the "Preface" he confesses that "sometimes from diseased impulses" he may have "written upon unworthy subjects" and that his language "may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether

¹³⁸ "Notes," 351.

¹³⁹ A Wordsworth puts it in the Advertisement: "Words, a Poet's words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper." *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poetry*, 351.

¹⁴⁰ Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 15-16.

¹⁴¹ Ferguson, 18.

protect himself.”¹⁴² However, the same diseased impulses that Wordsworth claims led him at times to arbitrary connections in fact seems to have staved them off: his "obsessive return" to words, objects, ideas, and experiences in *Lyrical Ballads* results not in the repetition of increasingly meaningless relationships between them, but in different, newly meaningful ones.

It is this kind of repetition with a difference that Wordsworth claims in his "Note" to "The Thorn" he was attempting to illustrate. "It was my wish in this poem," he says, to show how men "cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns of passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed.”¹⁴³ He goes on to admonish readers who "imagine that the same words cannot be repeated without tautology [. . .] virtual tautology is much oftener produced by using different words when the meaning is exactly the same.”¹⁴⁴ His emphasis in both comments is on the repetition of words or ideas which, rather than bringing them further from revelatory power, brings them closer by illuminating the changes, however slight, their relationships undergo with repetition. "The Thorn" directly approaches this phenomenon of associative or reflective thought, commingling words, objects, ideas, and feeling, in subtle, varying combinations.

Wordsworth's comment on words as "*things*, active and efficient" gives us insight not only into the nature of Wordsworth's conception of words, but also into his conception of "things." Wordsworth's use of the word "thing" is staggeringly inclusive. It can seem, certainly, that *anything* Wordsworth considers might be referred to as a "thing." However, Wordsworth does not use "things" as a place-holder for more particular nouns like creature, being, power, leaf, or Lucy. Instead, Wordsworth's "things" defy categorization in ecologically and ethically

¹⁴² "Preface," 757.

¹⁴³ "Notes," 351.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

significant ways. “Thing theory,” most closely associated with Bill Brown’s work and the study of eighteenth-century “it narratives,” is of limited usefulness in understanding the significance of “things” in Wordsworth’s work because Brown’s thing theory concerns primarily “made” objects—objects that are made by humans, whether that making comes about through industry or the objects’ accretion of cultural histories and fetishes. Conversely, as W.J.T. Mitchell points out in “Romanticism and the Life of Things,” “things” took on a “new life” in the romantic period as “new forms of archaic and modern animism and vitalism” sprang up and asserted themselves outside the realm of the human. Mitchell cites Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, which describes the way things in the nineteenth-century gained a “historicity proper to them, which freed them from the continuous space that imposed the same chronology upon them as upon men.”¹⁴⁵ In one sense, then, things were liberated from the human through an emphasis on their natural or geological history.

Marilyn Gaull’s reading of Wordsworth adds another layer of complexity to the consideration of “things” in his work; she works to explain the difference between “objects” and “things.” In her article, “‘Things Forever Speaking’ and ‘Objects of All Thought,’” Gaull argues that the two categories were easily distinguished in Wordsworth’s lifetime, when “object” referred to inert, resistant materials, and “things” (as Wordsworth often described them), acted in more lively ways. Gaull claims that objects and things were mutable, and could be converted from one to the other through the processes of perception and memory. Gaull describes her concept of “thinging-ing”: “taking a word, concept, object, even person out of its natural or

¹⁴⁵ Mitchell connects this separation of human and earth time to the development of anthropology and paleontology as separate studies. He also explores fossils and totems as “images of nature, expressing a relationship between human beings and the nonhuman physical world of animal, vegetable, and mineral objects,” as things that illustrate the crossing of natural and cultural history, and as characteristic embodiments of what he calls the romantic image. “Romanticism and the Life of Things,” *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2001, Vol. 28 Issue 1, 167.

material setting and projecting human values, meaning, or explanations on it.”¹⁴⁶ Merely perceiving an object, Gaull says, can turn an object into a thing. Gaull also proposes that memory, “the other sacred faculty of Romanticism,” has the power to convert things back to “objects, collectables, valued for their history with people, or other objects, or where they were found or purchased.”¹⁴⁷ In both cases of conversion (from object to thing or from thing to object) Gaull describes human processes of projection, explanation, and memorialization as the crucial active element, while the objects and things themselves seem to contribute relatively little.

Despite my appreciation for Gaull’s distinction between objects and things, and her nuanced discussion of their making and unmaking, I believe that things in Wordsworth’s poetry are, in some sense, “given”: they do not rely on human agency for their existence, animation or significance. The abstraction of “thing” as Wordsworth uses it in fact defies the binary subject-object relationship that allows one party (the subject) to bestow or revoke the significance of another. In “Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things,” Adam Potkay points out that things in Wordsworth’s work confound definition: “they bespeak the fusion of object and event, matter and energy, surface and depth, as well as generality and particularity, the categorical and the specific.” Moreover, “Wordsworth’s things are things without objects, things anterior to and in excess of subject-object dualities.”¹⁴⁸

Potkay’s etymological inquiry into the word “thing” works through the word’s history from Old English to present-day usage. Though Potkay finds that the word still bears traces of its original comprehensiveness, it became limited with industrial modernity to “a material and

¹⁴⁶ Marilyn Gaull, “‘Things Forever Speaking’ and ‘Objects of All Thought,’” in *Romanticism and The Object*, ed. Larry H. Peer, (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 9.

¹⁴⁷ Gaull, 11.

¹⁴⁸ Potkay, 391.

noncognitive object, particularly a manufactured object.”¹⁴⁹ Potkay argues that Wordsworth’s use of the word recalls the Old English use, where there was “no term, such as *object*, for a material entity,” when, by extension, “medieval Germanic-language speakers . . . did not in general conceive of material objects in a delimited physical sense, as separate from events, from the constitution and frame of that which is and comes to be, and from the transcendental conditions for knowing what little we can know of systems or stories that exceed our comprehension.”¹⁵⁰ Though he acknowledges definitions by Samuel Johnson and William Blackstone attempting to limit the word to “Whatever is; not a person” (Johnson) and “being without life or consciousness; an inanimate object, as distinguished from a person or living creature” (Blackstone), Potkay believes Wordsworth uses *things* in a way that “blurs distinctions between persons and non-persons, between entities and events.”¹⁵¹

I find in Potkay’s etymological study traces of an argument made by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, in which Bennett strives to evoke a “vital materiality” by testing what Jacques Rancière has called “the partition of the sensible” between dull matter (things) and vibrant life (living beings). In doing so, she hopes to “absolve” things from their “long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.”¹⁵² Bennett proceeds in her study with conceptions of “vitality” and what it means to be an “actant” that might help us read some of Wordsworth’s most interesting evocations of the vital materiality of things. For Bennett, “vitality” is “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 395.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 394.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 394-5.

¹⁵² Bennett, 3.

their own.”¹⁵³ Bennett often refers to these “quasi agents” as “actants.” Actant, a term she borrows from Bruno Latour, is “a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.”¹⁵⁴

Although readings of Wordsworth’s work often stress his ability to make the world over in his own image, his poetry is also littered with “actants”: things that “produce effects” and “alter the course of events.” His poetry is in this way a dynamic space, where the speaking poet interacts with a world of things that are themselves active, creative, and expressive. This is especially clear in a fragment written by Wordsworth in late 1798, probably in Goslar, Germany:

There is an active principle alive in all things:
In all things, in all nature, in the flowers
And in the trees, in every pebbly stone
That paves the brooks, the stationary rocks
The moving waters, and the invisible air.
All beings have their properties which spread
Beyond themselves, a power by which they make
Some other being conscious of their life¹⁵⁵

In this fragment, “all things” includes the material (trees) the immaterial (air) the mobile (water) the immobile (rocks) the living (flowers) and the nonliving (stones). All these things, these “beings,” Wordsworth claims, are active; specifically, they act upon others, making those others “conscious of their life.” The source of their activity, and their life, is ambiguous. In the first line of the poem, the speaker cites “an active principle alive in all things.” This “active principle,” which we might associate with a soul, is situated “*in* all things,” the default location of conventional spirituality. But as the poem develops, the active principle Wordsworth first invokes is dispersed into “properties which spread / Beyond themselves,” multiplying and

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁵⁵ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 309, ll. 1-8.

dispersing the sources of aliveness and activity. In other words, though Wordsworth begins with a single, unifying “principal alive in all things,” the fragment progresses towards what Jane Bennett might call an “agency of assemblages,” where multiple beings, each with multiple properties, reach out to affect many other beings. This “active principle” through which “All beings have their properties which spread / Beyond themselves” also infuses the energy of Wordsworth’s poem, whose sentences spread from subordinate clause to subordinate clause and whose lines extend beyond themselves, reaching over enjambments within their flexible pentameter.

The images this fragment evokes are of the “budding twigs” in “Lines Written in Early Spring,” who “spread out their fan, / To catch the breezy air,” and, even more nearly, Erasmus Darwin’s vegetable buds from *Zoonomia*, whose “anthers and stigmas are real animals, attached indeed to their parent tree like polypi or coral insects, but capable of spontaneous motions . . . affected with the passion of love, and furnished with powers of reproducing their species . . . fed with honey like the moths and butterflies, which plunder their nectarines.”¹⁵⁶ Wordsworth’s powers by which things make “Some other being conscious of their life” also evoke the invitations for engagement extended by nonhuman things to Dorothy in her Alfoxden and Grasmere journals. In many of the fragments William wrote around the same period, he eschewed the heavy abstraction of “powers” for playful engagement with an animated and interactive world of things. In a series of such fragments, written between October and December 1800, Wordsworth was particularly preoccupied by the ways particular things, like leaves, might become agents of life or consciousness:

When in the open space behind the h[]
A tawny bunch of withered [?leaves],

¹⁵⁶ Darwin, 105.

Scarcely to be distinguish'd from a kite
Or yellow falcon, wheeled itself about
On that invisible whirlwind while the boy
Shouted and shouted at the plant to see
The playful life it led among the []
I guess it was
Delight for which a happy [?man ?might ?pray]¹⁵⁷

Though many of the words of the fragment are missing, we can gather that the impetus behind this fragment was much the same as the one behind the thorn: some accidental phenomenon (in the thorn, a storm, here, a “whirlwind”) has a transformative effect upon a simple object, and reveals it as impressive, lively, or simply delightful. In this case, though the bunch of leaves is activated by the whirlwind, Wordsworth says the bunch “wheeled itself about,” displacing the agency of the rapidly moving wind and assigning it instead to the leaves themselves, which turn (through their comparisons to a kite and to a yellow falcon) from a bunch of inert and discrete things into a directed thing and finally into a lively being. This obfuscation of agency might prompt us to reflect upon the nature of an agent, a thing Jane Bennett reminds us can refer both to a thing that has the power to act, and to a thing that acts on behalf of another, as an “agent” of transmission. The transmission, dispersion, and consolidation of aliveness in the singular yet unspectacular phenomena Wordsworth describes disturbs our understanding of an agent (or subject) as singular, self-contained, and self-directed. Moreover, the nature of the poem as fragment recruits the reader into participation in its activation, an activation enhanced rather than impeded by the omission or illegibility of particular words. This is in part because the iambic pentameter drives the poem along without them, encouraging the reader to find suitable and more or less inferable substitutions. In this way, the meter is a whirlwind that sweeps the reader up in the poem’s spontaneous production.

¹⁵⁷ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 326, ll. 1-9.

In other fragments of this period, Wordsworth expresses a similar interest in the dispersion of agency between actors and, particularly, between things that are not normally considered actors. In the fragment following “When in the open space,” for example, Wordsworth describes a “soft warm winter” morning, when a boy “by chance / Or wilfully . . . Unsettled with his foot a tuft of snow / Small as a sparrow’s egg,” which accumulates snow as it slides down a hill, gathering it up until it splits under its own weight and disperses into “a hundred tufts,” which collect more snow, until each in turn breaks “Into a thousand fragments . . . Splitting and gathering, / till the mountain seem’d / Raced over by a thousand living things, / Ten thousand snow-white rabbits of the cliffs.”¹⁵⁸ This chain reaction (or, more aptly, reverse snow-ball effect) unfolds with delightful verbal slipperiness and rapidity, its various figures—the snow/egg/rabbits, the boy, his father, and their dog—assembled ambivalently around the action. Yet more wonderfully, the race of the snow-rabbits impresses upon the hill the form of a tree in the snow, to which the boy points:

And when the Race was ended he would point
 Down to the form of that gigantic tree
 Which far beneath them by the devious tracks
 Left by the Runners in that elfin race
 Had been impress’d upon the snow and lay
 With trunk beginning at the Lad’s own feet
 And branches covering half the mountain-side. (22-28)

The form impressed upon the snow at their feet has the characteristics of a Darwinian tree of life: its unfolding is spontaneous, undirected, generative. The devious course of the snow-rabbits produces the recognizable form of the tree with the same lack of obvious agency or intent that typifies the other actors in the scene: the father who stands “like a man / Robb’d of all purpose” (6-7), the boy who “by chance / Or wilfully” kick-starts the descent of the snow (7-8), and even

¹⁵⁸ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 327, ll. 7-20.

the dog who accompanies them, whose barks sleep among the snow and receive no echo, as if the dog had been “defrauded of his voice” (35). And yet this assembly of figures and elements ambivalently generate, in their congregation, a tree and (a fragment of) a poem.

Chance Collisions and Quaint Accidents

The possibility that natural objects and things lead playful, creative lives recalls Coleridge’s supposition, in the *Biographia Literaria*, that nature might have a poetry of its own. Coleridge offers the appearance of natural objects under the influence of accidents of light and shade as one example of this poetry, but there are many other ways in which Wordsworth seems to have strained to elicit voices and images of nature that might in some way be considered given: creative productions of a world capable of self expression. In yet another fragment of late 1800, Wordsworth traces the voice of a small stream:

Thou issuest from a fissure in the rock
Compact into one individual stream,
A small short stream no longer than the blade
Of a child’s coral; then, upon the face
Of the steep crag diffus’d, thou dost flow down
Wide, weak and glimmering, and so thin withal
Thy course is like the brushing of a breeze
Upon a calm smooth lake. A few bold drops
Are there,—these starting regularly forth
Strike somewhere on the rocks and stones beneath
And are thy voice, for thou wert silent else.¹⁵⁹

Like the fragments quoted above, this fragment traces the agency of a body that is both one and many. Like the group of leaves, or the gathering and splitting balls of snow, the stream of water is at once a single entity or agent and also multiple ones. Like the snow and the leaves, the stream also changes form, narrowing and widening, breaking apart, and otherwise responding to

¹⁵⁹ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, 321, ll. 1-11.

the pressures of its environment. In this case, the water is compelled through a “fissure in the rock” into a concentrated stream, which becomes “diffus’d” upon the crag’s face. “Wide, weak and glimmering” upon that face (in an alliteration that enhances the sense of one and many in the poem), it is possible to read the stream as a stream of tears, where a “few bold drops” spring out to produce a voice by striking the rocks and stones beneath them. This delicate attribution of a face to the stream and crag gestures toward a tradition of poetic references to the “face of nature.” In his reading of the ethics of things in Wordsworth, Potkay suggests that this tradition referenced not simply the visible surface of the world, but also the “nonnarrative fullness of things” underlying that surface. Potkay suggests philosopher Silvia Benso’s *The Face of Things* as a good revision of that tradition for contemporary environmental ethics.

In *The Face of Things*, Benso stresses the difference between faces and what she calls facialities. Potkay quotes some of Benso’s definition of “facialities” in his essay, and I quote it at fuller length here to emphasize some of the commonalities I believe it has both with Bennett’s work on the vitality of things and Donna Haraway’s work on the potential for things to evoke an ethical response:

Faces express a specific content, a defined contour, an individuated existence. Facialities invoke the intimation of signification of a face, and yet the vagueness of a cluster of meaning the demarcation of which remains blurred, fluid, porous to a continuous, osmotic exchange between inside and outside that mobilizes boundaries, and therefore definitions; that runs the risk of continuous slippage away into the night of the indistinct, undifferentiated, anonymous; that creates zones of shadows, ambiguities, perplexities, contradictions, and therefore richness. Facialities evoke the possibility of the existence of faceless faces, which, despite their facelessness, are yet endowed with the intimating power of the face to demand an ethical response.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (State University of New York Press, 2000), xxx.

Benso's description of faciality resonates with Bennett's on the indistinctness of agency and also Haraway's work on the ability of nonhuman creatures and things to invite the engagement of their human spectators. Benso is more strident in saying that facialities "demand" an ethical response, but all three thinkers on the power of things would certainly agree, with Wordsworth, that "All beings have their properties which spread / Beyond themselves, a power by which they make / Some other being conscious of their life." Even when those beings do not have a face, like the stream above, they often do seem to speak, project images, cast shadows, or otherwise engage creatively with the poet. Unlike his sister Dorothy, who was careful to attend to natural objects and appearances that appeared in any way to invite her attention, William seemed particularly fascinated by those environmental phenomena that seemed to demonstrate or emulate creative activity of a human kind and especially the creative activity of his own poetic line.

Put differently, Wordsworth valued most the objects, things, and appearances with which he could interact in terms of poetic sound and image, even when the sounds or images those things projected were incomprehensible or strange. These odd engagements (part indulgence, part struggle, like all forms of play) are catalogued most memorably in the spots of time, their haunting aspects backlit by the seeming transgressions of a boy against nature. In "Wordsworth's Rhetorical Theft," Timothy Bahti argues compellingly that the transgressions Wordsworth describes in the spots—the nest robbery, the boat stealing, and other, more ambiguous thefts and offences—are acts that "steal from nature in acts that metaphorize natural objects but also, ultimately, the self that would have a literal story of its 'natural' and proper

coexistence with nature.”¹⁶¹ Guilt over this metaphorical theft—the theft of a “proper coexistence with nature” in the service of poetry and metaphor itself—may indeed have affected Wordsworth as he expanded and revised *The Prelude*. Nevertheless, the *Two-Part Prelude* takes a different approach to the play of figure and ground, immaterial and material.

In *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History*, Ross Hamilton explores the role Wordsworth’s treatment of accident may have had in his understanding of this play between figure and ground, between pliant and resistant matter. Hamilton’s account of accident in the spots of time has interesting resonances with accident as I have tracked it thus far. Hamilton considers “accident” as it applies to the inessential qualities of things, to mishaps, and to unforeseen, chance events. In his chapter on Wordsworth, “The Accidental Sublime,” Hamilton credits Wordsworth with transforming “details in nature or mundane objects into signs of philosophical import” and with transmuting “the inessential into the essential.”¹⁶² What is interesting about Hamilton’s account in this chapter is the durability of the accidental objects and events Wordsworth describes in the spots of time: “what remained accidental was the transitory observations and fluctuating feelings that became attached to memories; what he recognized as substantive was the preservation of such accidents of experience in the form of eternal images.”¹⁶³ As Hamilton puts it, the images of the spots of time become “substantial” over time: they become substances that matter, possess their own kind of stubborn materiality, despite the shifting associations that cling to them and their accidental, phenomenal origins.

This is an arresting claim that might help explain the pull of the spots of time in our

¹⁶¹ “Wordsworth’s Rhetorical Theft,” in *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 98.

¹⁶² Ross Hamilton, *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* (The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 190.

¹⁶³ Hamilton, 198.

thinking about objects, things, and the environment more generally in Wordsworth's poetry and prose, even though those episodes turn on transitory events, special effects, and a nature that is different from one moment to the next. In the *Two-Part Prelude*, the boy in the poem meets a world that is material and in some sense stable, yet not inert, and the poet writing meets images of that environment that are fixed, yet subject to changes in the poet's series of associations regarding them. In both these realms—of the boy at play in the lakes and the poet-narrator reflecting upon that play—there is the potential for creative engagement with a world that presents figures of itself that both inspire and frustrate the boy in those episodes and the poet writing them. In the nest-robbing episode, for example, the boy is framed in contradistinction to a “naked crag” and moved by a “strange utterance.” As the scene opens, the boy is seemingly aligned against and supported by the crag. The speaker describes his precarious position

Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
Or half-inch fissures in the slipp'ry rock
But ill sustained, and almost as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain
Shouldering the naked crag...¹⁶⁴

The physicality of the language used in this passage, the contraction of “slipp'ry,” the sliding “s” sounds in quick collision with the hard sounds of “slipp'ry rock . . . sustained . . . almost,” and “blast,” as well as the arrangement of lines, with “Or” and “But” creating a skip and a lurch into theirs, and the opposite forces of suspension and support compelling theirs, ground the experience in material conflict; the boy, the blast, and the crag are caught in a similar dynamic of support and suspension. In this intractable position, the wind speaks to or around the boy, but its “utterance” is incomprehensible:

While on the perilous ridge I hung alone
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind

¹⁶⁴ *The Prelude*, 1799. I. 57-61.

Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds! (63-66)

As it swirls out of focus, the sky obtains an otherworldliness that is familiar from Dorothy's journals, but William accentuates it here with a communication that passes *through* the boy powerfully without communicating anything in particular *to* him. Although the "loud dry wind" is anthropomorphized as a "strange utterance," that utterance blows *through* the boy's ears without his comprehension—it may even move in one ear, and out the other without proper registration by the mind or senses. The force of the "utterance" recalls that word's etymological history not only as speech, but also as "a degree which surpasses bounds or goes beyond measure in respect of severity," and that implies "immoderate force or violence" and "excess" (*OED*). This meaning of the word alone seems to call out for a reading of the episode as sublime. Wordsworth's own rubric for the sublime, which he would later describe in an essay on "The Sublime and the Beautiful," does resonate with the episode. As the boy hangs upon the cliff, suspended by the wind and sustaining the cliff, he seems to "participate in the force which is acting upon" him and, in the second part of the verse, the boy becomes "absorbed in the contemplation of the might in the external power." Insofar as he is conscious of himself, he is also conscious of an "external Power at once awful & immeasurable." In this episode, the boy grasps at a meaning he cannot get or, in Wordsworth's words (again on the sublime), his mind is called to "grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining."¹⁶⁵

This is the nature of engagement with the natural world in Wordsworth's work, where that world depends for its energy and activity upon its engagement with spectators that will

¹⁶⁵ William Wordsworth, Appendix III [On the Sublime and the Beautiful], *A Guide through the District of the Lakes*, in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, Volume II, eds. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 354.

entertain its shifting faces and temporary, other-worldly pronouncements, without necessarily understanding or successfully interpreting them. Like Benso's faceless faces, the utterance without comprehensible speech seems to demand a response, even if that response is little more than consciousness of its being. Like those facialities, the utterance seems significant, yet its meaning is "blurred, fluid, porous to a continuous, osmotic exchange between inside and outside that mobilizes boundaries, and therefore definitions; that runs the risk of continuous slippage away into the night of the indistinct, undifferentiated, anonymous." The sky and the clouds that move within it swirl beyond the boy's grasp, but the wind has communicated one of those "rememberable" things Wordsworth says imbue "Collateral object and appearances" with significance through "chance collisions and quaint accidents." The extremity of the boy's situation and the incomprehensible utterance that blasts through his ears in this episode seems to preclude the kind of playful engagement I suggest is at work in the spots of time and more broadly in Wordsworth's poetry, but this "severer intervention," as Wordsworth puts it in the following verse of the two-part *Prelude*, is part of a larger collection of sounds and images that prove themselves variously amenable to and needful of the poet's interventions.

Wordsworth does not present the images and utterances of objects and things in the spots of time as readily interpretable. Nevertheless, the scenes he describes afford a model for oblique engagement with worlds that will never, in the words of the "Immortality Ode," be "realized." When Wordsworth cuts "across the shadow of a star" in the skating scene, for example, his skates bisect a fluid boundary between a thing (a star, the very symbol of a thing that exists more vibrantly as idea than as empirically verified fact) and an image of itself, the shadow that gleams in the boy's path, inviting his departure from his mates. The play of boys on ice, the sharp hissing of their skates and the din of their voices resounding in the surrounding precipices, yields

to the solitary vision of the boy, who sets the world in motion by stopping short his own:

Not seldom from the uproar I retired
Into a silent bay, or sportively
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng,
To cut across the shadow of a star
That gleamed upon the ice. And oftentimes
When we had given our bodies to the wind,
And all the shadowy banks on either side
Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
The rapid line of motion, then at once
Have I, reclining back upon my heels
Stopped short—yet still the solitary cliffs
Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had rolled
With visible motion her diurnal round.
Behind me did they stretch in solemn train,
Feebler and feebler, and I stood and watched
Till all was tranquil as a summer sea. (170-185)

The sequence of events in this scene is characteristic of other spots of time, particularly in its emphasis on happenstance (the appearance of the “shadow of a star” in the boy’s sight-line as he looks away) and a sudden switch in sensory attention. In this case, the primary sensory mode transitions from the auditory to the visual as the boy exchanges the “uproar” of his playmates for the silent glimmer of the star on the ice. The boy’s glance “sideways” also has a certain rakishness, as though his sudden decision to leave the game of his friends is a way of indulging a different form of play. It is this play, the one that cuts sideways across the world, engaging its temporary, phenomenal communications, that figures Wordsworth’s composition of and intervention in the poetry of nature, which is properly neither material nor immaterial.

The “shadow” of the star is the starlight’s reflection, its image presented on the smooth, mirroring ice. In subsequent drafts, Wordsworth would substitute “image” and “reflex” for “shadow.” A note to editors Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill’s edition of the poem claims the final, 1850 selection of “reflex” has “an indefinable rightness.” The note does not offer any explanation for why the word seems correct, but it could simply be due to its

precision (a “reflex” is a “reflection of light”). The word may also seem “right” because a reflex can also be “a glance” or “sidelong look” (*OED*). In that sense, the “reflex” of the star is not only a reflection, but also a gesture that returns the boy’s sideways glance; the “reflex” of the star implies its engagement with the boy in the spirit of the games from which he recently turned.

Wordsworth’s original selection for the passage—“shadow”—is also wonderfully suggestive. “Shadow,” used commonly to mean a reflection, also carries with it an implied dichotomy: that between substance and shadow, the material and the immaterial.¹⁶⁶ Thus, when¹⁶⁷ the boy cuts across the shadow of a star, he could be said to be splitting the difference: accepting that the “shadow,” as an immaterial appearance, cannot impede his progress across the ice, while also acknowledging its presence as a given marker in space, with which he can engage physically and symbolically. The boy’s next game—stopping short to let the earth spin by his dazed vision—is a variation on this engagement. When the boy halts his own motion, he hands it off (as in a game of tag) to the scenery around him, which wheels past him “even as if the world had rolled / With visible motion her diurnal round.” Wordsworth’s “as if” allows that the world does not ordinarily roll with *visible* motion, but the image produced nevertheless reveals something true about the world—the underlying fact of its motion and its diurnal round. That is, the boy’s engagement with the apparently inert landscape allows that landscape to suggest to him

¹⁶⁶ In “Deep History: Association and Natural Philosophy in Wordsworth’s Poetry,” Ross Hamilton claims that Wordsworth’s use of the word shadow “advert to the old language of natural philosophy which distinguished between immutable form (which Aristotle’s Christian commentators turned into a soul) and mutable matter.” The “shadow” of the star brings it—an “immaterial and immutable thing”—into the realm of the material world. In Hamilton’s reading, “an aura of the spiritual invades the material world to provide a liberating experience grounded in his perception of nature,” *European Romantic Review*, October 2001, Vol. 18 Issue 4, 467.

¹⁶⁷ As Reeve Parker points out, this “when” might more properly be an “if”; the boy retires from the uproarious play of his friends “To cut across the shadow of a star,” but we can not be sure that he actually does so (the speaker cites only the boy’s intention). If read as the expression of whimsical intent alone, the potential interplay of glance and reflex between boy and star becomes an exchange of possibility merely, an engagement of ideas.

something about itself. The play of the boy and poet with a world that is both substantial and suggestive produces this truth of seeming and being.

The “poetry of nature” in these passages arises out of the playful interactions of the figures described with the temporary, phenomenal interventions of wind, light, and sound. The verse takes up the playful, dynamic features of these interactions, emulating and expressing their lively being. In these passages, Wordsworth the poet considers “man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting upon each other,” a consideration he cites in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as the business of a poet. In so doing, his objects become dynamic subjects, collaborating in his poetic endeavours. As my closing reading of Wordsworth’s first draft of the Boy of Winander passage demonstrates, however, the terms of this collaboration are not entirely conceived or enforceable by the poet; Wordsworth’s nonhuman objects, things, creatures, and appearances resist being easily or completely synchronized, composed, or directed.

The Boy of Winander passage dramatizes the potential and variable responsiveness of nonhuman beings memorably by bringing nonhuman animals into play. The owls’ responsiveness as animals has largely been overlooked because they have consistently been read as representatives of a generalized nature or simply a generalized material world. In this reading, the verse might be considered an example of the “reality testing” Geoffrey Hartman has described, and the test the boy of Winander puts to reality rides upon the response of the owls to whom he calls. A reading of the episode that privileges the diverse set of players in the scene, however, casts the scene differently. It moves beyond the boy’s apparent expectation for a game of call and response played out between agents whose soundings do not signify but are

nevertheless identifiable as voices, towards the communications of natural agents that borrow, then seem to withhold, those voices. It also prevents us from uncritically folding the owls of the passage into their surroundings.

It is possible to read the landscape Wordsworth invokes in the Boy of Winander passage as a stage set, a background for the drama that unfolds between the boy and the owls to whom he calls. As in many Wordsworth poems, however, background and foreground seem to exchange places over the course of the scene, and the cliffs, stars, and trees that stand as witnesses emerge as actors. In some ways, this transposition solves the problem Christine Kenyon Jones has identified in Wordsworth's treatment of nonhuman animals. In "Minute Obeisances': Beasts, Birds, and Wordsworth's Ecological Credentials," Jones argues that despite Wordsworth's "ease in bestowing a voice upon inanimate, physical features, such as mountains, woods and rivers," he struggled to employ various kinds of literary artifice to present the voices of nonhuman animals.¹⁶⁸ Though I disagree with Jones's claim that "Wordsworth's hills, rocks, rivers and other physical features and forces are made to express directly and relatively unproblematically the emotion which the poet invests in them," I agree that animals in Wordsworth's poetry are a special case, presenting unique challenges to the author's attempts to engage with them creatively.¹⁶⁹ The owls, with forms of agency different than those available to the boy or to the cliffs and hills upon which their hoots redound, insist that the speaker engage with the problems of speaking for, with and about nonhuman creatures that have their own voices and their own power to respond to the human voice. Echoes, the work of the cliffs and hills that seem merely to constitute the scene's surroundings, are also at play, and further complicate the verse's

¹⁶⁸ Christine Kenyon Jones, "Minute Obeisances': Beasts, Birds and Wordsworth's Ecological Credentials," *Romanticism*, 2001, Vol. 4 Issue1, 74-89.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, 77.

exploration of agency, cause, and effect:

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs
And Islands of Winander! many a time,
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Press'd closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him.¹⁷⁰

The speaker's initial address to the cliffs and islands of Winander seems to place him at the scene he describes, even as Wordsworth's displacement of the human figure at its center from himself (the poem was originally written in the first-person) to the boy removed the speaking "I" from it. As a result, the speaker stands apart from the scene from or to which he seems to speak, and the human figure he invokes—the "boy"—becomes a member of the scene the speaker describes rather than it's seeing I/eye. The imprecision of the speaker's description of the environment, alongside his enumeration of its many possible members and arrangement, evoke a scene whose parts—the lake, the stars, the hills, the trees, the boy—are moveable and variable, yet significant in the fact of their being what they are. Thus, when the boy stands "there" in the seventh line, we do not know precisely where he stands (he could be beneath the trees, or beside the lake), or at what time of day (he could be there when the stars are "rising or setting"), but we know that he does so in relation to these things, that his position and actions are in relation to their own.

When the boy lifts his hands to his mouth to blow "mimic hootings to the owls / That

¹⁷⁰ I quote here the 1798 draft of the poem composed in Goslar, found in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, The Cornell Wordsworth, 139, ll. 1-11. However, the passage floated between poetic contexts and also between the first and third persons, changes that echoed the series of substitutions and deferrals described and evoked in the verse.

they might answer him,” he does so in recognition of this variable relationality, and his expectation that they will answer hangs on the enjambment between the two lines. The enjambment of the lines, and the apparent redundancy of the speaker’s clarification that the boy hoots to the owls “That they might answer him,” mark the intensity of that expectation. It is an expectation not only that the owls will respond to his call, but that, in doing so, they accept his “mimic hootings” as authentic. Philosophers like Daniel Dennett, who attempt to mark a difference between the human and the animal, might read this attempt to bamboozle the owls as exclusively human. Though animals might engage in behaviours that mislead other creatures, Dennett believes, animals are not conscious of their ability to deceive or of their pretense as such; only humans are conscious of this ability and are conscious of their ability to make representations of themselves and others to others. In his essay, “Thinking Other-Wise: Cognitive Science, Deconstruction and the (Non)Speaking (Non)Human Subject,” Cary Wolfe takes issue with this argument via a reading of Derrida’s increasingly well-known, posthumously published “And Say the Animal Responded?”¹⁷¹ Wolfe argues that Dennett falls back upon the Cartesian position he claims to refute by attempting to argue for a difference between *reaction* and *response*, with animals capable only of reaction to stimuli and humans capable of genuine response by virtue of our ability to use concepts and representations, and our ability to distinguish signifying and signifying about signifying.¹⁷² In “And Say the Animal Responded?” however, Derrida calls into question our ability self-consciously to wield representations and to draw such distinctions. Every pretense, no matter how simple, presupposes “taking the other

¹⁷¹ Cary Wolfe, “Thinking Other-Wise: Cognitive Science, Deconstruction and the (Non)Speaking (Non)Human Subject,” in *Animal Subjects: An Ethical Reader in a Posthuman World*, ed. Jodey Castricano (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008). Derrida’s “And Say the Animal Responded?” appears in Derrida’s posthumously-published *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

¹⁷² Wolfe, 134.

into account” Derrida argues; “it therefore supposes, simultaneously, the pretense of pretense—a simple supplementary move by the other within the strategy of the game. That supplementarity is at work from the moment of the first pretense.”¹⁷³

The boy of Winander seems at first to expect a reaction from the owls of Winander, one perhaps akin to the echoes he invokes in *An Evening Walk*, where the echoes reliably return his own song (“a happy child,” he taught the echoes of the rocks to return “[his] carols wild”).¹⁷⁴ In short order, however, the owls prove that they are differently response-able to his call. Their shouts evolve and build, transmuting the boy’s original hoot and mocking the very notion of a self-possessed voice or of simple call and response (action-reaction):

And they would shout
Across the wat’ry vale and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene
Of mirth and jocund din. (11-16)

The owls’ responsiveness, their expected shouts, ratchet up in intensity from shouts to “quivering peals” to “long halloos” to “screams,” until the owls are finally dispossessed of their voices, their sounds taken up by the hills around them, amplified, “redoubled and redoubled.” The transmission of voices the boy expected in the form of call and response (action-reaction) instead moves in an unexpected relay, with successive parties taking up and wilding the original voice: the boy’s call is taken up by the owls, escalated, warped and terrifyingly transmuted from peal to halloo to scream, until these sounds are finally taken up by the atmosphere itself, the surround

¹⁷³ Quoted in Wolfe, 134. An in-depth reading of the Boy of Winander passage with Derrida’s work on animals, which I have not developed here, would take into account Derrida’s conversation with Lacan in “And Say the Animal Responded?” I raise the issues of reaction, response, and pretense here only cursorily to suggest that Wordsworth shares Derrida’s skepticism that any fundamental distinction can be drawn between the ways humans and animals engage in these fluid activities, a skepticism Wordsworth dramatizes wonderfully in this passage.

¹⁷⁴ In *The Major Works*, 1, ll. 19-20.

sound of environmental echo, on a seemingly endless reverb. I believe we can read this chorus of dissonant sounds, sounds that seem to both merge into and bounce off one another, as the effect not of a single agent or even dual agents responding to one another, but of what Jane Bennett calls “congregational agency.” Congregational agency, which Bennett compares to *shi* in the Chinese tradition, refers to the way “people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other.”¹⁷⁵

Thinking of the shouts, halloos, screams, and echoes described not as a simple matter of call and response (or call and reaction), but as the dissonant, joyful (mis)communications of multiple actors, helps us read the silence and what follows it not as the absence of a response, but as a reminder of its possibility in a world of creatures capable not only of reacting or responding to one another, but of surprising one another:

And, when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
its woods, and that uncertain heaven, receiv'd
Into the bosom of the steady lake. (16-25)

In the silent moment described, the background becomes foreground, and the familiar hand-off of energy from one player to another described in the other spots of time is repeated. In this case, that handing of power or energy comes as “a gentle shock of mild surprise” because it takes forms the boy had not expected.¹⁷⁶ In the first instance, of the silence upon which the boy hangs,

¹⁷⁵ Bennett, 34.

¹⁷⁶ In her reading of the poem, Anne-Lise Francois calls our attention to De Quincey's account of waiting with Wordsworth at midnight for the *Courier* to arrive, in which De Quincey records Wordsworth's reflections upon noticing an unusually bright star. Francois describes Wordsworth's insight into “the

it is necessary to imagine the owls not as absent, but as present somewhere in the trees, blinking perhaps—silent, but not unresponsive. It is the boy’s feeling of surprise at this realization (that the owls and the echoes of Winander do not only or merely react to him) that carries the voice of mountain torrents and the visible scene into his heart and mind.

The voice of mountain torrents and the scenic imagery that come forward unsolicited in the poem do so as reminders of nature’s independent, nonhuman, and enduring presence.¹⁷⁷ But they also, importantly, present representations of themselves and others, proof not only of the existence and persistence of the nonhuman outside the human, but of the expressivity and creativity of the nonhuman outside the human. If the boy is chastened, it is because the communications he receives are outside the province of his own creative endeavours. The hoots of the owls and the echoes of their cries expertly warp the call and response the boy intended, developing it into the true play of creative, collaborative agents. By contrast, the voice of the mountain torrents and the image of the surrounding environment put the boy in the position of witnessing and receiving a representation of the world in which he has played no part; the scene transitions from figuring communication with the natural world as call and response, to the free play of dissonant but conjoined actors, to the mere reception of messages we need not co-sign. It is these messages, not the things themselves, that are transmitted to the boy: not mountain-torrents, but the “voice” of mountain torrents; not rocks and woods and sky, but their “solemn imagery” reflected in the face of the “steady lake.” These are creative productions: transitory,

turning back of anticipatory energies reversing the ratio between expectations and their fulfillment such that something is received into consciousness only with the recession of expectant attention—in this case a “star,” a visual phenomenon that, at once infinitely far and near, substitutes for an expected aural perception of the arrival of news of distant events.” *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷⁷ Geoffrey Hartman characterizes the cliffs, falls, and woods of the scene this way in an interview with Cathy Caruth published in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Essays in Honor of Geoffrey H. Hartman (Winter, 1996), 630-52.

unstable expressions of a world that is not fixed, but that can nevertheless be received as a spot of time, as the poetry of nature deposited into a human mind and heart that will keep it there until they, too, are absorbed into the evolving landscape.

CHAPTER 3

Shadows of Taste: John Clare's Tasteful Natural History

*'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' well every one to his hobby*¹⁷⁸
– Clare

The hand John Clare's publisher, John Taylor, had in shaping Clare for public reception as "the peasant poet" is well known among Clare scholars.¹⁷⁹ However, this was not Taylor's only attempt to shape Clare's life and work in the literary marketplace. Lesser-known aspirations of Taylor's were to place Clare among the legion of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century essayists, poets, and philosophers writing on the sublime and beautiful, and to introduce him as a unique, collaborative voice in the period's popular natural history. Clare approached the task of writing on the sublime and beautiful and publishing his natural history letters with enthusiasm, but expressed concern to Taylor in both cases that his own tastes were not likely to conform to established models. Indeed, Clare's approach to the sublime and his understanding of what natural history must be were utterly unique and turned entirely upon the matter of Clare's taste in particular, and on his understanding of taste more generally as a mode of guiding all creatures—insects and authors alike—into meaningful relation with one another.

In 1831, shortly before Clare proposed a new collection of poems, to be called *The Midsummer Cushion*, Taylor suggested that Clare produce a set of essays on "the Sublime and

¹⁷⁸ John Clare, 'Natural History Letter III', in *Natural History*, 38. Further references to *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* will be cited parenthetically by page number within the text.

¹⁷⁹ In "Clare and the Place of the Peasant Poet," Elizabeth Helsinger explores the various ways that Clare attempted to inhabit his role as a "Peasant poet," a term Helsinger points out was "a contradiction in terms from the perspective of English literary history." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13, no. 3, Politics and Poetic Value, (Spring, 1987).

