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**Alienation and Dwelling:  
The Pursuit of Happiness in Late Eighteenth-Century  
Autobiographical Literature**

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## DECLARATION

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

ALEXANDER HOBDAY,

# ALIENATION AND DWELLING: THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE.

## ABSTRACT

During the enlightenment a subjectivist concept of happiness became prominent and remains so today. This view, in which happiness is a mental state, instantiates a tension between happiness and ethics, happiness and reality, because it juxtaposes an inward condition with outward objectivity. This thesis argues that this conception is rooted in a zeitgeist of alienation, characteristic of certain strands of Enlightenment thought. Alienation can be defined as a failed relationship between self and world, self and other, the self and itself. In contrast to alienation, this thesis also explores the alternative zeitgeist of dwelling. Broadly speaking, this can be associated with the Romantic response to the Enlightenment. In dwelling, happiness, rather than being an internal mental state, tends to be conceived of as positive relationality. Happiness is a series of positive relationships between self and world, self and other, the self and itself. The introduction to the thesis draws upon the philosophy of Aristotle, Martin Heidegger, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor in order to articulate these two central concepts more fully and to situate them within eighteenth-century intellectual and socio-political history. The main body of the thesis explores how four writers — James Boswell, Laurence Sterne, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Wordsworth — respond to alienation in their respective works. All four of them might broadly be described as autobiographical writers and have been chosen because, in writing the self, they seek to think through the alienation that typically threatens modern selfhood.

Chapter one argues that James Boswell exhibits two alienated conceptions of happiness. The first, ‘aesthetic happiness’, is explored in his *London Journal*. Inspired by Joseph Addison, Boswell views happiness in terms of his capacity to imaginatively project beautiful images onto the world, in a manner intended to embellish dreary reality. The second, ‘principled happiness’, pursued in *Boswell in Holland*, requires that Boswell make his life over in accordance with a set of strict moral principles. Both of these, I argue, involve an over-investment in a particular conception of representation.

Chapter two turns to Laurence Sterne, whose *Tristram Shandy* discloses a notion of ‘hobby-horsical happiness’. Sterne satirizes objectivity as dogmatism, pointing out that all knowledge emerges from within a particular perspective. As such, facts and values are not truly distinct. In resisting dogmatism, Sterne seems to support an extreme form of subjectivism, where everyone lives according to their own whims. The chapter goes on to explore whether or not there can be any escape from this hobby-horsical idiosyncrasy.

The third chapter explores Mary Wollstonecraft’s grappling with alienation and her articulation of the possibility of dwelling. In the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft argues that if society were to be reconstructed in accordance with the rational-metaphysical laws of the universe, then, virtuous happiness would become possible for all. After the French Terror, her faith in reason fails and, taking a Romantic turn, she places her hopes for progress on the imagination. In *Short Residence*, alienated by what she views as the atomizing tendencies of commerce, she argues that the imagination can restore the relationship between self and other, human beings and nature. In doing so, human beings might recover a sense of dwelling. However, as Wollstonecraft becomes increasingly depressed, she begins to write of the imagination in escapist terms. After surviving a second suicide attempt, she writes ‘On Poetry’, now vesting a muted faith in progress in the figure of the poet.

The final chapter explores Wordsworth’s great-decade poetry. Central to this work is a myth which describes how a primordial or childish receptivity to nature is superseded by the mind’s power to impose its will upon nature, that is, to reconstruct the natural world. Wordsworth hopes to once again dwell in nature’s presence, while maintaining this mental power. This is not easily accomplished, however. The chapter traces a persistent tension between nature’s presence and mind’s power, one which is replicated in two different conceptions of happiness: blessedness and Stoical *ataraxia*. The chapter concludes by exploring an analogous tension in Wordsworth’s understanding of language and representation. This is interpreted through the lens of Heidegger’s notions of *techne* and *poiesis*.

The thesis concludes by reflecting upon the ways in which technicity influences our contemporary approaches to happiness and instead argues for the benefits of a poietic approach to the good life.