Beautiful in Poetry." Instead of producing any essays, however, Clare replied to Taylor's request with a scornful letter, declaring that he "could give this sheet full of specimens of bombastic fancy that critics are daily stringing as pearls of sublimity . . . but not one specimen can I point out as to what I think time will occupy in his conception of sublimity."¹⁸⁰ Indeed, it is only if we think of the sublime as something other than a "series of bomb bursting images tagged together by big sounding words" (just what "other people often bring forward as specimens of the sublime," Clare wrote), that we can begin to think of the sublime as a category worth exploration in Clare's poetry. Far from "bomb bursting" or "bombastic," Clare's sublime has elements of lastingness and tastefulness we do not often associate with sublimity or, for that matter, with natural history. The energetic stability and unique propriety of Clare's sublime is due in part to his extension of aesthetic faculties like "taste" to nonhuman forms and processes and his privileging of the associative abilities of a figure he calls the "man of taste," a naturalist poet whose experiences in the world ring with lively associations. In this sense, as Sarah Houghton points out in "'Enkindling ecstasy': The Sublime Vision of John Clare," Clare's sublime is better characterized as sympathetic than as egotistical.¹⁸¹ The rich associative abilities of the man of taste activate Clare's sublime, imaged in his poetry in scenes swarming with life. The flexibility and sustainability of these forms of life and thought in the face of loss and destruction, a topic I will address in the latter part of this chapter, depends upon Clare's richly developed sense of changing literary, historical, and environmental contexts. His favored images teem with the tasteful activities of birds, insects, men of science, and men of taste. It is these that we might usefully explore as sublime.

¹⁸⁰ From a letter almost certainly addressed to John Taylor, written after Friday, 15 April, 1831. From *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 539.

¹⁸¹ Sarah Houghton, "'Enkindling ecstasy': The Sublime Vision of John Clare," *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism*, 9.2 (2003), 176-95.

Merely to say that Clare's treatment of nature in his poetry involved the kind of aesthetic reflection we associate with the Romantic sublime or theories of taste is to speak against a pervasive strand of criticism that considers Clare's close attention to particular details of the natural world and his affection for "descriptive rhyming"¹⁸² as inhibiting his production of the kind of visionary poetry associated with his Romantic contemporaries. Indeed, upon reading draft manuscripts for the *Shepherd's Calendar* provided by Taylor (their mutual publisher), John Keats himself observed that "the Description too much prevailed over the Sentiment." In a subsequent letter to Clare, Taylor attempted to clarify Keats's criticism by saying, "I think he wished to say to you that your Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called from by a particular Sentiment . . . his remark is applicable only now and then when he feels as if the Description overlaid and stifled that which ought to be the prevailing Idea."¹⁸³ Keats and Taylor's comments echoed the reviews of Clare's first collection, *Poems, Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, which almost universally balanced praise for Clare's "minute observation of nature, delicacy of feeling, and fidelity of description" with doubts about his ability to frame "sustained or lofty flights."¹⁸⁴ While his poems contain "true and minute delineations of external nature, drawn from *actual observation*" our knowledge of the biographical facts of Clare's life is a necessary "apology for the absence of that transcendent excellence which more favoured poets

¹⁸² Clare describes his poetry this way in his autobiographical writings, collected by editors Eric Robinson and David Powell in *John Clare by Himself* (The Mid Northumberland Arts Group: Carcanet Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁸³ Quoted in John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 130.

¹⁸⁴ Octavius Gilchrist's first introduction of Clare in the *London Magazine*, called "Some Account of John Clare, an Agricultural Labourer and Poet" 1820. Gilchrist was actually one of Clare's first and longest supporters. From *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 40.

have attained,” an anonymous reviewer states in 1820.¹⁸⁵ The question of whether or not Clare ‘belongs’ among those Romantic poets we favor today, as James McKusick points out in “Beyond the Visionary Company: John Clare’s Resistance to Romanticism,” still turns upon the extent to which Clare’s poetry can be considered visionary in “a tradition of aesthetic idealism initiated by Kant and Schiller and characterized by a view of the creative process as a free play of intellect, unconstrained by objective circumstances.” By not engaging the biographical and historical contingencies of Clare’s life, McKusick says, Romantic critical theory manifests “an unwillingness to acknowledge those features of Clare’s poetry . . . that resist the transcendentalising impulses” latent within the theory itself.¹⁸⁶ Elsewhere, in his book *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*, McKusick also argues vigorously against a conception of Clare’s relationship with the natural world as either economically or aesthetically inflected.¹⁸⁷ McKusick’s consistent pairing of the economic and aesthetic implies a conception of the aesthetic narrowly aligned with the version of the picturesque mode presented by John Barrell in his important book on Clare, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, which describes the picturesque viewer as a consumer of landscape. Nevertheless, as Barrell makes clear, it seems that Clare’s way of looking at nature was different and also aesthetic in a very particular way. Without seeing Clare’s close relationship with nature as a laborer and rural dweller either as an “apology” for a lack of aesthetic reflection or as a necessary protest against it, then, I believe we can usefully consider the extensive attention Clare paid in his letters, notes, and poems to looking at nature together with his vigorous interest in *ways* of looking at nature. While it is

¹⁸⁵ From an unsigned review, *New Monthly Magazine*, March 1820, xiii, 326-30, qtd. in *The Critical Heritage*, 68.

¹⁸⁶ James McKusick, “Beyond the Visionary Company: John Clare’s resistance to Romanticism,” in *John Clare in Context*, eds. Haughton, Phillips, and Summerfield (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 230.

¹⁸⁷ James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

tempting to say, with John Middleton Murray, that “there is an intrinsic impossibility that vision of [Clare’s] kind, so effortless and unparading, should ever pass beyond itself” because it is “too perfect,”¹⁸⁸ it is clear upon reading Clare’s many reflections upon vision that he made an effort to differentiate between various ways of seeing and campaigned vigorously for forms of poetry and natural history informed by his undeniably aesthetic understanding of the natural world.

Shortly after reading Elizabeth Kent’s *Flora Domestica*, a book published by their shared publishers Taylor and James Hessey, Clare began reflecting upon what an ideal natural history might look like and began writing a natural history of his own. In 1824 he started sending entries to Hessey as contributions to “A Natural History of Helpstone,” which he later decided to call “Biographys of Birds & Flowers’ with an Appendix on Animals & Insects.” As Margaret Grainger notes in her edition of these and other writings, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, most of the letters that Clare intended to contribute to “A Natural History of Helpstone” were never completed, and Hessey did not publish them. Nevertheless, these prose notes, poems, and letters (including his response to Kent’s *Flora*, which further embeds many of the flowers Kent mentions in the book within their contexts in Helpstone folklore and Clare’s reading and observation) tell us much about how Clare imagined and practiced his own form of natural history.

For Clare, writing natural history was a way of accounting for and celebrating the peculiarities of taste among birds, flowers, insects, and men. I take “Shadows of Taste” to be an especially important poem in Clare’s account of the relationship between taste, the sublime, and the practice of natural history. This relationship can be difficult to track in part because Clare’s descriptions of “the man of taste” and a series of variously related figures—ranging from the

¹⁸⁸ Qtd. in Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 130.

“man of science” to the “man of feeling”—differ so widely. In “Shadows of Taste” Clare presents the associative activity of the man of taste as an alternative to the collecting and cataloguing of the traditional man of science or natural historian. In “Shadows of Taste” (a poem in which the meanings of “shade” and “shadow” are multiple) the man of taste exercises his taste through “associations sweet” that set natural objects and creatures within various environmental and literary contexts. His ability to do this depends upon the creatures being left in the homes their own “shades” of taste have led them to choose. By contrast, the isolating vision and practices of the traditional natural historian remove his specimens from their homes, evacuating the shades of taste that characterize them and leaving them shadows of themselves.

Taste was a fraught matter for Clare. In “Sketches in the Life of John Clare” and letters to Taylor, Clare expressed his belief that his own taste was “peculially” his own. In the “Sketches” he describes the way he “try’d” his friends’ taste as a child “by pointing out some striking beauty in a wild flower or object in the surrounding senery”:

I often wondered that, while I was peeping about and finding such quantities of pleasing things to stop and pause over, another should pass me as careless as if he was blind I thought sometimes that I surely had a taste peculiarly by myself and that nobody else thought or saw things as I did¹⁸⁹

Clare expresses a similar sentiment ten years later in a letter replying to Taylor’s request that he write a series of essays on the sublime and beautiful. Clare’s letter begins by saying, “I fear you overrate my abilities . . . I so seldom see other peoples judgments who are considered not only men of taste but men of unerring criticism coinciding with mine that I feel I am only an individual indulging in an erroneous fancy,” but he continues more confidently by inveighing against both the “bomb bursting images” others present as the sublime and the “unnatural images

¹⁸⁹ *By Himself*, 17.

cloathed in the pomp of illused words” that others describe as beautiful.¹⁹⁰ Clare, who considered these examples the “vagaries of taste,” viewed fashions in taste with contempt; his contempt for fashionable taste and fashionable men of taste seems twinned with a faith in his own taste and his own version of sublimity, however peculiar, and a commitment to developing these in his poetry and natural history.

Taste and Association

In “Shadows of Taste,” Clare links taste with a variegated way of viewing nature, and he associates lack of taste with blindness. “The man of science and of taste” Clare invokes in the poem “Sees wealth far richer” in the meadows and fields than do the “vulgar hinds” Clare contrasts him with:

the low herd, mere savages subdued,
With nought of feeling or of taste imbued
Pass over sweetest scenes a carless eye
As blank as midnight in its deepest dye¹⁹¹

Clare’s description of the eye as “blank as midnight in its deepest dye” reminds us of his related description of the Linnaean classification system as a “hard nick-namy sy[s]tem of unuterable words” that only overloads botany “in mystery till it makes darkness visable.”¹⁹² In both descriptions, Clare emphasizes that the object of perception is obscured rather than illuminated by the faculty of perception or system of organization used to observe it: the blankness of the “carless eye” of the low herd is as deeply dyed as midnight and obstructs rather than facilitates

¹⁹⁰ Draft to Taylor, after Friday, April 15, 1831, *Letters*, 539.

¹⁹¹ *Middle Period*, III, ll. 49-52.

¹⁹² *By Himself*, 189. In describing the Linnaean classification system as a “hard nick-namy sy[s]tem of unuterable words” that only overloads botany “in mystery till it makes darkness visable,” Clare alludes to Milton’s description in *Paradise Lost* of the flames of Hell, from which come no light, but rather “darkness visable.”

sight, just as the mystery with which the Linnaean classification system overloads botany obscures the lack of real knowledge it provides with a Miltonic, visible darkness. These forms of darkness block from view not only the sweet scenes through which the low herd passes and the plants the Linnaean man of science classifies, but also the many associations Clare claims such scenes and plants inspire in the man of taste. Like the shadows that feature prominently in Clare's prose and verse sketches of the natural world and the paintings of DeWint he admires, the literary, historical, and environmental associations of the man of taste play around the objects of his perception, providing a shifting contextual background for them rather than obscuring them in darkness as the careless eye and the Linnaean classification system do. I believe these associations are the "shadows of taste" for which the poem is named and that the lively associational activity of the man of taste (and, as we shall see, of the plants, animals, and insects that also exercise taste) produces a richly contextualized form of natural history like that Clare strove to write.

In a letter that Clare may have intended for his autobiography, he introduces the "poetic feeling" with which he regards nature:

I love to look on nature with a poetic feeling which magnifys the pleasure I love to see the nightingale in its hazel retreat & the cuckoo hiding in its solitudes of oaken foliage & not to examine their carcasses in glass cases yet naturalists & botanists seem to have no taste for this poetical feeling they merely make collections of dryd specimens classing them after Leanius into tribes & familys & there they delight to show them as a sort of ambitious fame with them 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush' well every one to his hobby¹⁹³

Clare might as well have said, "to each his own" or even "there's no accounting for taste" when he says "every one to his hobby," but instead he seems concerned to emphasize that the naturalist has "no taste" for the "poetical feeling" Clare claims for himself and for the man of taste. Clare

¹⁹³ *Natural History*, 38-39.

acknowledges that he is as happy as the naturalist or botanist in “finding a new spieces of field flower or butter flye” he has not seen before, but he protests that he has “no desire further to dry the plant or torture the Butterflye by sticking it on a cork board with a pin.” Instead, he says, he would prefer that the “fluttering butterflye . . . settle till [he] can come up with it to examine the powderd colours on its wings.”¹⁹⁴ Here Clare’s taste is for a living butterfly rather than a dead one whose demise he imagines as painful, but it is also a preference for context, a context visible to the “poetic eye.” In sticking the butterfly upon a corkboard, the naturalist or botanist Clare envisions shakes off the coloured pollen that might stick at the moment of its observation and isolates it in a new and barren environment. The specimen is thus stripped of its context and abstracted into an environment that approaches contextlessness—perhaps with a Linnaean label that only makes “darkness visable.”

In this letter, as in “Shadows of Taste,” there are at least two varieties of contextual darkness. Clare distinguishes the time the “rustic” or “clown” spends in nature from that spent by the botanist, but believes that both walk with blinders of sorts: the rustic, despite seeing a plant in its original setting, sees it only as a plant while the botanist or naturalist, taking it out of context, sees it only as a particular *type* of plant. The poetic eye of the man of taste, by contrast, sees the plant in various contexts—environmental, historical, and literary. In the same letter, Clare writes about the literary associations that arise in the man of taste when experiencing nature:

a clown may say that he loves the Morning but a man of taste feels it in a higher degree by bringing up in his mind that beautiful line of Thompsons ‘The meek eyd morn appears mother of dewes’ The rustic sings beneath the evening moon but it brings no associations he knows nothing about miltons description of it¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 41.

The key difference between the rustic, the man of science, and the man of taste, then, is the man of taste's ability to associate natural objects with literary passages. While the rustic "turns an eye" on flowers and "plods bye," "the man of taste looks upon the little Celadine in Spring & mutters in his mind some favourite lines from Wordsworths address to that flower."¹⁹⁶ This associative ability, more than allowing the man of taste simply to see the flower before him, allows him to see it as it is illuminated and enlivened by its literary context. The man of taste synthesizes the environmental, historical, and literary contexts of the objects he views into an associational, contextual field. As Clare proclaims near the end of the letter, "If I had the means to consult & the health to indulge it I shoud crowd these letters on Natural History with licious scraps of Poesy from my favourite Minstrels & make them less barren of amusment & more profitable of perusal."¹⁹⁷ Clare's "scraps of poesy" convey life-giving context to accounts of natural objects, suggesting that natural and literary histories cannot be separated except to their mutual detriment. He presents the associational activity of the man of taste (here himself) as a mode of productivity that shares more with the tasteful activities of the birds and plants he describes in "Shadows of Taste" than it does with the blank carelessness of the rustic or the classification schemes of the naturalist.

Clare and Kent: A World of Associations

Clare's ruminations on the associational skill of the man of taste appear in the second letter of a series Clare wrote Hessey in response to Elizabeth Kent's *Flora Domestica*, which resembles not a little the ideal natural history Clare proclaimed he would like to write. Taylor and Hessey forwarded Clare a complimentary copy of the first, anonymously authored, *Flora* in

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

anticipation of an expanded second edition. Clare quickly discovered that they shared similar sensibilities regarding the intimate relationship between botanical specimens and poetic ones. Indeed, Wordsworth's address to the Celandine is quoted at length in Kent's entry on that flower, and many passages from Clare's own poetry appear in pages of the *Flora* along with lengthy "specimens" and "extracts" from various other poets including Spenser, Cowley, and Wordsworth. Clare's initial appraisal of the book in an earlier letter to Taylor—that "the account" of the flowers Kent catalogues "is poetry"—is both a literal synopsis and a compliment of Kent's prose. Kent's book is also in some sense itself the "portable flower-garden" of her subtitle; it is a garden run riot with literary reference, historical anecdote, etymology, and botanical instruction. Clare himself plays with the notion of the book as "garden" throughout his initial response to it, perhaps riffing on Kent's description, in the introduction to the *Flora*, of Clare's volumes of poetry as "a beautiful country, diversified with woods, meadows, heaths, and flower-gardens."¹⁹⁸ In valuing the diversity of one another's prose and poesy, the compliments Kent and Clare payed each other attest to their shared interest in promiscuously mixing natural and literary tropes and natural and literary history, while their chosen metaphors for that diversity (a garden for Kent's work and a rich, wild ecosystem of "woods, meadows, heaths, and flower-gardens" for Clare's) indicate the differing backgrounds and differing concerns of the two authors.

As Daisy Hay details in her article, "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators,"¹⁹⁹ Kent came to Taylor and Hessey as a writer already linked to an expansive literary network through her brother-in-law, Leigh Hunt. His associations with the "Cockney School" informed the

¹⁹⁸ Kent, Elizabeth, *Flora domestica, or, The portable flower-garden: with directions for the treatment of plants in pots and illustrations from the works of the poets*, (London: Whittaker, Treacher: 1831), xxii.

¹⁹⁹ Daisy Hay, "Elizabeth Kent's Collaborators," *Romanticism*, Vol. 14 No. 3, 2008, 272-81.

underlying political aims of the *Flora* and explain the prominence of quotations by Hunt and Keats in the *Flora* (a circumstance that at first disappointed Clare, who believed that earlier authors were given somewhat short shrift). As Hay explains, even Kent's choice to speak primarily about potted-plants for indoor use (a choice that Kent foregrounds in the *Preface* to her book), identified her as a defender of the ideals of suburban luxury developed by Hunt and his circle, and thought by some, including an anonymous reviewer in *Blackwood's* "On the Cockney School of Poetry," to be a vulgar affectation and a waste of poetic energies on "flowers seen in window-pots."²⁰⁰ Hay reads Kent's *Flora* as a response to the unnamed *Blackwood's* reviewer, and indeed Kent introduces the book as the result of her resolution to disseminate information that might lead others (who, like herself, lived in town) to pursue and maintain a "*portable garden* in pots." Her selection bias was for flowers considered "most desirable for beauty of form or colour, luxuriance of foliage, sweetness of perfume, or from interesting or potential associations with their history."²⁰¹ It is these luxuries of form and color, and the literary and historical associations each bloom brings with it—rather than recommendations regarding light and water and so forth—that command Kent's most vibrant interest in each of her alphabetized entries.

Despite her intention to share an enjoyment of flowers with a wider audience, Kent, like Clare, makes a distinction between the kind of seeing employed by "common eyes" and the kind of seeing enjoyed by the poet, which "gives new charms to every object on which it gazes!" Her description of the poet and his way of seeing the world bears a striking resemblance to Clare's later description of the poetic eye of the man of taste:

²⁰⁰ Quoted in Hay, 274.

²⁰¹ Kent, xx, xiv.

A poet sees in a flower not only its form and colour, and the shadowing of its verdant foliage—his eye rests upon the dew-drop that trembles on the leaf; a gleam of sunshine darts across, and gives it the sparkling brilliancy of a diamond. He sees the bee hovering around, buzzing its joyous anticipation of the honey he shall draw from its very heart; and the delicate butterfly suspended as it were by magic from its silken petals. His imagination, too, brings around it a world of associations, adding beauty and interest to the object actually before his eye.²⁰²

Each entry in Kent's *Flora* presents such a "world of associations,"—a flower brought to life by the play of light at the moment of its observation, the creatures that share its space and whose lives depend upon each other, and the associations that "world" the flower yet again in literary and historical contexts, adding immeasurably to the interest and imaginative palpability of the "object actually before" the poet's eye. Kent's own world of associations—those that compose themselves around the figure of a flower studded with dew and buzzing with bees—takes three pages and quotations from ten authors, including Keats, Herrick, and Montgomery, to properly compose. Clare could not but be pleased.

It was in anticipation of this pleasure, perhaps, and with a canny sense for the shared sensibilities of the two authors, that Taylor and Hessey sent Clare the *Flora* in hopes that he might make some contribution to its second edition. The *Flora* was already an impressive collaborative document informed by a variety of discourses, but to Kent's concentration on the "Gardenesque" aesthetic of the Cockney school and the tastes of a new urban middle-class, Clare seems to have hoped to add a hint of wildness and the names, songs, and superstitions of the rural poor. Clare's notes on the *Flora* indicate that though he agreed with Kent's practice of natural history in spirit, his own stake in it was slightly different. His notes, which he sent to Taylor and Hessey, included his disclaimer that they could hardly be of use to the as yet anonymous author of *Flora Domestica* since Clare himself was "no botanist" and could describe

²⁰² Kent, xxxvi.

flowers “no better,”²⁰³ but they nevertheless carefully modify and fill out Kent’s descriptions with an especially local form of natural history. Where Kent’s descriptions excel in the kind of associational activity across time and natural and literary fields that Clare admired, he was concerned to make notes on the wild varieties of the flowers Kent described in terms of their numerousness and prominence over time in his own community and also, especially, on their common names in Helpston.

Despite Clare’s protestations against the way of seeing (or *not* seeing) employed by the “rustics” or “clowns” in his passages on taste, and his interest in the local names for flowers (and the village rhymes that use them) attest to a corresponding respect for what a commonly used name might reveal to a person of taste about the relationship between people and the plants and insects with which they interact. In a separate letter to Taylor, Clare connects taste with a preference for common names. In defense of his use of the name “Woodseers” for a species of insect, Clare argues, “wether it be the proper name I don’t know tis what we call them & that you know is sufficient for us.” Though the *us* refers clearly enough to the people of Clare’s locality, it also rather winningly includes Taylor. Several sentences earlier in the letter Clare writes that Taylor is a man whose “taste is preferable to any [Clare has] witnessed” because he is “a man of feeling that looks on faults with indulgence & never willfully passes by a blossom he may chance to find on his journey.”²⁰⁴ Clare’s confidence in Taylor’s ability to recognize “woodseer” as the only appropriate term for the insect springs from his flattering identification of Taylor as a man of taste and feeling who cares little for the judgments of other men and does not overlook the natural history a word like “Woodseers” might contain and reveal (as Clare notes in the letter, the woodseer was “one of the shepherds weather glasses,” believed to foresee by the turn of its

²⁰³ Grainger, *The Berg Collection, Natural History Letter I*, 13.

²⁰⁴ *Letters*, 162, 163.

head the arrival of fair or wet weather).

It is in this spirit, perhaps, that Clare wonders at the omission of a number of different humble wild flowers and their common names in Kent's *Flora*. He expresses "wonder," for example, that "our tastful author did not put [the common field Scabious] in his garden." Not yet knowing Kent's name or gender, Clare nevertheless identifies her as a "tastful author" and incorporates her into their circle of writers and editors; "our tastful author," Clare assumes, should be no more likely than Taylor to wilfully pass by any blossom he might encounter.²⁰⁵ The list of additions and modifications Clare sent Taylor and Hessey seems to be an effort to redress what Clare felt to be these unexpected omissions, and to draft a *Flora* with a rural emphasis—one that would not only be about wild flowers and country customs, but that might be priced within the reach of rural dwellers. And while the commodification of nature in the *Flora* (through which plants are discussed as "symbols of happiness, and of a widely available luxurious domesticity"), might be linked to the trend in container gardening in the early nineteenth century amongst the urban middle-class, which allowed individuals literal possession of plants,²⁰⁶ Clare's wild *Flora* was to be a book in which flowers were linked to local songs and superstitions and belonged in some sense to those who gave them this particular cultural surround and sought to maintain it. Thus Clare refers to flowers with possessive pronouns: "our 'Old-mans-beard,'" and "my 'ragged robin,'" for example, sometimes claiming particular varieties or sorts of flowers as "ours" or "mine." In other cases, Clare distributes the ownership of particular blooms amongst their primary admirers and the people who maintain their myths. Clare's account of the Celandine is a particularly telling example:

²⁰⁵ *Natural History* Letter I, 19.

²⁰⁶ Hay, 277.

this is my ‘crow flower’ & ‘buttercup’ the children often call them ‘golden daisies’ some of the common people know them like wise by the name of ‘pile wort’ but none by the name of ‘little celadine’ the large one or major is calld ‘wart weed’ & the yellow juice emitted when the stalk is broken is applyd to warts as a certain cure & I myself have known it succeed often—my mother has a poetical superstition about them she calls (I mean the major Celadine still) them Dane weed as they grow plentifully in a field at her native place were it is said the danes & redshanks fought a desperate battle & on that day which is said to be Whit Sunday she assures me for certain tho she never tried it herself that they emit a red juice instead of a yellow I have never had the curosiety to travel so far to contradict her & she will not be persuaded by the contrary at home for she is certain they are not the same flower & that her Dane weed owns its wonderful property still—what belief is stronger than superstion²⁰⁷

Clare’s celandine—the “crow flower”—is different from Wordsworth’s “little celadine” and from his mother’s “Dane weed,” but Clare seems to revel in the diversification of the common yellow plant. His short paragraph performs in little what Kent’s four-page entry on the flower does, but while Kent seems almost dutiful in her citation of the appearance of the celandine in various literary and cultural contexts, Clare’s interest in the appropriation of the flower by children and his own superstitious mother seems somewhat more playful and theoretically interested; it is concerned not so much with the number and quality of references to the flower as it is on the nature of naming and belief. Not believing his mother’s superstition for a moment and not having the curiosity required to prove her wrong, he nevertheless recites the myth of Whit Sunday and thinks of it as a particularly “poetic” one.

In his article, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” Timothy Morton reads Heidegger’s description of Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of female peasant’s shoes. Heidegger’s description, Morton says, “poetically renders the way in which these humble things gather together the entire environment, the social and natural place, of the peasant woman.”²⁰⁸ Heidegger’s description

²⁰⁷ *Natural History Letter*, 17.

²⁰⁸ Timothy Morton, “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” *Studies in Romanticism*, Summer 2008, volume 47, issue 2, 181.

calls forth the “earth” of the peasant’s shoes—their earthy dirtiness and resistance to instrumentalization—while allowing them protection by the “world” of cultural and historical instruments. Morton believes the gesture is a futile one, characteristic of Romanticism, which counters “the displacements of modernity with the politics and poetics of place...a cry of the heart in a heartless world.”²⁰⁹ I believe Clare sees his mother’s superstition as such (as one possible response to a world without a heart or a sense of place), but that he nevertheless respects her “poetical superstition” as representative of the powers and pleasures of poetry. I do not mean to suggest that Clare is complacent with or unquestioning of this sheltering power—indeed, he plays with it to the point of satire in poems like “The Lament of Swordy Well”—but I do mean to suggest that Clare sees the “worlding” capacities of art, culture, and belief as part of a greater network of possibilities through which we can interact with an “earth” that is not necessarily separate from those worlds, as Morton insists.

Taste’s Many Hues

Clare’s various notions of taste, especially as they inflect literary and natural history, converge in “Shadows of Taste,” a poem that refuses to pass by any blossom in its accounting of taste as something as substantial and embedded in its environmental context (no matter well hidden) as any blossom. Taste is also a faculty as likely to be held by an insect or plant as a person. Within the first six lines of the poem, taste is both something that we see and something that we see with; it is visible in the world and a faculty of choice that all beings inherit:

Taste with as many hues doth hearts engage
As leaves & flowers do upon natures page
Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares
But birds & flowers & insects are its heirs

²⁰⁹ Morton, 183.

Taste is their joyous heritage & they
All choose for joy in a peculiar way (1-6)

Taste in these lines is something inherited and declared by its possessors. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that this taste can nevertheless only be recognized by a viewer who also has taste. Clare sets up this recognition as a form of reading by invoking nature as a page, but he immediately expands reading beyond the province of the human mind: “Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares, / But birds and flowers and insects are its heirs—.” Thus the flowers “upon nature's page” that might engage our taste themselves practice taste as a faculty of choice that is nevertheless tied to their natural history or “joyous heritage.” The first two thirds of the poem is a rich, tasteful natural history of birds, flowers, and insects whose various shades of taste lead them to “choose for joy in a peculiar way” by making their home in “leaf-darkened woods,” streams, or “barren roads.” By suspending the creatures’ faculty of taste between the ability of each creature to “choose for joy” freely and the practice of their “joyous heritage,” Clare urges us to refrain from deciding whether these home-making choices are free or determined. While joy infuses each of these impulses, their suspension between freedom and determination is an important component of Clare’s conception of natural history as made up of the peculiar choices all creatures freely make within a continuous, inherited framework. In *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape*, Timothy Brownlow defines “natural taste” in Clare as the refinement of inherited instincts in the face of particular circumstances. He quotes Jay Appleton’s thesis in *The Experience of Landscape*: “the individual creature interacts with its environment in a manner which, in the most general sense, is common to its species, but in detail is peculiar to itself.”²¹⁰ Brownlow offers birdsong, which, as Clare knew, is generally similar

²¹⁰ Timothy Brownlow, *John Clare and Picturesque Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 128-29.

within a species but particular to any one member of that species. However, Brownlow does not raise the issue that Clare's primary interest in "Shadows of Taste" is to explore the way taste operates in the homemaking choices of individual creatures (thus "Birds own [taste] in the various spots they choose" (7)). "Shadows of Taste" explores how creatures embed themselves within particular contexts by choosing their homes, and this decision, the result of a fine balance between inheritance and choice, reveals—and produces—the taste of each homemaking creature.

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben employs the work of ecologist Jakob von Uexküll to explain the ways in which all creatures create their own environments, whose scope and primary features are determined by the particular perceptual capabilities and point of view of each creature in particular contexts. Uexküll calls the primary features that matter to each creature within their environment "carriers of significance;" these carriers of significance vary in their signification depending upon the environment of which they are a part. Agamben gives the stem of a flower as an example. Depending on whether it is observed in the environment of "a girl picking flowers for a bouquet to pin to her corset, in that of an ant for whom it is an ideal way to reach its nourishment in the flower's calyx, in that of a larva of a cicada who pierces its medullary canal and uses it as a pump to construct the fluid parts of its elevated cocoon, or finally in that of the cow who simply chews and swallows it as food," the stem of the flower is differently meaningful.²¹¹ As such, there is no one objectively constituted version of the stem of the flower and, by extension, there is no one objectively constituted, fixed, version of a larger environmental system, such as a forest. There is only the stem of the flower-for-the-girl, or for-the-ant or for-the-cow. Likewise, as Agamben points out, there is only a forest-for-the-park-ranger, a forest-for-the-hunter, a forest-for-the-nature-lover, etc. Clare also

²¹¹ *The Open*, 41.

connects the ways the creatures he observes constitute their particular environments through the tasteful choices they make and the associations they draw between “carriers of significance” and the environment-constituting choices and associations of humans.

Amidst the parade of these creatures and their “unnumbered hues” are the shades of taste manifested in the various men of taste who populate the poem. At the centre of “Shadows of Taste” is a man of taste who reminds us of Clare himself, who liked to look at nature with a “poetic feeling.” The poetic associations of this man of taste provide a second home for the creatures he observes, embedding them within a literary context with the same “wisdom of creative choice” that characterizes their home making. In this sense, “Shadow of Taste” is not, as Jonathan Bate has suggested of Clare’s work more broadly, “the record of his search for a home in the world,” so much as it is the record of his search for a home for the world in his poetry.²¹²

Clare describes the lasting quality of the relationship between poetry and nature, which he calls at its best the “true sublime,” in terms that echo Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in their invocation of ceaseless activity. In a poem, the poet says:

A blossom in its witchery of bloom
There gathered dwells in beauty & perfume
The singing bird the brook that laughs along
There ceaseless sing & never thirsts for song
A pleasing image to its page conferred
In living character & breathing word
Becomes a landscape heard & felt & seen
Sunshine & shade one harmonizing green
Where meads & brooks & forests basking lie
Lasting as truth & the eternal sky
Thus truth to nature, as the true sublime
Stands a Mount Atlas overpeering time (67-78)

²¹² Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 153.

This invocation of poetry as a lasting residence for elements of the natural world (it is *there* that blooms are gathered and *there* that birds perpetually sing, Clare emphasizes with the anaphora that highlights “There . . . There . . . Where”) seems to be integral to his understanding of the potential of natural history and the “true sublime.” The expression of nature in poetry and the expression of poetry in nature is sublime and lasting insofar as it is true, and this truth is predicated upon a larger sense of order or fitness in the world between its inhabitants’ creative activity (their tasteful choices) and their contexts. Clare thus radically extends Wordsworth’s belief that,

the individual Mind
(And the progressive powers perhaps no less
Of the whole species) to the external world
Is fitted; and how exquisitely too—
Theme this but little heard of among men—
The external world is fitted to the mind²¹³

For Clare this fitness is not restricted to the “individual Mind” or even to the “progressive powers . . . / Of the whole species,” but is available to all creatures, for whom taste or instinct is a creative activity that the poet recognizes as akin to or even identical with his own: “Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares / But birds and flowers and insects are its heirs—”(3-4).

We can analogize this kind of fitness, as W. John Coletta does in “Ecological Aesthetics and the Natural History Poetry of John Clare,” to the ecological understanding of the “interdependence” of elements in natural communities. Coletta points in particular to Clare’s prescient illustrations of what ecologist Eugene Odum has called mature, or climax, communities, and adapts Odum’s definition of “interdependence” as “a measure of a system’s ability to adapt to circumstance or even to adapt circumstance to itself” to Clare’s notion of taste.

²¹³ William Wordsworth, “Home at Grasmere,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ll. 1006-11.

Coletta believes it is possible to translate “the ecological concept of interdependence . . . into an aesthetic principle of the interdependence of images . . . [which] may all ultimately be seen as part of an interdependent ecological and aesthetic whole” in Clare’s poetry. Coletta goes on to describe “Clare’s ecology of mind . . . in which the inner and outer landscapes are fitted to one another as organism is fitted to environment.”²¹⁴ The fitting of inner and outer landscapes Coletta describes as Clare’s ecology of mind is analogous to the interdependence, or fit, he sees between ecology and aesthetics in Clare’s poetry. Coletta suggests that this interdependence strengthens and sustains the poetry despite the diversity of images it presents. Indeed, the series of images in “Shadows of Taste” depend for their significance upon the interdependence of their parts. Each object and association in the system of images, seeming to vie for position in the busy scene, can also be seen to depend upon every other and to fit together.

John Barrell views the relationship of images in Clare’s poetry as a more competitive one, and in many ways more conventionally sublime one, than Coletta’s chosen term, “interdependence,” might imply. In Barrell’s discussion of Clare’s presentation of complex landscapes, Clare’s attention is constantly torn between his awareness of the *particularity* of objects and their *multiplicity* within the larger scene. The particularity of objects, Barrell says, calls for Clare’s attention and separates them from their background as “*too* striking to be contained in a properly composed landscape.” At the same time, such objects are so multiple that “we have the sense always that outside the poem are hundreds of images hammering to be admitted.” Their “overwhelming multiplicity,” Barrell says, is a threat to Clare’s desire to attend

²¹⁴ W. John Coletta, ‘Ecological Aesthetics and the Natural History Poetry of John Clare’, *The John Clare Society Journal* 14, (July 1995), 30, 38-39, 42.

to each one of them.²¹⁵ But it is just this hammering of images, apparently without end, that sustains the shifting network of associations that comprise the man of taste's sublime natural history.

The objects in "Shadows of Taste" never stand alone. They are a breeding—and feeding—ground for the associations and ideas of the man of taste: "Associations sweet each object breeds / And fine ideas upon fancy feeds" (133-34). Moreover, these associations depend less upon the objects themselves than they do upon the objects' environments: the man of taste doesn't love flowers "because they shed perfumes," or butterflies for their "painted plumes" or even birds for their singing alone. Instead, he loves their home, the "wild and meadow lea": "There hath the flower its dwelling place & there / The butterfly goes dancing through the air" (139-40). And although Clare opens up his notion of "taste" in "Shadows of Taste" to include a wide spectrum of shades—"taste runs riot in her every grade" (48)—the cohesion of these shades seems to depend upon the associational activity of the man of taste, who is able to see the shades in their present environmental context as parts of a larger, shared natural and literary history. His ability to do this, the speaker warns at the close of the poem, is dependent upon natural objects being left in their homes:

Associations sweet each object breeds
& fine ideas upon fancy feeds
...
But take these several beings from their homes
Each beautiful thing a withered thought becomes
Association fades & like a dream
They are but shadows of the things they seem (133-4, 147-50)

In some sense, the title "Shadows of Taste" also refers to this de-contextualized form of natural and literary history, one in which the shades of taste described in the poem become shadows of

²¹⁵ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 151, 153.

themselves: the butterfly with the pollen shaken off its wings, the celandine without
Wordsworth's beautiful mention of it.

In additionally drafted lines for the poem, Clare explicitly connects such shadows of taste (objects deprived of their tastes and the associations of the man of taste) with the traditional activities of the natural historian, including the collection of specimens and their classification. He does so within a larger discussion of the associations that inspire joy in the man of taste:

The man of taste in fine ideas feeds
Associations that give birth to joys
...
But take the orchis from its mossy steeps
& buttey flyes to entemoligize
Classd in choise boxes
& birds encaged to sing a prisoners song
The man of taste half looses all he felt
The joys of freedom & they all their own
Their choice & joy creates the like in him
& pleasure there inspires in him the joy
Joys principal[e] exist with them
& he recieves the interest as his due²¹⁶

The "fine ideas" that feed the associations that "give birth" to the joys of the man of taste depend upon and take their cue from the ability of the creatures he observes to make choices freely in the environments they have formed for themselves precisely through these choices.

Clare closes "Shadows of Taste" and strings his images together both ecologically and aesthetically with his presentation of a "warped and punished trunk of stunted oak," which has been "Freed from its bonds" of ivy by a thunder-stroke. The oak's survival facilitates its use as a home for birds and also, it seems, as a home for the string of images that precede it, which seem to owe their lively being to its perseverance in the "desolate neglected spot / That seems in labour's hurry left forgot," a place noticed and appreciated only by the man of taste (141-42). By

²¹⁶ *Middle Period III*, additional lines, MS A31, 27.

choosing to highlight the perseverance of the oak and its transformation into a lively habitat rather than emphasizing the “bomb bursting” image of the thunder-stroke that felled it (a more likely candidate for the type of sublimity we associate with Burke, especially), Clare privileges the preservative potential of the sublime as he conceives it, a potential I will pick up later in a further discussion of the importance of thunder-struck trees, dotterel stumps, and rotting wooden gates in Clare’s poetry.

Beautiful’s Sublime: Taste and Repetition through Time

First, I return to what is probably Clare’s most forceful expression of his version of sublimity, in the line “truth to nature as the true sublime / Stands a Mount Atlas overpeering time.” The lines are a distillation of many of his ideas regarding the possibility of a “true sublime” that might stand against the “specimens of daily caterers for public decision.”²¹⁷ In his letters to Taylor and his autobiographical writings, Clare is as concerned to differentiate his own taste from that of the London critical community with which he had limited contact as he was to differentiate himself from the “low herd.” In his autobiographical writings, quoted above, he describes feeling estranged in matters of taste from his childhood playmates, who could pass by “quantities of pleasing things” Clare had paused to linger over “as careless” as if they were “blind,” causing him to wonder if he had a “taste peculiarly by [him]self.” Nevertheless, Clare claims not to have let this experience change the expression of his taste in his poetry. Aside from his parents, whom he depended upon to alert him to passages in his poetry that were not sufficiently “natural,”²¹⁸ he chose to show his first attempts at poetry only to the one childhood

²¹⁷ To John Taylor, 1831, *Letters*, 541

²¹⁸ Clare presented his own work as the work of others to his parents before gaining confidence in his abilities.

companion whom he was confident shared his own way of seeing: “he was a strict observer of nature and acquainted with most of her various pictures this recommendation was plenty for me as I found his eyes viewd things as mine did and his notice observed them as I expressed them.”²¹⁹ Though this friend did not express particular pleasure in Clare’s verses, Clare claims to have been satisfied enough with his merely understanding them, and in this way testifying to their truth to nature.

When presented with Taylor’s request to prepare a series of essays on the sublime and beautiful, Clare’s doubts regarding the universality of his taste flared up again, with an equal insistence upon the propriety of his own peculiarities, which he attributed to a faithfulness to those expressions of nature that are themselves faithful to nature. Though Clare’s letter begins by saying, “I fear you overrate my abilities . . . I so seldom see other peoples judgments who are considered not only men of taste but men of unerring criticism coinciding with mine that I feel I am only an individual indulging in an erroneous fancy,” he continues by inveighing against both the “bomb bursting images” others present as the sublime (mentioned at the outset of this chapter) and the “unnatural images cloathed in the pomp of illused words” that others describe as beautiful, in which admittedly gorgeous, but outrageously unnatural landscapes “colored with blue foliage & a green sky” are lauded as the “superexcellent in song.” The draft letter ends with the pacific assertion that while “the vagaries of false taste” and fashions last only for a season, “nature will be herself again & nature will out live them all.”²²⁰

Despite his confidence in the triumph of nature over fashion, however, Clare’s own confidence in his abilities falters again months later. Clare’s particular disappointment is with a volume of poetry collected by Southey called *Selected Works of the British Poets*, from which

²¹⁹ Sketches in the Life of John Clare, *John Clare by Himself*, 17.

²²⁰ Draft to Taylor, after Friday, April 15, 1831, *Letters*, 539.

Taylor had expected Clare to extract instances of the sublime and beautiful and to comment on them in the margins. “[H]ow is it I cannot find the sublime & beautiful which I expected[?]” Clare asks Taylor, complaining that the selections for the collection seem to have been made by a printer rather than by a poet. Clare throws the disappointment of the collection up into his larger “drawbacks and disappointments”: “I live in a land overflowing with obscurity & vulgarity far away from taste & books & friends . . . I see things praised that appear to me utterly worthless & read criticisms in the periodicals when I do see them that the very puffers of Blacking & Baersgreese would be very ashamed of.”²²¹

In the midst of his profound ambivalence regarding his role in any community of taste, Clare clings to his characterizations of the beautiful and sublime as simple, true, lively, and lasting. It is difficult to tell to what extent Clare felt the beautiful and sublime worth distinguishing from one another. While his attention to aesthetic categories seems more careful than that with which Barrell credits him (Barrell seems to me to have oversimplified Clare’s treatment of the aesthetic by lumping the picturesque, sublime, and beautiful together), he does not seem as exercised by their potential indistinctness as Edmund Burke, whose widely circulated and discussed *Enquiry* on the subject Clare seems to acknowledge when he notes that the desired effect of the “bomb bursting images” many people present as the sublime is to represent “shadows or creations of the terrible” (though they have “no more effect on the mind as terrible than the unmeaning rant of a maniac”).²²² Instead, Clare’s conception of sublimity more often seems to coincide with or exceed beauty in its simplicity. In discussing the book of Job, for example, Clare notes that “the simple sublimity of the poetry is more than beautiful.”²²³

²²¹ To John Taylor, October, 1831, *Letters* 549-50.