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## ALIENATION AND DWELLING

During the Enlightenment, a modern concept of happiness emerged. This concept is now so widely accepted as to be common sensical. Broadly speaking (and one must speak broadly on this topic, for happiness is not the kind of phenomenon that invites mathematical precision), this is the conceptualization of happiness as, in the phrasing of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a ‘state of pleasurable contentment of mind’.<sup>1</sup> While there are, of course, a variety of conceptions of happiness in contemporary society, for most people today, it would be common sensical to describe happiness, broadly, as a feeling, as found in widely different things for different individuals, as a matter of perspective. It is difficult to disagree with these descriptors, for they all seem to speak to the nature of happiness. One might question, however, whether they are sufficient to describe the highest good of human life. It might be that these descriptors are not wrong, exactly, but that they are reductive. “If happiness is a matter of subjective perspective”, one might ask, “then what is its relationship with ethics? Can an inhumane person be happy?” Even more fundamentally, one might wonder as to the relationship between happiness and reality: “Can I be happy in an unhappy world?” The conception of happiness as a subjective mental state implies that a given individual’s happiness might not relate to their treatment of others and that the way the world really is might not have any bearing on that happiness.

We can differentiate this modern concept of happiness – in which the relationship between happiness and ethics, happiness and reality, is in question – from the ancient conception. For Aristotle, the first thinker in the Western tradition to offer a philosophical account of happiness (and, simultaneously, to establish the discipline of ethics) the answer to the latter two questions would be “no” in both cases. In Aristotle’s view, happiness, or *eudaimonia*, describes the condition of living-up-to-nature.<sup>2</sup> A human being pursues happiness by being an excellent (which, for Aristotle also means virtuous) exemplar of the species: happiness is explicit and deliberate humanness. Furthermore, although Aristotle views pleasurable feeling as an important component part of happiness, it is not, by itself, a sufficient descriptor. Crucially, the happy man takes pleasure in the right things. Being happy is not, therefore, merely a matter of cultivating a positive perspective on things but also requires that one is oriented towards things

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Happiness, n’, *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021) <<https://www-oed-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/84070>> [accessed 3 January 2022].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the first few pages of *The Nicomachean Ethics in Aristotle’s Ethics: Writings from the Complete Works - Revised Edition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 215–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400852369>>.



that are good. For Aristotle, the pursuit of happiness is the pursuit of a good which transcends the individual. One is made happy by bringing one's own life into alignment with the highest good of human nature.

It is not my specific intention to defend this ancient conception of happiness. Aristotle's sense of the relationship between the subject of happiness and the world in which that subject lives and acts seems to me to be crucial. However, it is not possible, nor desirable, simply to return to the ancient worldview. The modern conception of happiness throws the relationship between self and world into question, for happiness is viewed as an internal condition, often specifically contrasted to the external world (in the view of happiness as perspective, for instance). One might respond to this conception by affirming that happiness is, in truth, exactly that positive relationality which the subjectivist view finds doubtful. Happiness, I would suggest, is better conceptualized as a series of positive relationships: between self and world, self and other, the self and itself. To put it another way, being happy means being positively attuned to the good that is *really there*. In the wake of the modern subjective turn, however, this there-ness should not be understood to be independent of the subject, for there is no *there* if there is not also a *here*. The really-there-ness of happiness describes, not an objective presence, but a relational one. This view of happiness involves a different emphasis than that of the Aristotelian one. For Aristotle, the fact of the relationship between self and world was largely assumed. Enlightenment epistemology, however, threw that relationship into question and it fell to subsequent thinkers, most notably Kant, to defend and recover it. My notion of happiness as a mode of positive relationality is, therefore, post-Kantian. I take the activity of defining happiness to involve, not merely the application of concepts to a pre-existent phenomenon, but rather the active creation of new understandings of the good life, such as transform the nature of that phenomenon. The highest good of human nature, happiness, is not there, independent of our conceptualizing efforts, but nor is it purely subjective. It is rather always already a composite of our given nature and the concepts through which we articulate that nature.