²²² To John Taylor, after Friday, 15 April, 1831, *Letters*, 539.

²²³ To John Taylor, May? 1831, *Letters*, 540.

More important than simplicity or truth in conveying the sublime or beautiful, however, seems to be Clare's rather more radical, usually implicit, claims that time is the only true test of sublimity, and flesh and blood liveliness the only passing measure of that test.²²⁴ It is an expectation of liveliness that belies Clare's characterization of the true sublime as a stony "Mount Atlas overpeering time," but which is fully in keeping with his admiration of those poetic extracts in which natural objects seem to live and grow and with those passages in his own poetry we might usefully consider as examples of a natural-historical sublime that vigorously moves and breathes.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the living landscape of Helpston as Clare knew it was enclosure. As Barrell describes it in *The Idea of Landscape*, enclosure de-localized Helpston with devastating effects for Clare, whose entire system of knowledge, he says, was local. The identity of the places Clare described and Clare's own identity, Barrell explains, depended upon things staying the way they were, where they were.²²⁵ This may account for the difficulty of distinguishing between a nostalgia for childhood and a nostalgia for Helpston before enclosure in Clare's poetry of loss. As Sarah Zimmerman points out in her work on Clare, it is also difficult to attribute such losses to any one cause, which can seem alternately to be the simple passage of time, natural events, or enclosure.²²⁶ The difficulty of fixing or accounting for such losses made them no less bitter for Clare. Taylor often found himself in the position of managing Clare's sharp responses to particularly unjust forms of loss, urging Clare to delete lines of his verse that Clare's patron Lord Radstock might find ungrateful and even thematizing Clare's response to loss in his introduction to *The Village Minstrel* to make it appear to his advantage as a poet:

²²⁴ The only poets whom Clare claimed to appreciate in Southey's collection were Fletcher, Withers, and Brown, though "where it not for the beautiful flesh & blood realtyys that burst from their own feelings every now & then they would have been long forgotten" (*Letters* 549).

²²⁵ Barrell, 123.

²²⁶ Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).

The regret of a poet for the loss of some object in nature, to which many of the dearest recollections of his earliest and happiest days had attached themselves, is always vehement; but who can wonder at or condemn it? If an old post had such attractions for Pope, surrounded as he was with comfort and luxury, what allowance ought not to be made for the passionate regard of poor CLARE for things which were the landmarks of his life, the depositaries of almost all his joys?²²⁷

Taylor includes below this preface an extended portion of an 1821 letter Clare wrote him mourning the immanent loss of two favourite elm trees behind his home to the “savage” owner who wished to sell them. The portion Taylor excerpts ends with an apology of sorts, in which Clare offers up as a mere “indisposition” his wish that everything boys might find “would remain in that state till they died.” Though Taylor doesn’t mention the result of their negotiations about the trees in his introduction to *The Village Minstrel*, they did continue, with Taylor offering to get Octavius Gilchrist to purchase the trees and save them. Clare’s reply was appreciative, but bitter: “I thank you heartily for your honest liberality in wishing to purchase the Elms for me & shall certainly never forget it—but you shall not buy them < ? > –let them dye like the rest of us.”²²⁸ Three lines are heavily deleted in the space mark.

Clare encounters these trees and others with a forceful ambivalence about how to approach their loss and destruction. Battered, broken, and traumatized trees, in particular, appear throughout his work. As Tim Fulford points out in his article, “Cowper, Wordsworth, Clare: The Politics of Trees,” trees were for Clare both landmarks and “selfmarks,” that were more properly the property of the poet in his intimate relationship with them than of the land owners who often flagrantly destroyed them. Fulford claims that in his treatment of them Clare “dramatize[s] loss and destruction without a compensatory discovery of a remaining power and unity in [his] own mind”; his language “operates according to an aesthetics of weakness—an intimation of loss,

²²⁷ *Critical Heritage*, 138.

²²⁸ *Letters*, 164.

dismemberment and oblivion rather than immortality.”²²⁹ But as often as Clare’s descriptions of broken trees seems to accord with this “aesthetics of weakness” (Clare’s last letter to Taylor on the doomed elms might seem at first to suggest such an aesthetic) they also sometimes lead the poet to reflect upon their continued life in some form or another or upon their continued ability to provide shelter to the people and animals whose lives they share. Running alongside the “indisposition” that Clare says caused him to wish that trees might remain in the same state as when they were first spotted in childhood and his bitter appraisal of the losses incurred through enclosure, Clare develops an aesthetic strain of natural continuances through which loss is imagined as a sublime confirmation of change and repetition in a natural history that absorbs and shelters human history. This gain through a loss is familiar to us in structures of sublimity, but here operates as an ecological, rather than egotistical, triumph.

Instances of people running for shelter from the rain under the leaves of trees, boys huddled inside the trunks of huge dotterel trees eating juicy wild peas, and animals escaping the hunt beneath tree roots abound in Clare’s poetry. In a short prose passage headed “TASTE,” Clare notes that there is “excessive rapture . . . in contemplating an autumn Landscape” and that “there is happiness in lolling over the old shivered trunks & fragments of a ruined tree destroyed some years since by lightening & mossaing & wasting away into everlasting decay.”²³⁰ Through the “poetic eye” that lingers over broken trees, Clare encounters and re-imagines a natural environment as a literary text; this attention develops an aesthetic strain of natural continuances through which environments or contexts thrive despite change. In fact, these changes register the evolution of contexts that unfold as natural history itself unfolds. Put differently,

²²⁹ Timothy Fulford, “Cowper, Wordsworth, Clare: The Politics of Trees,” *John Clare Society Journal*, 14 (1995), 58.

²³⁰ *Natural History*, 282.

interdependence makes the evolution of contexts possible because it refuses to abandon any of its parts, each part being critical to every other.

In another poem from *The Midsummer Cushion*, “The Moorhen's Nest,” Clare calls up an image of a “broken tree” that persists despite disaster. The speaker of that poem declares:

tis wealth to me
Wild heaths to trace, and note their broken tree
Which lightning shivered and which nature tries
To keep alive for poesy to prize (37-40)

The radical form of interdependence Clare describes in these examples crosses the boundaries of the non-human and human, the natural and the poetic. His understanding of their relationships is closer to sublime understanding than it is to a naïve confusion of art and world, or the facile forms of “interdependence” Morton associates with weak forms of eco-criticism and ecological land art. In fact, Clare’s nearest kinship in the world of land art today may be with Andy Goldsworthy. In *Rivers and Tides*, a documentary about his work, Goldsworthy expresses an understanding of art as implicated in natural processes. As the tide disassembles a large nest of driftwood Goldsworthy has constructed along the water’s edge, he watches the structure come to pieces as it follows the tide’s circular drift—an echo of the nest’s form—out to sea. “Doesn’t feel at all like destruction,” Goldsworthy notes.²³¹

Shivered and broken trees and the poems that prize them illustrate the way sublime ecosystems of mind and nature live and move continuously through time, as a hold against loss. This is the case for another tree in “The Moorhen's Nest,” which withstands a sudden disaster or, in Eugene Odum's language, adapts itself to circumstance, when a bank is washed away from under it by a flood. The poet describes happening upon this tree in the course of a walk during

²³¹ *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy Working with Time*, by Thomas Riedelsheimer, Annedore Donop, Andy Goldsworthy, Trevor Davies, and Leslie Hills (Burlington, VT: Docurama; New York, NY: Distributed by New Video, 2004).

which he has encountered a number of natural and man-made objects, “little pictures passing by”:

Then comes the meadows where I love to see
A flood-washed bank support an aged tree
Whose roots are bare, yet some with foothold good
Crankle and spread and strike beneath the flood,
Yet still it leans, as safer hold to win
On t'other side, and seems as tumbling in,
While every summer finds it green and gay
And winter leaves it safe as did the may. (79-86)

Clare's image here of a submerged network of roots resonates with his other characterizations of stable communities, where the landscape is richly stratified both horizontally and vertically, as Coletta points out, into various, smaller niche communities. Clare gives us here a set of images that invoke several of those layers both in place and time: the bank once washed by water, beneath it the roots extending down beneath the remaining water and, above all, the trunk and branches of the tree, whether green or grey with the seasons, extending out over the river in perfect security.

The complex image of the lightning or flood struck tree repeats throughout the poetry in which Clare seems to be working out his own natural aesthetic, giving it the status, in some ways, of Wordsworth's spots of time. Nevertheless, Clare's lively, swarming, linked images seem to function differently in his work than the spots do in Wordsworth's. In “The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery,” Paul de Man describes the Romantic sublime of Rousseau, Holderin, and Wordsworth as springing from a “nostalgia for the object,” like an “earthly and pastoral flower,” that swiftly becomes “a nostalgia for an entity that could never, by its very nature, become a particularized presence.” This movement away from natural objects as the source of ontological priority ultimately leads the poet to acknowledge “a possibility for consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship with the outside world, without

being moved by an intent aimed at a part of this world.”²³² The Romantic sublime as de Man describes it is therefore a movement away from the material world as the source of priority, or eternity, and towards some un-particularized entity or even, over and above that, towards one's own faculty of reason.

Clare's sublime is not quite of this variety. Eternity, for Clare, *is* rooted in material nature to some degree. Poetry, insofar as it has “truth to nature,” as Clare points out in “Shadows of Taste,” has this quality also, and in its ability to perpetually replay the activity of nature (as in the Keatsian passage cited above) is also expressive of it. Thus the sublime in nature and poetry (and, importantly, nature *in* poetry) is characterized in Clare's work “in terms of an inevitability of repetition or citation.”²³³ This “pre-eminent worthiness of being cited” is the quality that inheres in scenes like the lightning-struck oak in Clare's poetry. In Clare's poetics, the repetition of such images is a form of sublime quotation much like that Suzanne Guerlac describes in “Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime,” in which she argues that the force of the sublime is “maintained through the act of citation.”²³⁴ The force of sublime transmission in Guerlac's account of the Longinian sublime also causes a confusion of speaker and listener, subject and object, such that “the *destinateur* gets ‘transported’ into the message and the *destinataire* achieves a fictive identification with the speaker.”²³⁵ This seems an apt description of sublimity as Clare might conceive it given his positioning of himself as nature's interlocutor. Clare consistently, with more or less seriousness, portrays nature as an acting subject. He gives a piece

²³² Paul de Man, ‘Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), 76.

²³³ Suzanne Guerlac, ‘Longinus and the Subject of the Sublime’, *New Literary History*, 16 (1985), 276.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ This is Guerlac's gloss on Longinus's famed account of the sublime as having the ability to “transport” us out of ourselves such that we are “filled with joyful pride,” as if “we had ourselves produced the very thing we heard” (qtd. 275).

of land a voice in his protest poem “The Lamentations of Round Oak Waters” and elsewhere. In a letter written to Taylor in anticipation of his move from Helpston to Northborough, in which he says he has had “some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me so long,”²³⁶ he inverts our expectations regarding a relationship we expect to be one-sided. Under Guerlac’s model of sublime transport, the speaking voice of nature would be absorbed into its message, or poem, and the listener, whether we think of him as Clare or as a reader of the poem, would be transported into an identification with that speaking voice. Clare seems to imagine such an exchange in a sonnet called “November” for *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, in which he describes sheltering from a storm:

I love the wizard noise & rave in turn
Half vacant thoughts & self imagined rhymes
Then hid me from the shower a short sojourn
Neath ivied oak & mutter to the winds
Wishing their melody belonged to me
That I might breath a living song to thee²³⁷

Though Edward Strickland provides this segment of the poem in his article, “John Clare and the Sublime,” as further evidence in a case he makes for Clare’s evasion of the sublime (apparently because Clare runs for cover beneath the oak tree),²³⁸ I believe the passage does more to indicate Clare’s persistent interest in the topic. While the verse might not seem characteristic of Clare, it does seem to participate in the more interestingly developed strain of sublimity Clare described elsewhere, in the *Biography of Birds and Flowers* and other poems for *The Midsummer Cushion*.

²³⁶ To John Taylor, early January 1832, *Letters*, 561.

²³⁷ A poem for *The Midsummer Cushion*, published in 1830 in *The Stamford Bee*. From *John Clare: Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837*, eds. Robinson, Powell and Dawson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

²³⁸ Strickland gives a psychological argument for what he says is Clare’s avoidance of the sublime because of its overtones of sex and death. Strickland says that Clare instead clung to the persona of the “field poet” in a “refusal to succumb to a potentially catastrophic vulnerability.” The article appeared in *Criticism*, vol. XXIX, number 2 (spring 1987), 155.

The ivy covered tree as a place of safe harbor for creative activity seems to play an important role in Clare's changing formula.

Thus, in "The Progress of Rhyme," another poem for *The Midsummer Cushion*, Clare reflects upon a grove of "ancient limes / That into roofs like churches climb, / Grain intertwisting into grain." The grove shimmers with a "screen" of "summer's luscious leaves," and respire with the song and breath of insects and flowers. It is a place where, Clare says, "All I beheld of grand, with time / Grew up to beautiful's sublime."

In "The Eternity of Nature" Clare explicitly explores the potential of natural continuances through sublime quotation. In that poem, which begins "Leaves from eternity are simple things / To the world's gaze — whereto a spirit clings / Sublime and lasting," Clare invokes the perpetual freshness of his favourite inhabitants of nature — the birds and bees and flowers — linking them as 'partners' with time. Cowslips are one of many elements which, like the daisy, "lives and strikes its little root / Into the lap of time":

Cowslips' golden blooms
That in the closen and the meadow comes
Shall come when kings and empires fade and die,
And in the meadows as time's partners lie
As fresh two thousand years to come as now,
With those five crimson spots upon its brow. (27-32)

The "five crimson spots" upon the eternally blooming cowslip are picked up again, or quoted, later in the poem as the first of a number of slightly different iterations of the number five in nature:

With the odd number five, strange nature's laws
Plays many freaks nor once mistakes the cause;
And in the cowslip-peeps this very day
Five spots appear, which time ne'er wears away
Nor once mistakes the counting — look within
Each peep, and five, nor more nor less, is seen. (77-82)

Characteristically, the poet urges us to get close to the material world to recognize these repetitions that associate tiny natural forms with one another. In “The Eternity of Nature,” the poet conveys a spirit “Sublime and lasting,” through the sheer multiplicity of natural objects at the ground level that repeat the number five, defying the poet to find any, “Count which [he] will,” that do not “make the number right” (94). The sublime in Clare's poetry most often occurs at this scale of natural vision, whether the subject is standing upon a riverbank or kneeling down to better view an insect or bird's nest; visions of landscapes that seem to melt into the sky from the perspective of a subject standing upon an eminence are absent. Instead, repetitions and transpositions through time and space prompt them.

In his “Essay on Landscape,” Clare invites us to view the landscapes of De Wint: “Look at them they are the very copys of nature,” he marvels. Nature rewards her worshippers, he goes on to say, by revealing “her own imaginings” rather than the “mountains & rivers & cataracts” the fanciful imagine where they are not, he says, ticking off a laundry list of formations conventionally associated with the sublime (none of which, incidentally, Clare would have seen in Helpston). The lover of nature makes the best use of nature’s imaginings “by reflections as true & as light as a rushy common with its summer tract of a brook & old dotterel trees,”²³⁹ Clare says, advocating a form of reflection that gains its life from its likeness to nature and the “Shadows of Taste” that give it its lightness. Clare’s own taste settles upon a tree, a “dotterel,” whose top has been lopped off for harvest or scorched by lightning and turns it into “a Paradise,” a haven for sublime understanding.

It is not simply the “Eternity of Nature” — its “pre-eminent worthiness of being cited” ad infinitum in its various forms and the poetry in which it makes its home — that makes up Clare's

²³⁹ *Prose*, 211.

sublime. Rather, this endless iterability is paired with an appreciation of taste as a kind of freedom of creative choice, or, to return to Coletta's words, as “a measure of a system's ability to adapt to circumstance or even to adapt circumstance to itself,” that makes the “Eternity of Nature” sublime and lasting in ways that survive the sudden thunder and lightning and make new invitations to all creatures to “choose for joy.”

CHAPTER 4

Natural History in a New Sense

*I thynke for to touche also
The worlde whiche neweth everie daie,
So as I can, so as I maie.*

– John Gower, Thoreau’s epigraph to “Monday,” *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*

*It bloomed and dropt, a Single Noon—
The Flower—distinct and Red—
I, passing, thought another Noon
Another in its stead*

*Will equal glow, and thought no More
But came another Day
To find the Species disappeared—
The Same locality—*

– Emily Dickinson

In 2008, researchers at Harvard and Boston Universities published the results of their study of the impact of climate change on the phenology (the timing of seasonal activity) of a wide variety of flowering species in and around Concord, Massachusetts. Based on data spanning 150 years and originating with the data-set of Henry David Thoreau, the researchers found that species are now flowering an average of seven days earlier than they did in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁴⁰ Plant species whose flowering time is most sensitive and responsive to temperature change have fared best under warming trends, perhaps because these plants are better able to maintain important relationships of synchronicity with other plants, pollinators, and predators.

²⁴⁰ Charles G. Willis, Brad Ruhfel, Richard B. Primack, Abraham J. Miller-Rushing, and Charles C. Davis, “Phylogenetic patterns of species loss in Thoreau’s woods are driven by climate change,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105.44, November 4, 2008, 17029-33.

Researchers Abraham J. Miller-Rushing and Richard B. Primack's choice of this passage from Thoreau's journals as the epigraph for the publication of their findings in the journal

Ecology is canny:

It is astonishing how soon and unexpectedly flowers appear, when the fields are scarcely tinged with green. Yesterday, for instance, you observed only the radical leaves of some plants; to-day you pluck a flower.²⁴¹

Thoreau's reflection on the ghostly swiftness of seasonal change, through which plants come into flower seemingly overnight, is thrown into a much larger time scale in the context of Miller-Rushing and Primack's study. Employing Thoreau's own careful records of the times of the first-flowering of individual plant species, the study identifies a small, but overwhelmingly significant shift in the life histories of those plants. Yesterday (in Thoreau's time) Thoreau may have observed only the leaves of the larger blue flag on June 15th; today (in our own) we can indeed pluck its flower on that same date.

Perhaps most worrying is the fact that we no longer witness the life cycles of a staggering number of the plant species Thoreau observed in Concord, Massachusetts. Miller-Rushing and Primack found that 27% of the species that Thoreau observed no longer exist in Concord at all (when Thoreau observed them, they were already what ecologists call "ghost species" within their region—species whose place-faithful lives were quickly becoming untenable because their climate was changing around them). Their disappearance came despite the fact that Concord is, by modern measures, a remarkably well-preserved environment. In fact, about 60% of the area Thoreau roamed in Concord appears roughly the same as it did in his day, as undeveloped space (40% of that space is explicitly protected). The authors of the flowering-time study take this as evidence that "a more global approach to conservation prioritization is

²⁴¹ Thoreau, quoted in "Global Warming and Flowering Times in Thoreau's Concord: A Community Perspective," Abraham J. Miller-Rushing and Richard B. Primack, *Ecology*, 89(2), 2008, 332-41.

necessary to minimize future species loss” and that developing appropriate conservation strategies will necessitate including “information not only on species life history, but on their evolutionary history as well.”²⁴²

As with so many ecological and evolutionary principals, Thoreau himself discerned that particular plant species might have not only a uniform and endlessly repeating life history and set of characteristics, but also an evolutionary history that might inform our understanding of the relationships that determine its changing character. Characteristically, he did so through close observation. On August 21st, 1851, Thoreau reported in his journal:

I have now found all the hawkweeds. Singular these genera of plants—plants manifestly related yet distinct— They suggest a history to Nature—a Natural *history* in a new sense.²⁴³

Thoreau’s conception of natural history “in a new sense” was born of his ability to distinguish tiny differences as well as important resemblances,²⁴⁴ and, crucially, to distinguish between natural histories over vastly different time scales; from his location in Concord in the mid-nineteenth century, Thoreau could imagine natural history as a spirit of change involving the lives of hosts of individual plants and animals over large swaths of time rather than as a record of static matter.