This relational conception of happiness has an important corollary, which itself has several dimensions. Happiness, in my understanding, is in part constituted by the way that it is conceptualized by a given person, culture, or historical period. Being happy, therefore, involves the intellect. This means, firstly, that happiness is not an arational feeling, a sensation of pure pleasure or enjoyment, such as is physiologically universal to all human beings. On the contrary, how we interpret happiness has a significant bearing on how we experience happiness. That is not to say, however, that pleasure and pain, positive and negative emotions, are not highly important considerations in matters of happiness. It seems to me that they are vital. Secondly, I

understand the happy life and the meaningful life to be intertwined. A life that is *merely* pleasurable or enjoyable is meaningless. Instead, happiness requires that the individual judge whether or not she is taking pleasure in worthy objects, that is to say, in meaningful things. Human happiness requires, not a retreat into narcotic-stupefaction, but the consistent use of our judgement as to which things and activities are worthy of us and which are unworthy. Furthermore, happiness requires that the world is made intelligible to us in a meaningful way, that we *comprehend* the world. Etymologically, comprehension can be broken down into *com*, meaning ‘with’ or ‘together’, and *prehension*, meaning ‘a grasp’. When we are happy, then, we are brought together with the world by grasping it, by intellectually comprehending it. Again, here, happiness is a matter of relationality. By contrast, an incomprehensible world, an existence that does not make sense, cannot be described as happy. It can be absurdly amusing at best. Finally, although my view of happiness emphasises the importance of the intellect, I do not understand theory and practice to occupy entirely separate domains. Different intellectual conceptions of happiness give rise to and are embedded in different praxes for pursuing happiness. It follows from this intellectual understanding that we should not understand the pursuit of happiness merely to involve the maximization of reified good feeling, but that we should instead see the activity of interpreting and defining happiness as part of the good life itself. Aristotle and the other Socratics arguably held some version of this view.

The view of happiness as relational and as shaped by intellectual activity is notably different from the view of John Locke, who coined the phrase ‘the pursuit of happiness’, and whose view of happiness vis-à-vis liberal individualism has been influential in modernity.<sup>3</sup> Locke offers a paradigm example of a modern conception of happiness, in that he depicts happiness as rooted in pleasure, depicts pleasure as arational, and, what is more, throws the relationship between happiness and ethics, happiness and reality, into question. In Book II of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argues that happiness and misery, as well as good and evil, are merely ideas annexed to the basic, arational sensations of pleasure and pain. Locke is aware that, in making this argument, he has opened up the possibility for moral relativism, since different people take pleasure in different things and people do not necessarily take pleasure in what is good. Happiness, moreover, does not describe (as it does in Aristotle) an aspiration to live-up-to-nature, but rather describes a condition in which physiological pleasure is maximally present.

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<sup>3</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 260.

Locke therefore makes a further distinction between happiness and true happiness. True happiness is the happiness we pursue in accordance with ‘the highest perfection of our intellectual nature’ and, in pursuing this, we bring our desires in line with ‘the true intrinsick good’ that is really there.<sup>4</sup> In this, his view is more in line with Aristotelian eudaimonia. However, Locke quickly undercuts this argument. Locke acknowledges that there is, in reality, little reason to favour true happiness over ordinary happiness. Happiness, after all, is fundamentally pleasure, even if true happiness is pleasure brought into accordance with the intrinsic good that is really there. He responds to this problem by means of a *Deus ex machina*: the promise of the happy life thereafter. If we pursue true happiness, Locke argues, God will reward us with maximal pleasure in the afterlife. Strikingly, here, Locke extends his reliance upon instrumental reason and his reified conception of happiness to the divine itself. For Locke, the sacred is subsumed under the logic of utility and pleasure maximization. This is apparent in Locke’s allusion to Isaiah 22:13: ‘For if there be no Prospect beyond the Grave, the inference is certainly right, Let us eat and drink, let us enjoy what we delight in, for tomorrow we shall die’.<sup>5</sup> At base, Locke’s theory of happiness and his theological-outlook is reductive and hedonistic. What is more, his philosophical style conceals the way in which, by conceptualizing happiness, he is, in truth, actively re-creating it. Locke prefers to present his views as timeless verities that he has discovered. In this respect, his view of happiness is dogmatic.

Locke is an emblematic figure in this history. As a political philosopher his work played a key role in the gradual transition away from the *ancien régime* towards the liberal-democratic modern social order. Culturally, this transition corresponded with a democratizing call for widespread happiness, a call that one does not find in Aristotle, for whom happiness is an elite preoccupation. As Darrin McMahon writes: ‘All could be happy. All should be happy. All would be happy – some day. That was the faith born in the age of the enlightenment’.<sup>6</sup> This optimism was felt during the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. The authors of the American Declaration of Independence described ‘the pursuit of Happiness’ as an ‘unalienable’ right and, in France, the revolutionary leader Saint-Just noted that ‘happiness is a new idea in Europe’.<sup>7</sup> However, as Vivasvan Soni has argued, Enlightenment thinkers did not merely call for the democratization of happiness but also articulated a different conception of it. Soni argues that the eighteenth century represents ‘a seismic shift in Western attitudes toward happiness, a shift

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<sup>4</sup> John Locke, pp. 266, 268.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Darrin M. McMahon, ‘What Does the Ideal of Happiness Mean?’, *Social Research*, 77.2 (2010), 469–90 (p. 477).

<sup>7</sup> Saint-Just quoted in Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), p. 262.

that was coterminous with the advent of modernity itself'.<sup>8</sup> The enlightenment, in Soni's view, represents a lost opportunity for the realization of a more secular and democratic ideal of happiness.<sup>9</sup> One indication of this shift is the sense of a breach between the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of the good, such as is evident in Locke. This is further evident in Kant, as Soni points out, for Kant divides happiness from moral duty.<sup>10</sup> As Brian Michael Norton argues, the period 'saw the rise of a new, more subjective understanding of happiness that seemed to threaten its time-honored ties with virtue [...] this created a considerable amount of anxiety'.<sup>11</sup> One must be careful not to overestimate the prevalence of this breach in the eighteenth century. As Adam Potkay argues, one can find evidence that the link between virtue and happiness remained in place well into the nineteenth century and, to some extent, is still in place today.<sup>12</sup> What Locke's example shows, however, is that, even when an eighteenth-century thinker sought to affirm the link between 'the true intrinsic good' and happiness, as most did, their starting assumptions could lead them to theorize a reconciliation that was tenuous at best.

This thesis explores different notions of happiness as disclosed by four long eighteenth-century writers: James Boswell, Laurence Sterne, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Wordsworth. None of them think of happiness in precisely the same way. Happiness, as alluded to earlier, cannot be pinned down with mathematical precision, but is rather better served by an inquiry which seeks broad generalizations. This is the manner in which I mean to interact with these four. I would suggest, therefore, that, beneath the apparently contrasting perspectives on happiness described by each of them, a set of underlying zeitgeists, or senses of self, can be brought to light.

I argue that the versions of happiness described by Boswell and Sterne are influenced by an alienated sense of self. Alienation, in this study, most centrally describes a defective conception of the relationship between self and world, self and other, the self and itself, such as is taken to inform John Locke, modern epistemology, and much enlightenment thought more broadly. It is the zeitgeist of alienation, I would suggest, that bequeaths to modernity the subjectivist conception of happiness that is prominent today. The most central instantiation of alienation in philosophy is the subject/object dualism of Descartes and of those philosophers

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<sup>8</sup> Vivasvan Soni, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 335-410.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Michael Norton, 'Ancient Ethics and Modern Happiness: A Study of Three Treatises in Enlightenment Britain', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 38.2 (2014), 47-74 (pp. 48-49) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/00982601-2645936>>.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Potkay, 'Narrative Possibilities of Happiness, Joy, and Unhappiness', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 33.2 (2011), 111-25 (p. 117) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2011.569459>>.

who dogmatically assumed the verity of this paradigm, notably Locke and David Hume. While the subject/object paradigm is a theoretical preoccupation, as I argued above, theory and practice do not occupy distinct realms. In the eighteenth-century, as Boswell will exemplify, subject/object theory was translated into a praxis for pursuing happiness.

Responding to alienation, therefore, requires not only new praxes for pursuing happiness but a new comprehension, a new intellectual *grasp*, of the world. This intellectual grasp is achieved, I argue, in the works of Wordsworth and, to some extent, in those of Wollstonecraft. Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft were both intellectually aware of alienation as a contemporary issue and both sought to overcome it in their writing. Their overcoming of alienation is what I term 'dwelling'. To dwell is to understand the relational nature of the human being and, correspondingly, to reconceive of happiness as a condition that involves positive relationality. Both Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth (although the latter more particularly) write in a post-Copernican way. They believe that the mind can transform phenomena and does not merely represent them internally. Happiness, for both of them, requires the cultivation, not only of internal mental states, but of new ways of connecting to the world. Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth offer us, therefore, possibilities for an alternative concept of happiness.