As Thoreau frames it in his journal, his interest in botany arose not from any generalized study of plant species, but from a desire to “know my neighbors, if possible,—to get a little nearer to them.”²⁴⁵ He recalls looking out on a swamp at one point, and wondering if he could

²⁴² Willis, et al., 17029, 17031.

²⁴³ Henry David Thoreau Journals, August 21st, 1851, in *Material Faith: Thoreau on Science*, edited by Laura Dassow Walls, Thoreau Society: 1999, 27.

²⁴⁴ Similar observations would lead Charles Darwin to offer his paper “On the Tendency of Species to form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection” to the Linnean Society on July 1st 1858. *On the Origin of Species* would be published the following year.

²⁴⁵ *Material Faith*, 4 December 1856, Journal IX: 156-58.

ever possibly become familiar enough with its flowers to identify them all according to Bigelow's "Plants of Boston and Vicinity" (his first book of botany). Eventually he did, but he gained this knowledge not through a laborious and artificial process of memorization but, rather, through an increasing acquaintance with individual plants reachable on foot:

I soon found myself observing when plants first blossomed and leafed, and I followed it up early and late, far and near, several years in succession, running to different sides of the town and into the neighboring towns, often between twenty and thirty miles in a day. I often visited a particular plant four or five miles distant half a dozen times within a fortnight, that I might know exactly when it opened, beside attending to a great many others in different directions and some of them equally distant, at the same time.²⁴⁶

The activity Thoreau describes in this segment of his journal resulted in the records Miller-Rushing and Primack engage in their study; despite its length and wide-ranging significance, that study is composed of the minute observations of multiple individuals observing hundreds of individual plants belonging to hundreds of distinct plant species over time. For seven years (beginning the year Thoreau commented on the varieties of hawkweed in his journal), Thoreau scanned the woods of Concord, observing and carefully recording the date upon which he first observed the flowering of more than five hundred plant species. For fifteen years, in 1878 and from 1888-1902, Edward Hosmer (a shopkeeper and amateur botanist) did the same, and between 1963 and 1993 Pennie Logemann recorded the times of first-flowering of plants on her property to develop a reliable calendar for her landscaping business. Each of these observers might have expected the times they recorded each year to be roughly the same, differing slightly only in response to variations in seasonal temperatures and weather patterns from year to year. Together with the observations of the researchers themselves from 2003 to 2006, however, the

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 156-58.

data tell a different story on a different scale. On average, species are now flowering a full week earlier than in Thoreau's time.²⁴⁷

Thoreau's natural history writing anticipates and articulates the issues raised by Miller-Rushing and Primack's study in surprising ways. Diurnal, seasonal, and generational changes underlie his understanding of natural history and structure most all of his narratives—even those that are not generally considered natural history.²⁴⁸ Despite the apparently consistent repetition of such cycles over time, Thoreau's depiction of natural history is never predictable, in part because he was aware of a fundamental dissonance at the heart of humans' environmental experience: that of our participation in, but necessarily partial coincidence with, the history of life on earth. Writing from Walden pond in his journal, Thoreau reflected upon humans' ability to embrace within their life span the shorter lives of other material things, and to be embraced by those natural phenomena that appear fixed, unchanging, and enduring. He expresses that relationship of different time scales spatially, as a matter of nearness and distance:

All material things are in some sense man's kindred, and subject to the same laws with him.

Even a taper is his relative—and burns not eternally, as some say of lamps found burning in ancient sepulchres—but only a certain number of his hours.

These things belong to the same dynasty or system of things. He witnesses their wasting and decay as well as his own. What man's experience does not embrace is to him stationary and eternal. Whether he wakes or sleeps the lamp still burns on and burns out—completing its life within his own.

He sees such objects at a very near angle. They have a very large parallax to

²⁴⁷ Miller-Rushing, et al. 333-34.

²⁴⁸ According to the generally accepted appraisal of Thoreau's career, he became more invested in traditional forms of natural history as he aged. While I accept this appraisal up to a point, I believe Thoreau was deeply invested in re-thinking natural history from the time he first engaged it. That his writing became more detailed and factual as he aged does not seem to me evidence of his acceptance of more traditional forms of natural history. Thoreau's record-keeping instead seems to evidence his growing confidence that his records would reveal their own narratives over time. As the final entry in his journal attests, all natural phenomena—like the example he uses of the wind as it etches its movements into the sand—are “self-registering.”

him—but not so those tapers the fixed stars which are not both lit and burnt out in the life of a man—yet they too are his distant relations.²⁴⁹

Here, the human life span is a distorting mechanism, one that brings material things with shorter lives than humans near to us, and that takes those things with longer life spans further from us. In their alienation from human time scales, these things seem “stationary and eternal,” an illusion that makes those tapers in the sky—the stars—seem very far (both in space and in time) from their kindred, the tapers upon our tables.

Thoreau’s ability to imagine the finitude of all material things despite their existence in different time scales sprung from a very recent acceptance within the scientific community of the fact of species extinction.²⁵⁰ Even as natural history catalogues swelled to accommodate newly discovered plants, animals, and cultures, naturalists struggled to accept the history of life on earth and of humans’ experience of it as proscribed and marked by unrecoverable losses. Thus though Thoreau asks, in *Walden*, “Why do precisely these objects we behold make a world? Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbors; as if nothing but a mouse could have filled this crevice?” he was also sceptical that just those objects we behold at any given moment in time offer us a complete world.²⁵¹ Writing in his journal in 1856 in response to the newly acknowledged disappearance of animals such as the cougar and wolverine in the Northeast he speculates:

Is it not a maimed and imperfect nature that I am conversant with? . . . When I think what were the various sounds and notes, the migrations and works, and changes of fur and plumage which ushered in the spring, and marked the other seasons of the year, I am reminded that this my life in nature, this particular round

²⁴⁹ Material Faith, Fall 1846, Journal 2:354

²⁵⁰ For a discussion of the extinction debate see Mark Barrow’s *Nature’s Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (University of Chicago Press: 2009).

²⁵¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Journal, Reviews and Posthumous Assessments, Criticism*, edited by William Rossi (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 150-151.

of natural phenomena which I call a year, is lamentably incomplete . . . I take infinite pains to know all the phenomena of the spring, for instance, thinking that I have here the entire poem, and then, to my chagrin, I learn that it is but an imperfect copy that I possess and have read, that my ancestors have torn out many of the first leaves and the grandest passages, and mutilated it in many places.²⁵²

This, “my life in nature,” Thoreau laments, is marked by omissions, mutilations, losses unimaginable. One such loss, a much more personal one, would prompt him to begin his study of natural history.

“Natural History of Massachusetts”

Thoreau began his formal engagement with natural history in late winter 1842. He did so at Emerson’s urging, in the midst of what was, for both of them, a period of mourning. In January 1842, Thoreau’s brother John died suddenly and unexpectedly after cutting his face while shaving on New Year’s Day. Later that month, Emerson’s young son Waldo contracted scarlet fever. He also died. Laura Dassow Walls (who has edited and written about Thoreau’s natural history writing), suggests that Emerson assigned Thoreau the task of reviewing the state of Massachusetts’s natural history survey as a distraction from their grief. As such, Emerson’s cheerful “Preliminary Note” to the resulting essay (which appeared in *The Dial* in July), seems oddly glib:

We were thinking how we might best celebrate the good deed which the State of Massachusetts has done, in procuring the Scientific Survey of the Commonwealth, whose result is recorded in these volumes, when we found a near neighbor and friend of ours, dear also to the Muses, a native and an inhabitant of the town of Concord, who readily undertook to give us such comments as he had made on these books, and, better still, notes of his own conversation with nature in the woods and waters of this town.²⁵³

²⁵² *The Heart of Thoreau’s Journals*, edited by Odell Shepard (Dover Publications, 1961), 157.

²⁵³ Emerson, “Preliminary Note” to Thoreau’s “Natural History of Massachusetts,” in *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Lewis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

The impersonality of Emerson's address—his us of the royal (in this case editorial) “we” and his off-the-cuff manner—is somewhat jarring given that he was perhaps less concerned with celebrating the good deeds of Massachusetts in conducting a scientific survey than he was with distracting his neighbour and friend from his very recent loss. The note continues, though, with a slight gesture towards the other losses possible if Thoreau had not written the essay:

With all thankfulness we begged our friend to lay down the oar and fishing line, which none can handle better, and assume the pen, that Isaak Walton and White of Selborne might not want a successor, nor the fair meadows, to which we also have owed a home and the happiness of many years, their poet.

The trope of relinquishing one thing and taking up another as a matter of letting loose one's grip or unhanding (in the stated case, unhanding the oar and fishing line), or taking something in hand (in this case, the pen of the poet) is one Emerson and Thoreau engage repeatedly in their writing on the (im)balance of loss and gain. Here, the assertive gesture of taking the pen of the poet in hand prevents a loss to naturalists Walton and White of a successor and to the meadows of a poet. Presumably, Thoreau had neither oar nor fishing line in hand when Emerson made his request (the already lost object, instead, was his brother, John). Thoreau's own health suffered during this period; it is indeed possible that the meadows would have lost their poet if Thoreau had not picked up his pen and collected material from his *Journal* for the essay.

For Thoreau, sympathy, loss, and estrangement are fundamentally experiences of the body in a particular environment—experiences that recalibrate the relationship between subjects and objects, as well as between soul and substance. Though the “Natural History of Massachusetts” is not an elegy, or even noticeably elegiac in its tone; it is marked by its attendance to forms of sympathy and estrangement, with which he had a radical encounter that January. When John experienced lockjaw after cutting himself shaving Henry, too, experienced symptoms of the infection to a degree that made his family fearful for his life. As Walls points

out in *Seeing New Worlds*, this radical sympathy was followed upon John's death by Henry's feeling that sympathy with anything, even his own body, was henceforth foreclosed:

I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body. I love any other piece of nature, almost, better.

I was always conscious of sounds in nature which my ears could never hear—that I caught but the prelude to a strain. She always retreats as I advance. Away behind and behind is she and her meaning. Will not this faith and expectation make to itself ears at length. I never saw to the end, nor heard to the end; but the best part was unseen and unheard.²⁵⁴

In the "Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau looks to fish, foxes, and loons for the sympathy he has lost, and turns to "natural rhymes" for evidence that parts of nature sympathize with one another. Yet, Thoreau's desire for sympathy in nature does not lead to easy conversation with it (despite Emerson's optimism). Instead, Thoreau's essay tugs gently at the questions and themes that would drive his natural history writing throughout his life, including his longed-for sympathy with nonhuman creatures and things, and the limits of that sympathy in contemplating beauty, comprehending animal minds, and practicing natural history.

Thoreau engages the explicit occasion of his writing ("Reports—on the fishes, Reptiles, and Birds; the Herbaceous Plants and Quadrapeds; the Insects Injurious to Vegetation; and the Invertebrate Animals—of Massachusetts") only cursorily. Instead, he avers at the essay's outset that "much more is adoin'g than Congress wots of" and asks, "What journal do the persimmon and the buckeye keep, and the sharpshinned hawk?"²⁵⁵ Wondering at this question, contemplating natural beauty and its serenity—to one who does these things, Thoreau asserts,

²⁵⁴ *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, editors Francis H. Allen, and Bradford Torrey (New York: Dover, 1962), 98.

²⁵⁵ "Natural History of Massachusetts," 4.

“no harm nor disappointment can come.”²⁵⁶ Natural history itself is an “elixir,” an antidote to the “din of religion, literature, and philosophy, which is heard in pulpits, lyceums, and parlors.”²⁵⁷ Several privileged figures—a solitary rambler, a sailor, an Indian—stride through the text, cutting a swath through this noise in their attendance to the infrequent cries of winter birds, the lonely notes of loons, and the essences of the muskrat. The “man of science” does have a place here, but he too learns about the world not through “inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy,” but by his “finer organization,” one that allows him to “smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men.” We learn, Thoreau concludes, “by direct intercourse and sympathy” and not through “contrivance and method.”²⁵⁸

Thoreau demonstrates his own finer organization by sounding and sighting his way through the Massachusetts landscape, cataloguing birds and other creatures by first marking their introduction to his senses: a note here, a track there, the luster of scales through the water. In this way, even entomology “extends the limits of being in a new direction, so that I walk in nature with a sense of greater space and freedom.”²⁵⁹ “With pleasure,” he explores “the sources of the myriad sounds which crowd the summer noon, and which seem the very grain and stuff of which eternity is made.”²⁶⁰ Yet, with these invitations for engagement (the sounds and sights that catch Thoreau’s notice), comes a certain call for reserve in particular situations. The “direct intercourse and sympathy” Thoreau advocates is rather indirect in the specific instances he records. They are inflected, instead, by an appreciation for privacy in a scene where observer

²⁵⁶ We might hear an echo, here, of Wordsworth’s assertion to Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey” that “nature never did betray / The heart that loved her,” where that claim is preceded, if not predicated by, the intimation that, in fact, she has.

²⁵⁷ “Natural History of Massachusetts,” 5.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

and observed are alone, together:

When I detect a beauty in any of the recesses of nature, I am reminded, by the serene and retired spirit in which it requires to be contemplated, of the inexpressible privacy of a life,—how silent and unambitious it is.²⁶¹

In Thoreau's statement on "privacy" the subject of privacy is ambiguous; it is unclear whether the privacy belongs to the observer in the scene, or the beauty he observes. The "inexpressible privacy of a life" seems to belong to both: the "beauty" in its recess, and the observer who must assume an analogous "retired spirit" to contemplate it. The two sympathize precisely through their retirement or recession from one another, their retreat becoming what they hold in common.²⁶²

Thoreau also highlights a certain reserve in the act of observation; in fact, the observer is not said to observe at all—only to detect and to contemplate. The scene as sketched omits the moment or moments of observation; Thoreau glosses over the intrusive act of looking, moving immediately from the detection of some beauty (an insect, a fox, a moss, perhaps) to contemplation of it. It is unclear whether the contemplation he describes takes place immediately after that initial detection or some time much later, but the curious omission of a period of observation—of staring or scrutiny—implies a respect for the thing observed, manifested by a certain retreat from it into the kind of inward thoughtfulness associated with contemplation. Later, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau would speculate that the primary occupation of the natural historian (like that of the fisherman), is not

²⁶¹ Ibid., 5-6.

²⁶² In this, as in so many other things, Thoreau's conception of Native Americans' relationship with their environment was his ideal: "The Indian's intercourse with Nature is at least such as admits of the greatest independence of each. If he is somewhat of a stranger in her midst, the gardener is too much her familiar. There is something vulgar and foul in the latter's closeness to his mistress, something noble and cleanly in the former's distance" (*A Week* 56).

in obtaining “new genera or species” but in obtaining “new contemplations.”²⁶³ The displacement of the object of attention, from the animal or phenomenon sighted to the contemplations it inspires, is familiar to us from the natural history of Clare. The shift is a necessary one, and a polite imaginative gesture, that recognizes and respects the privacy of other creatures while engaging them.

Thoreau structures his essay loosely around an account of the seasons and remarks on several creatures within each major category covered in the Massachusetts’s *Reports*. He spends little space simply naming resident animal species, preferring instead a number of enigmatic narratives detailing the characteristics of particular animals. As Lawrence Buell points out in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Thoreau’s attention to and minute description of the characteristics of animals was not unique during this period in American natural history writing, when “profiles” or “cameos” of animals were common. These profiles generally included all the minute details a zoologist might require, such as a species’ dimension, weight, colour, diet, and range, but they also often included an eclectic collection of short travel narratives, hunting tales, amusing anecdotes, and personal asides. After describing the features and colours of the American wild cat, for example, John James Audubon and John Bachman move on, in their *Vivaporous Quadrupeds*, to describe its habits and character:

It is . . . generally cowardly when attacked, and always flies from its pursuers, if it can, and although some anecdotes have been related to us of the strength, daring, and fierceness of this animal; such as its having been known to kill at different times a sheep, a full-grown doe, attack a child in the woods, &c; yet in all the instances that have come under our own notice, we have found it very timid, and

²⁶³ Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, eds. Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1980), 25.

always rather inclined to beat a retreat, than to make an attack on any animal larger than a hare or a young pig.²⁶⁴

Throughout the book Audubon and Bachman use all manner of sources to flesh out their accounts, gathering up rumour, registries, letters and personal experience to detail what a particular animal species always does, has been known to do, and has done in their experience.

For Buell, the “intermixture of fact, narrative, and autobiography, even the tonal interweave of reportage and playful mock-epic pedantry” in Thoreau’s animal sketches does not “differ in kind from many natural history publications designed for general audiences” like *Viviparous Quadrupeds* (which he cites as characteristic of that genre).²⁶⁵ Yet, it seems to me that Thoreau’s sketches of animals do in fact depart from this model in ways that are apparent from his first attempts at such sketches in “The Natural History of Massachusetts.” Instead of speaking generally about what animal species do, supported cursorily by anecdotal evidence, Thoreau highlights in detail his interactions with particular animals. These are themselves anecdotes, but their emphasis is not on the general character of a species at large, but upon the writer’s interaction with a particular animal, at a particular moment in time. These moments of interaction are shaped by a delicacy I find absent from the narratives included in *Viviparous Quadrupeds*. The privacy of any one wild cat in any one interaction is not a concern for Audubon and Bachman. Neither do they seem to have suffered any impulse to sympathize in some way with their subjects, a desire Thoreau expresses repeatedly in “The Natural History of Massachusetts” and throughout his natural history writing. On one hand, Thoreau’s animal sketches are marked by his respect for the “inexpressible privacy of a life in nature.” On the

²⁶⁴ John James Audubon and Rev. John Bachmann, *Vivaporous Quadrupeds of North America* (New York: J.J. Audubon, 1846), 5.

²⁶⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 415.

other, they are born of Thoreau's will to explore "the limits of being," to sympathize with the unlikeliest creatures: "Methinks I have need even of [a minnow's] sympathy, and to be his fellow in a degree."²⁶⁶ Entomology, ichtheology: the study of insects and fishes held all the fascination marginal subjects would hold for Thoreau throughout his life. With the same relish in perversity with which he imagines sinking into the depths of the most "impermeable and unfathomable bog,"²⁶⁷ he imagines fellowship with a particular fish in a particular brook.

Thoreau dedicates his profile of the fox to a particular fox, with an even greater degree of specificity. It is, in fact, the passage's oscillation between a narrative intended to illustrate something about all foxes and its fixation, nevertheless, on a particular encounter and a particular fox, that make the passage such an enigmatic one. In the "serene and retired spirit" Thoreau advocates, Thoreau the observer in this passage plays no part, to the point of ceding the earth to his animal subject. The passage, which stands out as the essay's most graceful, manages to address at once the general or expected behaviour of foxes while speaking of "a fox," a non-specific yet singular animal whom he depicts running across the snow in a moment that achieves a certain spectral and timeless quality:

When I see a fox run across the pond on the snow, with the carelessness of freedom, or at intervals trace his course in the sunshine along the ridge of a hill, I give up to him sun and earth as to their true proprietor. He does not go in the sun, but it seems to follow him, and there is a visible sympathy between him and it.²⁶⁸

The transcendental moment Thoreau describes, in which the sun seems to follow the fox in a moment of sympathetic identification, seems utterly unique, yet his opening phrase, "When I see a fox . . ." suggests that such sightings are regular. In this, Thoreau treads a peculiar course: he seems to speak about the characteristics of foxes in general, while attending to the liberty and

²⁶⁶ "Natural History of Massachusetts," 14.

²⁶⁷ "Walking," in *The Essays*, 164.

²⁶⁸ "Natural History of Massachusetts," 13.

specificity of an individual fox in a particular situation. Moreover, Thoreau removes himself from that situation. In his words, he gives the scene up to the fox, eschewing sympathy with it for an acknowledgment of sympathy between the fox and its environment. The scene—the sun—seems to follow the fox, and the observer is left outside it.

After presenting this picture, Thoreau inverts the dynamic to place the reader in the scene with the fox:

Sometimes, when the snow lies light and but five or six inches deep, you may give chase and come up with one on foot. In such a case he will show a remarkable presence of mind, choosing only the safest direction, though he may lose ground by it. Notwithstanding his fright, he will take no step which is not beautiful. His pace is a sort of leopard canter, as if he were in no wise impeded by the snow, but were husbanding his strength all the while. When the ground is uneven, the course is a series of graceful curves, conforming to the shape of the surface. He runs as though there were not a bone in his back. Occasionally dropping his muzzle to the ground for a rod or two, and then tossing his head aloft, when satisfied of his course. When he comes to a declivity, he will put his fore feet together, and slide swiftly down it, shoving the snow before him.²⁶⁹

Thoreau teaches his reader how to read the animal's movements in this passage, which slips between tenses and between hypothetical and descriptive modes, encouraging the reader to see in her mind's eye the tracks of the fox, his movements, and the movements of his mind. Earlier, Thoreau notes that he can tell "which way a mind wended" by attending to a fox's tracks, noting the direction they face, the interval between them, and the rapidity of pace indicated by the depth of each print's impression in the snow. The passage above leads the reader through the process of reading the animal's mind in its movements: the fox is frightened, but has "a remarkable presence of mind;" he conserves his strength, takes pleasure in his course, and is responsive to the terrain. In Thoreau's description, the animal takes its course purposefully, and also playfully, in the matter of art. Indeed, Thoreau remarks upon the expressiveness of the sound the fox's

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

steps produce, noting that “he treads so softly that you would hardly hear it from any nearness, and yet with such expression that it would not be quite inaudible at any distance.”²⁷⁰

“Expression,” here, seems to imply artfulness, character, or sentiment; the expression of the fox’s tread is a form of communication. Thoreau is reluctant to transcribe the content of the expression, focusing instead upon the delicacy of its transmission and reception: it is easy to miss, yet available to all, “at any distance.”

The tread of the fox is an enigma: that it can just barely, but always, be heard at any nearness or distance indicates that its transmission is not dependent upon its proximity to a recipient, but instead upon the availability of that recipient to its expression. In the “Natural History of Massachusetts,” the availability of a naturalist or “true man of science” to the gestures and expressions of the natural world relies upon his ability to cultivate an “eye unprejudiced by the short term of human life” and a longing for a sympathetic relation to his subjects constrained by that prejudice.²⁷¹ The image of the fox running in the sun figures forth an image of sympathetic relation outside that prejudice by declining to distinguish between two very different material objects living out lives of radically different duration (the fox and the sun), and in nevertheless allowing them a sympathetic relation because, at this moment, they exist together: the fox “does not go in the sun, but it seems to follow him, and there is a visible sympathy between him and it.”²⁷²

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and *Walden* (written and revised together during Thoreau’s two years on Walden pond) were prompted by the “short term of human life.” *A Week*, in particular, can be read as a response to the short term of John’s life and as a memorial

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 14.

²⁷¹ “Natural History of Massachusetts,” 20.

²⁷² Ibid., 14.

to Henry's time with him. Both are also attempts to describe the world "unprejudiced" by the short term of human life and in so doing to recalibrate Thoreau's sympathetic relation to elements in space and time. Just as *A Week* folds two weeks into one, *Walden* folds two years into one, and both include excerpts from the journal Thoreau kept throughout his life. The journal was chronological and clearly dated, but the excerpts he selected from them float out of that framework to join, in *A Week*, the narrative of two weeks spent by Henry and John on a canoe trip together and all the affiliated fragments of time that Thoreau picked up on that river, from the original naming of the Concord river to John's death, which is not mentioned but which nevertheless pervades the text.

Merrimacking

*[S]uch sympathy have [the elements] ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain in tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause, grieve.*²⁷³

According to Jonathan Bate in *Romantic Ecology*, elegies and the eighteenth century poems of inscription to which Geoffrey Hartman has linked them in the development of the Romantic lyric operate under a system of gains and losses through which the loss of a particular person, moment, or feeling results in the gain of the poem written about the loss. Bate also believes that there is a profound doubleness about poems like Wordsworth's "Poems on the Naming of Places" that register the loss of a moment that is "irredeemably past," but simultaneously recover those moments through their recurrence in the minds of the poems' readers (93). Bate's particular political claims regarding "Wordsworth and the Environmental

²⁷³ *Walden*, 93.

Tradition” (his book’s subtitle), nevertheless rest upon yet another sense of gains and losses that requires that we consider the places described in Wordsworth’s “Poems on the Naming of Places” as places that exist in the physical world, not just the world of the poems. Bate’s work is “dedicated to the proposition that the way in which William Wordsworth sought to enable his readers better to enjoy or to endure life was by teaching them to look at and dwell in the natural world” (4). Given this dedication, Bate’s claim that “Wordsworth’s ‘Poems on the Naming of Places’ inscribe, guard, protect, and preserve secluded bowers and sacred places,” does not apply merely to a guardianship and preservation of place that is limited to the space of the poem. Bate means that, in a very real way, Wordsworth’s readers ought to feel motivated to ensure that secluded bowers and sacred places remain secluded and sacred (107). In this way, the poems preserve the landscapes they describe, despite their inability to preserve the moments and persons inscribed therein in a similarly material way. This is certainly true, to some extent, of the places Thoreau described, most especially Walden Pond itself, which one can still visit. Additionally, as John McPhee details in his introduction to *A Week*, it is still possible to take the boating trip Thoreau describes in that work. As McPhee points out, however, the places Thoreau described are significantly different today, both because of additions (like traffic noise) and omissions (of particular flowering plants, for example). This was, in fact, Thoreau’s own experience of these places, places that are never what they once were, or will someday be.²⁷⁴ It is always already a “maimed and imperfect” nature with which Thoreau converses, a poem that

²⁷⁴ Thoreau had heard that “the gales do not at present waft to the voyager the natural and original fragrance of the land, such as the early navigators described, and that the loss of many odoriferous native plants, sweet-scented grasses and medicinal herbs, which formerly sweetened the atmosphere, and rendered it salubrious, by the grazing of cattle and the rooting of swine, is the source of many diseases which now prevail; the earth, say they, having been long subjected to extremely artificial and luxurious modes of cultivation, to gratify the appetite, converted into a sty and hot-bed, where men for profit increase the ordinary decay of nature” (*A Week*, 355).

is merely an “imperfect copy” of itself, with some leaves missing and mutilated.

If Bate’s hope that literary works might help ensure that the places they describe stay forever green therefore seems an oversimplification of the natural world as Thoreau encountered it, we might turn to Paul Fry’s response to Bate, in which Fry asserts that “poetry is an epitaph, not a landscape” –a fact that will become even clearer, he believes, if all the secluded bowers and sacred landscapes Bate invokes are destroyed. According to Fry in his article, “Green to the Very Door? The Natural Wordsworth,” the continuance of the particular material world described in a poem is not only not necessary for the poem’s success or appreciation, it is not possible. Fry goes so far as to add his own tag line to the conclusion of *Romantic Ecology*, in which Bate implores readers of Wordsworth’s Boy of Winander episode to remember that it is about “a boy alone by a lake at dusk blowing mimic hootings to unseen owls. Which are there to answer him.”²⁷⁵ Fry’s addition—“And then to stop”—might seem an undue savaging of Bate’s concluding message, but it is in accordance with the only reading of “nature” that Fry believes will allow him to continue to refer to Wordsworth as a “nature poet” (something he wishes to do). Like the “stone-colored criticism” with which Fry counters Bate’s environmentalist green criticism, the version of “nature” in Wordsworth’s poetry Fry chooses to discuss is one in which the human and nonhuman realms of being intersect to reveal something about the “widest commonality” of being.²⁷⁶ It is this form of nature, Fry argues, that persists when the owls of the

²⁷⁵ Bate, quoted in Paul Fry’s “Green to the Very Door? The Natural Wordsworth.” *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment: Romantic Poetry and the Ecology of Reading*. Edited by Helen Regueiro Elam and Frances Ferguson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

²⁷⁶ Fry takes his language about the “widest commonality” of being from Walter Pater’s “Wordsworth,” in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Signet, 1974). According to Fry, fluctuations in the proportion of human to nonhuman things and the persistence of particular forms of being cannot change this widest commonality of being. My chapter, with Thoreau, nevertheless argues for the relevance of particular forms of being and the specificity of forms of evolutionary change for

Boy of Winander passage fall silent. And while Fry, like many others before him, also reads that silence as an intimation of the boy's death, he does so because he believes that the scene reveals an "ontology of nature" in which the inanimate precedes the animate and "nature is our own nonhuman existence, forgotten once named."²⁷⁷

By contrast, Thoreau writes of owls in *Walden* that also express something about the widest commonality of being, but that do so without drawing sharp distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, the living and the nonliving. Thoreau's owls, which seem to screech "oh-o-o-o-o- that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!" express a "dismal scream" indeed, yet Thoreau loves to hear their "regrets and sighs":

They are the spirits, the low spirits and melancholy forebodings, of fallen souls that once in human shape night-walked the earth and did the deeds of darkness, now expiating their sins with their wailing hymns or threnodies in the scenery of their transgressions. They give me a new sense of the variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling . . . It is a sound admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized.²⁷⁸

"That nature which is our common dwelling" is various and capacious, Thoreau discovers, not simply because of what it currently contains, but because of what it has contained and continues to carry with it. The "vast and undeveloped nature" which men have not recognized carries within itself, curiously enough, history. It is itself both landscape and epitaph, continually memorializing everything it has ever been.²⁷⁹ Thoreau's own writing practices reproduce that

properly understanding, appreciating, and in some sense protecting, our common dwelling and in recording its natural history.

²⁷⁷ Fry, 104.

²⁷⁸ *Walden*, 84.

²⁷⁹ In what is perhaps a reference Anne-Lise Francois' *Open Secrets*, Timothy Morton calls evolution itself an "open secret" because it is "a text that organisms 'play back' automatically," the record of variation, mutation, and descent open for all to see in its current incarnations. The reference appears in *The Ecological Thought*, written as a companion to *Ecology Without Nature*, also on ecology and Romantic literature (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 74.

activity of memorialization without bounds. *A Week* is astonishing in its capaciousness and scope, incorporating writing from his journals, descriptions of his journey with his brother, profiles of plants and animals, and anecdotes collected from his reading of historical records. *A Week* is their common dwelling, a residence for the living and the dead, for all things whose tenure on earth is only more or less temporary.

After a lengthy reflection on the past lives of the Concord river, once the Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River – and in some ways forever the Grass-ground River (or at least “as long as grass grows and water runs here,” he muses) – Thoreau launches himself on the bosom of the river, to “float whither it [will] bear” him. “[W]e seemed to be embarked on the placid current of our dreams, floating from past to future as silently as one awakes to fresh morning or evening thoughts,” he announces upon the commencement of this journey.²⁸⁰ Like Thoreau’s passage along panoramas of the Rhine and Mississippi rivers in “Walking,”²⁸¹ His water passage along the Concord and Merrimack Rivers in his *Week* is as much an account of the passage of time as it is of his passage through the landscape. As the riverbank scenery passes before him, Thoreau reads the landscape for the traces of its past. Often, these traces come in the form of physical reminders, pipes or arrows, of a history of the native people who lived there. Nevertheless, Thoreau’s resources are multiple, including not just physical artifacts but also accounts of local historians, local legends, recovered letters, and his own fanciful word etymologies. Common to all Thoreau’s accounts of the rivers’ past lives, though, is his insistence upon their continuousness: in Thoreau’s account, all who have inhabited a place are in some way

²⁸⁰ *A Week*, 19-20.

²⁸¹ Thoreau distinguishes the two panoramas less in terms of the features of the landscapes they depict than in terms of the time periods they evoke. The Rhine panorama is “like a dream of the Middle Ages,” while that of the Mississippi is “a Rhine stream of a different kind,” whose bridges and foundations were yet to be laid (162).

contemporaries.

Thoreau seems to have organized his ideas for *A Week* under a similar principle, so that all manner of reflections find a place somewhere within it: as James Russell Lowell pointed out in his review of the book, “[t]he leaves of [Thoreau’s] portfolio and river-journal seem to have been shuffled together with a trustful dependence on some overruling printer-providence.”²⁸² It is Lowell’s position that Thoreau’s many diversions are “out of proportion and out of place” and “mar our Merrimacking dreadfully,” but Thoreau seems, rather, to have put his confidence in the providence of a landscape and a conception of a week that might stretch to contain anything. Thus “Thursday” quietly expands to contain an extra week off-river, in which Thoreau and his brother hike to the summit of Agiocochook. The presence of Thoreau’s brother is itself a hidden presence within the work; his brother is almost always absorbed into the plural “we,” aside from his periodic appearance as the “other” in Thoreau’s descriptions of activities requiring the work of two persons acting independently. Nevertheless, one gets the distinct impression in reading *A Week*, especially given the dates of its composition and the verse invocation Thoreau places as its opening (“Be thou my Muse, my Brother –”), that *A Week* is Thoreau’s memorial to his brother.

Like the other chapters of *A Week*, “Thursday” (which I focus on here because of its special status as an expansive and privileged enclosure, a week secreted within *A Week*) is littered with white space, original verse, verse quotations, historical anecdotes, and philosophical reflections. Many of the irruptions in “Thursday” seem to be especially concerned with the protective potentialities of the landscape that surrounds the two travelers and the status of the journey on foot enfolded into what is otherwise the limit of their voyage. This unfolding of a

²⁸² Lowell, James Russell, in a review of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, Vol. III, No. IX, December, 1849, 40-51, reprinted in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, Vol. 7, reproduced in Literature Resource Center.

journey within a journey is reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas" and also of the memories within memories to which Hartman turns his attention in "Nature and the Humanization of the Self in Wordsworth." In that essay, Hartman turns to a passage from book two of *The Prelude*, in which Wordsworth's memory of a horse ride with friends melts into a memory, within the first, of an old church in which the song of a wren can be heard "So sweetly 'mid the gloom" of recent showers that there, in that comfortless place, Wordsworth remembers, he could have made his "dwelling-place." In Hartman's account, the first memory "yields as if spontaneously" to the second, which is more inward, and embraces it. Within that embrace, Hartman says, the poet lingers and almost brings the poem to a halt. What Hartman marvels at in the passage as particularly Wordsworthian, though, is that the displaced memory is continuous with the first and "remains within the frame of its matrix."²⁸³

"Thursday" (the week within the matrix of *A Week*) begins on just such a gloomy, rainy day, in the scant enclosure of the brothers' tent-fold. The two wake to the sound of raindrops falling on their roof, "as if the whole country wept, the drops falling in the river, and on the alders, and in the pastures."²⁸⁴ Though the sound of the rain—"deliberate and ominous"—carries with it a mild yet threatening undertone, its omnipresence and apparently sympathetic tears also link it to a more explicitly friendly rain shower Thoreau would describe on Walden pond in a moment of loneliness, when—for once—"to be alone was something unpleasant." The feeling, Thoreau writes, was of temporary insanity, but as a sudden rain began to fall he became aware, "in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house" of "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me . . . Every

²⁸³ Geoffrey Hartman, "Nature and the Humanization of the Self in Wordsworth," *English Romantic Poets*, edited by M. H. Abrams (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 127.

²⁸⁴ *A Week*, 298.

little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me.”²⁸⁵ In *A Week*, as well, the rain seems to consolidate the atmosphere, gathering it around the tent in a curious embrace.

Once the brothers set out, they are obliged to feel and scent their way through an atmosphere that is heavy with fog and oddly porous, with “occasional brightenings in the mist, when the trill of the tree-sparrow seemed to be ushering in sunny hours.”²⁸⁶ Thoreau alternates between the past and the present tense in his account of their journey. Use of the present tense in some portions of “Thursday” is concurrent with a seeming consolidation of the atmosphere, as when the travelers stop to rest under the dripping twigs and leaves, which “enhance the sense of inward comfort and sociableness” they draw from reflection on the wild oats, bushy hill, gathering clouds, and the waning breath of the wind that make up their environment.²⁸⁷ Immediately following these observations in prose, Thoreau spins them into verse in a ten stanza poem that makes mention of all the previous details and more. The message of the poem is not unlike that of Wordsworth’s “Expostulation and Reply,” which calls us to heed those things in our environment we “cannot chuse but see” and give ourselves over to a faith in “wise passiveness.” In Thoreau’s lines, Shakespeare and Homer are discarded on a rainy day for his “business” with a drop of dew:

I am well drenched upon my bed of oats;
But see that globe come rolling down its stem,

²⁸⁵ *Walden*, 89.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁸⁷ Thoreau also uses the present tense in his consolidation of time in space, inviting figures from the past to inhabit the Concord river with him, as he does in his telling of the gory story of Hannah Dustan, her nurse Mary Neff, and an English boy escaping on March 31st (one hundred and forty-two years previous) from capture by Indians. As the women paddle, Indian scalps lying on the floor of their canoe, Thoreau moves from the past to the present tense in his narration of events until the women seem to actually overtake Thoreau and his brother upon the river, and the present of the women is handed off to the present of the writer (323).

Now like a lonely planet there it floats,
And now sinks into my garment's hem.²⁸⁸

This neat collapsing of the “lonely planet” into Thoreau’s hem seems paradigmatic of *A Week*, a text that seems to cover broad swaths of space and time even when its actors are at rest, even when the only time mentioned is “now.”

In fact, Thoreau’s account of what might be expected to be the book’s grandest landscape, a view of the woods and rivers surrounding Agiocochook (Mount Washington) from its summit (which seems to have been the destination of the land journey in “Thursday” or even, perhaps, of the entire expedition, though Thoreau nowhere presents it as such), is simply not there. Instead, Thoreau follows his assertion that they “were enabled to reach the summit of AGIOCOCHOOK” with white space and, floating in that white space, a stanza from Herbert’s “Vertue”:

Sweet days, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky,
Sweet dews shall weep thy fall to-night,
For thou must die.²⁸⁹

The rest of *A Week* is an account of the brothers’ return trip. Here, in the pause before that happens, it seems possible to read a faint tremble in the blank landscape atop Agiocochook and in the intimations of mortality in the sweet days of the Herbert stanza—perhaps a trace of the form of the absent John. We can also trace the weeping of the sweet dews that mourn the death of sweet days in “Vertue” back to the opening of “Thursday” and the sounds of rain drops hitting the Thoreau’s cotton tent, rain falling from the trees as if “the whole country wept.”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 302.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 314.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 298.

Getting and Spending, Having and Holding

In many ways, Thoreau's account of a world that seems retrospectively sympathetic to the loss of his brother is in stark contrast to the world as Emerson describes it in his essay, "Experience." In that essay Emerson presents an Indian he says is representative of us all:

The Indian who was laid under a curse, that the wind should not blow on him, nor water flow to him, nor fire burn him, is a type of us all. The dearest events are summer-rain, and we the Para coats that shed every drop. Nothing is left us now but death. We look to that with a grim satisfaction, saying, there at least is reality that will not dodge us.²⁹¹

For the Indian under a curse, as for everyone, Emerson believes, conditions do not touch us, and despite Emerson's final reiteration of a surmise we all make with "grim satisfaction," we suspect (as the tone of the passage suggests) that reality will likely fail to touch us even in death. Indeed, Emerson's subject in "Experience" is a death that has failed to touch him. The tale of the Indian follows closely on his only direct reference to it within the essay: "In the death of my son, now more than two years ago," he says baldly, "I seem to have lost a beautiful estate,—no more. I cannot get it nearer to me."²⁹²

It is difficult to read this assertion without being troubled by the speaker's detachment and by its position in the essay as, apparently, a passing remark. In her consideration of it, Barbara Packer remarks:

I have never yet read a commentary on it that I thought did justice to the peculiar kind of shock it administers to the reader who is encountering the essay for the first time. The casual brutality of the sentence in which Emerson introduces the death of his son *as an illustration* is unmatched by anything I know of in

²⁹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 200.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 200.

literature, unless it is the parenthetical remark in which Virginia Woolf reports the death of Mrs. Ramsay in the "Time Passes" section of *To The Lighthouse*.²⁹³

Indeed, it is difficult to read the first paragraphs of Emerson's essay without wondering at what Packer later calls their troubling "tonelessness."²⁹⁴ Commentators have attempted to explain it—and the absence of any further direct discussion of Waldo's death after the third paragraph—by discussing "Experience" as a primarily philosophical text with philosophical concerns,²⁹⁵ or as an elegy in which the elegiac concerns of the text become as imbedded as the child may in what, in psychoanalytic terms, would be Emerson's introjection of him.²⁹⁶ In any case, the "casual brutality" of Emerson's introduction of his son's death does not in fact seem out of place in most of "Experience." As he says, "We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual."²⁹⁷

The possibility that loss—casualties, even—could be experienced as casual is due in part, Emerson explains, to the remoteness of experience in general; when the possibility of ever really getting and holding on to anything in the first place is foreclosed, imagining anything like loss or renunciation is impossible. He claims, "[a]ll I know is reception; I am and I have; but I do not get, and when I fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not."²⁹⁸ The form of "getting" Emerson describes is akin to the "grasping" Emmanuel Levinas has described as the primary

²⁹³ Barbara Packer, quoted in Richard O'Keefe's "'Experience': Emerson on Death" in the *American Transcendental Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1995 June), 119.

²⁹⁴ In *Open Secrets* Anne-Lise Francois discusses a similar "tonelessness" in Wordsworth's Lucy poems and in selected Dickinson poems, proposing that it be read as "a form of constative simplicity rather than as the stifled expression of a grief and guilt too strong to surface otherwise" (157).

²⁹⁵ O'Keefe argues that "'Experience' is not Emerson's autobiographical record of his loss of Waldo; that record exists in his letters. Rather "Experience" is a philosophical essay based on that loss" (123).

²⁹⁶ Cameron, Sharon, "Representing Grief: Emerson's 'Experience'" in *Representations*, 15, (1986 Summer), 15-41. Cameron argues that "The theoretical understanding of introjection as a phenomenon that occurs in such a way as to leave the introjected object both unavailable and invisible to the self in which it is encrypted offers a means to picture the way in which Waldo dominates the essay from which he has disappeared" (35).

²⁹⁷ "Experience," 206.

²⁹⁸ "Experience," 212.

gesture of consciousness itself. Emerson, whose consciousness is under the influence of the opium he says is "instilled into all disaster," describes a slippery world defined by loss that makes such grasping, or clutching, impossible or ineffectual. Thoreau's initial response to his brother's death also evokes this feeling of a world estranged from oneself and just out of reach, "of sounds in nature which . . . ears could never hear," whose meaning is always "away behind and behind."²⁹⁹

Success in grasping reality or coming to full consciousness would mean only that, in Levinas' words, everything in our experience (even everything we lose) could be "understood, justified, pardoned."³⁰⁰ While Emerson half laments, then, that Nature "likes that we should be her fools and playmates" and will allow us "the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosophy,"³⁰¹ it also seems that the apparently anesthetic, "unhandsome" world he describes (in which we are merely Nature's bewildered playmates), is the only one in which we can experience having and not having outside a relatively more straightforward economy of wins and losses, of getting and spending, and even of any static notion of conservation and sacrifice.

For Emerson, experience is a series of near misses, through which we fail to get objects, events, and conditions truly near to us. The "evanescence and lubricity of all objects," he says, "which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest" is "the most unhandsome part of our condition."³⁰² This clutching seems closely related to what Geoffrey Hartman, in "A Touching Compulsion," calls Wordsworth's reality-testing, an act of literal grasping Wordsworth describes in the Fenwick note to "Intimations of Immortality": "I was often unable to think of

²⁹⁹ 364; 2/21/42, qtd. in Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 47.

³⁰⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peperzak, Chitchley, and Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 68.

³⁰¹ "Experience," 200.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 200.

external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality.”³⁰³ But in “Experience,” such a recollection with regard to reality is impossible and, perhaps, undesirable. The wall or the tree we clutch inevitably slides away from us, figuratively and literally.

The world, in other words, is not enough with us: to quote Wordsworth, “Little we see in Nature that is ours.” In fact, the world Wordsworth describes in the poem including those lines bears a striking resemblance to the one Emerson describes in “Experience.” Preoccupied with “Getting and spending,” the speaker of Wordsworth’s famed lines believes we nevertheless stand in a non-appropriative relationship to nature, having given even our hearts away:

The World is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours
And are up-gather'd now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.—Great God! I'd rather be
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.³⁰⁴

It is possible to read the giving away of our hearts as the cause of our inability to see in nature anything that is ours, as though we have somehow entered a series of bad transactions: hearts for

³⁰³ Wordsworth’s Fenwick note to “Intimations of Immortality,” quoted in Geoffrey Hartman’s “A Touching Compulsion,” in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³⁰⁴ William Wordsworth, “The world is too much with us,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, ed. M.H. Abrams and Jack Stillinger. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 297-8.

nothing but the vapid exchange of further getting and spending. If not as cause, however, it stands at least in kindred relation to our inability, or resistance to, appropriating nature. This renunciation seems to be a way of acknowledging a world that is too little with us. The sea, the winds, and the sleeping flowers of "The world is too much with us" slide off the poet like summer rain off the Para coats we are in Emerson's "Experience."

The poet's longing to be "suckled in a creed outworn" expresses an impulse that runs counter to the speaker's wistful acceptance of that lapsed state,³⁰⁵ it is a longing to inhabit a world where we *can* be touched, where glimpses of Proteus and Triton might carry with them a particular significance derived from a "creed outworn" that might place us, make us less forlorn. Thus might the sudden appearance of Proteus of the sea on a tract of British grassland be woven into an ordinary, fully-present sort of meaningfulness in which what we see correlates with what we want, and need, to believe.

A previous essay by Emerson, "Compensation," is built on such correlation. Assertions of symmetry, perfect scale, and cause and effect, including "[E]ach thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole," "The world globes itself in a drop of dew" and "Every act rewards itself" reinforce the essay at every point. Correlation, or compensation, is perhaps most reassuring in the final paragraph of the essay, in which Emerson reflects on the compensation we receive for loss, and seems to find it satisfactory. He says:

A fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of friends seems at the moment unpaid loss, and unpayable. But the sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all fact. The death of a dear friend, wife,

³⁰⁵ The impulse is related to what Geoffrey Hartman, in "A Touching Compulsion," (Chapter 2, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), calls the "counter-obstinacy" with which Wordsworth responds "when the light of sense goes out, and intimations of the death or the blankness of nature arise" (24).

brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius . . . ³⁰⁶

As such, any break in the order of compensation is eventually ("somewhat later") assimilated.

We are paid back for what we have given up, rewarded for our sacrifice.

In "Experience," however, Emerson seems to lament this kind of totality despite loss.

The "compensation for calamity" celebrated in the earlier essay is here beside the point.

Reflecting on the calamity of Waldo's death, he says,

If tomorrow I should be informed of the bankruptcy of my principal debtors, the loss of my property would be a great inconvenience to me, perhaps, for many years; but it would leave me as it found me,—neither better nor worse. So is it with this calamity: it does not touch me: something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. (200)

Various definitions of "caducous" resonate with moments in "Experience," but the one I would like to emphasize now is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a description for organs or parts that "fall off naturally when they have served their purpose," apparently leaving the organism total despite the loss.

Just as Emerson figures a death as the loss of a limb that leaves no scar, Thoreau, in *A Week*, imagines our birth as a rending of the earth that leaves no mark. As he does elsewhere in *A Week* and in the "Natural History of Massachusetts," Thoreau presents this healing as an opportunity to see outside typical human prejudices:

Perhaps no man is quite familiar with the horizon as seen from the hill nearest to his house, and can recall its outline distinctly when in the valley. We do not commonly know, beyond a short distance, which way the hills range which take in our houses and farms in their sweep. As if our birth had at first sundered things, and we had been thrust up through into nature like a wedge, and not till the

³⁰⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, edited by Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 149.

wound heals and the scar disappears, do we begin to discover where we are and that nature is one and continuous every where.³⁰⁷

Thoreau describes a familiarization with our immediate surroundings that is possible only through alienation from them; so disruptive is our birth, at first, that we can see nothing in context and thus nothing properly in perspective. When “the wound heals and the scar disappears,” however, we realize how little disruptive our presence has actually been: “nature is one and continuous every where.”

The very fine, almost indiscernible difference a human presence or absence makes is perhaps nowhere better evoked than in Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal,” a poem that shares the tonelessness of “Experience,” as well as the shock of being jugged outside human perspective that Thoreau registers in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. According to Onno Oerlemans, who reads the poem in *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, “imagining and comprehending death for Wordsworth begin by comprehending that matter is primary.”³⁰⁸ Oerlemans stresses that gaining this comprehension requires being able to see existence as “blankly as possible, without or beyond the screens of convention and signification that are inevitably involved with understanding human existence (as consciousness) and nature.”³⁰⁹ Imagining death requires stripping away the significations that otherwise accrue to the material world, obscuring a sense of our clear relation to it. Nowhere is the stripping away of meaning in Wordsworth’s poetry more successful, Oerlemans says, than in “A slumber did my spirit seal.” For Oerlemans, the poem’s two stanzas present versions of experience as, first, “absolute spirit,” and second, as “absolute matter.” The white space between the two in this reading is both a figure for the girl’s death, and for the “absence of any narration which would

³⁰⁷ *A Week*, 349.

³⁰⁸ Oerlemans, 39.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

make meaningful for the speaker her passage from absolute life to absolute death, from spirit to matter . . . There is no resolution or consolation offered.”³¹⁰ While I find this reading compelling in some ways, especially in its insistence upon the lack of resolution offered by the poem, it does not account for the atmospheric similarity of the two stanzas. It seems worth reproducing the familiar poem here:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees!³¹¹

The stanzas are striking in their apparent independence: each is its own, independent closed statement, each its own independent set of four lines with an alternating rhyme scheme and alternating iambs of four and three feet. These features of independence and self-sufficiency also, of course, make the verses mirror images of one another, and it does not seem quite so easy to separate the two thematically, in terms of an opposition between spirit and matter or even life and death, as Oerlemans believes.

The speaker and the “she” of the first stanza are alike in their alienation from human and earthly concerns (the ease with which we might misremember and transpose the phrases “human fears” and “earthly years” as “human years” and “earthly fears” suggests that these concerns are much the same). The slumber that seals the spirit of the speaker also seems to seal the “she” off from feeling or touch, a sealing of sensation that persists in the second stanza. “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees,” the she of the second stanza indeed

³¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

³¹¹ *Lyrical Ballads*, 164.

seems to have been absorbed into earth's materials, as Oerleman's argues, but the rolling motion of those materials caused by "earth's diurnal course" also seem to reinstate her into a universe and cycle of time that is active despite her inactivity, whatever its cause. Rather than registering a difference between "absolute matter" and "absolute spirit," the poem instead seems resolutely to refuse distinguishing them at all. In bringing "Lucy" together with "rocks and stones and trees," and in describing these apparently stationary things not at rest, but as relentlessly active ("Rolled round in earth's diurnal course"), Wordsworth insists that the human and the nonhuman alike, as well as spirit and matter are, as Thoreau would put it, "subject to the same laws," that "All material things are in some sense man's kindred."³¹²

Outside to Time

For Emerson, Wordsworth, and Thoreau the experience of loss calls into question the persistence and identity of all apparently remaining material things. That these remainders constitute "all there is," in some sense, also brings into sharp relief the nature of an environment and its constitution. We might recall Thoreau's query, "Why do precisely these objects we behold make a world?" reading it as: "Why do precisely these objects we behold, *and just these objects*, make a world?" Angus Fletcher, author of *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination*, might respond that an environment is simply a "lot of things merely surrounding the observer" whose reason for being need only be that "they surround, they environ, and are felt to be significant by virtue of this circumscription."³¹³ Fletcher believes this is true not only in the outer world, but also in the

³¹² Fall 1846, *Journal* 2:354, *Material Faith*.

³¹³ Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 118.

inner world of a poem. In this way, a poem can be an environment in which the girl with the pitcher on her head, the sheep, and the gibbet of *The Prelude*, for example, are significant if only because they make up the environment of the poem. Importantly, though, Fletcher sees any environment—outer or inner (“[f]or the outer world in its letter gives the coordinates of the inner world, with its thoughts”)—as a living system.³¹⁴ Part of what makes environment poems themselves alive, Fletcher claims, is their ability to seduce the reader into “a search for the author, who emerges only through a crisscross motion within the mental space correlated to some physical space the poet describes.”³¹⁵ Though Fletcher’s primary example of the environment poem is Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” it seems true that an environment poem need not concern only a search for the author of the piece, but might also include a search for other persons or things that are lost not only to the reader, but also in some sense to the author of the poem. Indeed, although Fletcher does not directly address the place lost things might have in an environment poem, he does stress that the environment poem is motivated by an ever-widening circle of analysis on the part of the poet, who must study “boundaries, edges, hedges, and horizons” to discover what belongs in the poem and what does not.

For Thoreau, determining what belonged in the environment of *A Week* and other works was as much a problem of space, requiring him to keep close to “boundaries, edges, hedges, and horizons,” as it was of time, requiring—or inviting—him to incorporate experiences that seemed in some sense “outside to time.” In the first pages of *A Week*, Thoreau speculates, “As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives, and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are, in time, veritably future, or rather outside to

³¹⁴ Ibid., 120.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 120.

time.”³¹⁶ The *demi*-experiences Thoreau describes that are revealed as “outside to time” only “in time” may somehow avoid the fatality of experience, with its freight of expectations, causes, and results (as Emerson describes it in “Experience”).³¹⁷ Thoreau’s language is also suggestive insofar as our “demi-experiences of the life that is in nature” might refer either to a noticing of the life of the natural world around us or to a demi-experience of being harbored in that life ourselves. In this latter sense, whenever we feel ourselves inhabitants of nature (or, perhaps, discover ourselves to have been retrospectively) we are outside to time.

An intimation of the life in nature outside to time may have prompted Wordsworth to return to his poem “When first I journeyed hither” both before and after the death of his brother John, finally publishing it in 1815 as “When to the Attractions of the Busy World.” The poem describes a grove, a “favourite haunt” of Wordsworth at Grasmere for the harbour it could provide from snow showers (the grove is also, the poet notices, a safe harbour for a pair of thrush’s, who venture to build their nest very close to the ground within it). The poet acknowledges that despite its attractions he loved the grove less than he wished because it provided him no clear passage for walking, but the “forsaken covert” is redeemed when he chances to notice a “hoary pathway traced around the trees” in a “natural opening” he had not before noticed. At once, the poet says, he knew that by his “Brother’s steps it had been traced.”³¹⁸ This unexpected crossing of paths in space if not in time (Wordsworth believes John wore the path in 1800 during his visit) becomes precious to Wordsworth initially because his brother has returned to sea since wearing the path, and the grove becomes a site of connection

³¹⁶ *A Week*, 8.

³¹⁷ Thoreau’s moments lived “outside to time” are analogous to the passages he would extract from his journal in composing *A Week* and *Walden*. In selecting passages from his dated and chronological journals for other writing projects he was moving them “outside to time” for future readers.

³¹⁸ William Wordsworth, “When to the attractions of the busy world.” *The Complete Poetical Works* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1888) Bartleby.com, 1999, <www.bartleby.com/145/.5/25/2007>.

through which they might pace together. The sense in which the two meet in their pacing requires an interesting crossing of space and time: either they are both walking at the same time but in different places (William in the grove and John upon the ship), or in the same place (the grove), but at different times. Wordsworth seems to have revised the poem before John's death, and then again, afterward, by adding a footnote that explained that his wishes "for the day / When we, and others whom we love, shall meet / A second time, in Grasmere's happy Vale" could not be granted because of John's death by shipwreck. The poem itself, of course, belies the footnote, offering itself up as a meeting place, a point of convergence where the brothers, their activities, and their histories come together in ways they never truly did in "Grasmere's happy Vale."

Wordsworth's poem on the grove thus becomes a safe harbour in its own right, in some way able to enfold the lost person it concerns and the experience of loss itself. It was not originally designed to do so—the space of the poem simply expands to contain the loss within its horizon. Similarly, *A Week* seems to contain not only Henry and John, but also John's absence, making his presence within the text doubled, ghostly. This certainly seems true of the physical landscapes and environments we inhabit. Present or absent, the people and things we know seem to reside together in spaces that seem always, inexplicably, able to contain them.

"Experience" gravitates toward an articulation of being and (non)being that takes into account our experience of this unity together with our inability to calculate it in terms of cause and effect, origin and destination:

I should feel it pitiful to demand a result on this town and county, an overt effect on the instant month and year. The effect is deep and secular as the cause. It works on periods in which mortal lifetime is lost. All I know is reception; I am

and I have: but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not.³¹⁹

The “periods in which mortal lifetime is lost” in which Emerson's new version of cause and effect work are those unremembered, unrepeated, unpromised portions of life he has spoken of throughout his essay, and they also remind us of his child, the particular mortal lifetime lost from the world and, apparently, from the middle and last sections of "Experience." Though Emerson has described those periods/persons as “lost,” they seem in some sense “outside to time.”

Emerson describes “having” or “possession” as a reception of gifts. “All I know is reception; I am and I have; but I do not get, and when I have fancied I had gotten anything, I found I did not,” he says near the end of the essay. Moreover, he continues, the reception of gifts requires no compensation: “When I receive a new gift, I do not macerate my body to make the account square, for, if I should die, I could not make the account square.”³²⁰ The reception and possible loss of a gift, as well as the impossibility of maceration of the body as payment brings us back to Waldo and the calamity of his death as “caducous,” a word that can refer not only to a body part that has fallen away, but also to “testamentary gifts which for some reason lapsed from the donee.” In this way, Waldo's death seems comparable to those “obstinate questionings” Wordsworth speaks of in his “Intimations Ode” as “Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realized” for which he sings thanks and praise. It seems we may only have glimpses of the “worlds not realized” in which we move—where what we have and do not have may reside—through the spaces of a world that otherwise seems too little with us. We can neither grasp it nor hold it; it is a gift that we cannot “get.” In like manner, Thoreau evokes the top of Ktaadn (“vast, and drear, and inhuman”) as “no man’s

³¹⁹ “Experience,” 212.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

garden, but the unhandelled globe.”³²¹ A “handsel” is a gift: offered at the beginning of a new relationship, it extends a promise of harmony. The “unhandelled globe” makes no guarantees; as Thoreau recognizes in that terrifying moment of confrontation with “matter, vast, terrific” atop the mountain, the firmest matter—our bodies even—slips away from us.

As Lawrence Buell notes in *The Environmental Imagination*, the “aesthetics of relinquishment” has long been an important concern of environmental writing. Buell identifies two forms of relinquishment: the relinquishment of goods, of “material trophies,” and the more radical relinquishment of individual autonomy, of the notion that anyone can be separate from his or her environment.³²² In identifying just these two forms, Buell neglects another form of relinquishment that is as important to environmental writing: the relinquishment of our ability ever to grasp, and hold, the people, places, and things with whom we inhabit the world at any given moment in time, at any given place in space. This kind of relinquishment is in a sense more primary than those Buell mentions, in that it accepts that we cannot give up what we have not “gotten,” or expected to hold fast forever, in the first place. Indeed, we might say that the nature of nature is change, and that that relentless change implies the passing away of everything we experience. Experience, in this sense, is what we can not have and hold, and an environmental way of thinking about loss might be one that relinquishes our attempts to do so. In the A.R. Ammons poem Buell cites as exemplary of the aesthetics of relinquishment the speaker does not relinquish goods, trophies, or even an identity of his own. Instead, the poem relinquishes getting, allowing sound and light and words to skip along its enjambments and be lost in its center:

³²¹ Henry David Thoreau, “Maine Woods,” in *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Lewis Hyde (New York: North Point Press, 2002).

³²² Buell, 144.

A bird fills up the
streamside bush
with wasteful song,
capsizes waterfall,
mill run, and
superhighway
to
song's improvident
center
lost in the green
bush green
answering bush:
wind varies:
the noon sun casts
mesh refractions
on the stream's amber
bottom
and nothing at all gets,
nothing gets caught at all.³²³

What is special about the texts described in this chapter is that they, too, seem able to exist as environments that contain objects—things that may just happen to be together but are nevertheless special in their particularity—and also moments, events and experiences that become “outside to time” in the space of the text and exist in that space contemporaneously.

Angus Fletcher argues that the “environment poem” best conveys this sense of plenitude in terms of space and time. It is a plenitude that gives us, in reading the poem, the sense of “entering and remaining inside a continuing moment-filled flow” that might allow lost persons and experiences a harbor in which they can be both present and absent, lost and found.³²⁴ The capaciousness of the environment poem might thus obviate the need to economize elegies in terms of gains and losses.

It may also be the case that, in the environment poem, all experiences need not be fatalities. In Emerson's “Experience,” experiences fall away as quickly as they occur, and our

³²³ Quoted by Buell, 164-65.

³²⁴ Fletcher, 248.

awareness of loss “threatens to absorb all things” in its “rapaciousness.”³²⁵ A reverse movement seems to motivate Wordsworth’s “When first I journeyed hither” and Thoreau’s *Week*, so that even losses are in some sense substantialized and sheltered by the environment with which they are surrounded in the space of the text. That a text could provide such strange shelter—that it could be both landscape and epitaph at once—seems to depend not just on the existence and persistence of the material place the text describes but also, of course, upon the shaping influence of the author whose act of inscribing creates a temporary holding place out of infinite space; the text is, in a phrase both Emerson and Thoreau use to evoke the short duration of our lives on earth, “a tent for a night.” Thoreau writes at the conclusion of “Thursday,” “[t]he sky is curved downward to the earth in the horizon, because we stand on the plain. I draw down its skirts.”³²⁶ In this way, the human perspective Thoreau requires we abandon to better appreciate the varied time scales of natural history also gives it shape and allows us to discern within it the traces of its past.

Though Thoreau was unaware of it at the time, his cataloguing of flowering times in Concord would allow researchers 150 years later to see ghosts in that landscape and to sketch a natural, evolutionary, history defined by loss and change. “Properly speaking there can be no history but natural history,” Thoreau would write following his brother’s death, “for there is no past in the soul but in nature.”³²⁷

³²⁵ “Experience,” 209.

³²⁶ *A Week*, 331.

³²⁷ March 8, 1842, Journal 1:370

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