All four writers produce works which are, in one sense or another, autobiographical. The outlier, here, is Sterne who uses his fictional persona, Tristram Shandy, to satirize the genre of autobiography. Nevertheless, he, like the others, investigates the relationship between self and world, self and other, the self and itself. This investigation, I argue, is necessary to overcome the non-relationality of alienation. Autobiographical writers have been chosen, then, because a central theme of autobiography, the relationship between inner self and external world, is also a theme that is central to conceptions of happiness in the eighteenth century. My argument is not necessarily that these writers were explicitly aware of a change in the conceptualization of happiness. This awareness rather emerges from the work of contemporary scholars like McMahon and Soni. It is rather that their works register the zeitgeists of alienation and dwelling and that these shape their respective pursuits of happiness. Whereas Boswell, ultimately, cannot write himself out of alienation, and therefore cannot convincingly articulate the congruence of happiness, meaningfulness, and worthiness, Wordsworth, and at points Wollstonecraft, are able to meaningfully affirm a sense of relatedness to the world. They are able to dwell. Correspondingly, their notions of happiness tend to emphasise relationality. Sterne, again, is the outlier, here. Although he does not conceive of happiness from a dwelling perspective, he sceptically ridicules the philosophical assumptions that arise from alienation. Scepticism

regarding the subject/object paradigm — that is, scepticism regarding Cartesian scepticism — has an important role to play in the discovery of the dwelling perspective.

Alienation and dwelling, as *zeitgeists*, are not peculiar to these four writers but are rather indicative of aspects of the culture at large. Roughly speaking, alienation might be associated with the emergence of an Enlightenment worldview and dwelling with the Romantic response to that worldview. Throughout the remainder of this introduction, I will both offer summaries of the specific notions of happiness that one finds in each individual writer and will offer an account of my two major concepts, situating them within the historical period.

## ALIENATION

Alienation is a ‘relation of relationlessness’, so writes Rahel Jaeggi in her 2014 book, named for its central concept.<sup>13</sup> Alienation is a mode of defective relation between self and world. It can take many forms including the alienation of the worker from their labour, commodification, and objectification, whereby things and people come to be viewed as inert, without intrinsic meaning or purpose. ‘An alienated world’, Jaeggi writes, ‘presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless, as rigidified and impoverished, as a world that is not one’s own, which is to say, a world in which one is not “at home”’.<sup>14</sup> The history of alienation critique, Jaeggi argues, begins with Rousseau.<sup>15</sup> Although I do not explicitly explore this in my chapters, I think it likely that Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth are made conscious of alienation by Rousseau and that it is thereby thanks to his conceptualization of the topic that they are able to respond to it successfully. After Rousseau, Jaeggi argues, alienation critique is taken up by Hegel and Marx in the nineteenth century and then Heidegger and the Frankfurt School in the twentieth.<sup>16</sup> She additionally draws upon the thinking of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who are central to this thesis.<sup>17</sup>

Any attempt to do full justice to the concept of alienation lies far beyond the scope of this introduction. Alienation has a rich intellectual tradition and also calls for detailed analysis in the domains of social and economic history. A literary history of alienation in the eighteenth century, moreover, would require attention to a far broader range of authors. This thesis limits itself to a focus upon four authors who might serve as examples of ways in which writers responded to alienation in the period. What is more, while the social and economic aspects of alienation are

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<sup>13</sup> *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 1 German language edition in 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–10.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 3, 161–64.

highly significant, this thesis focuses upon the intellectual conception of alienation as delineated, in varying but complimentary ways, in works by MacIntyre, Taylor, and Heidegger. What unites these thinkers is a focus upon alienation as a defective relation to others, to things, and to oneself. Hegel and Marx do not receive specific treatment in this thesis, but their influence may be discernible in the thinking of MacIntyre, Taylor, and Heidegger, each of whom was deeply influenced by one or both of them. All five of them, moreover, can to some extent be described as Aristotelians.<sup>18</sup>

In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre describes the rejection of Aristotelian virtue ethics by eighteenth-century moral philosophy, a rejection which coincides with the historical development of modern selfhood. In modernity, MacIntyre argues, we move from, what might be called, an encumbered to an unencumbered conception of the self. Of the encumbered self, MacIntyre writes,

It is through his or her membership in a variety of social groups that the individual identifies himself or herself and is identified by others. I am brother, cousin and grandson, member of this household, that village, this tribe. These are not characteristics that belong to human beings accidentally, to be stripped away in order to discover “the real me”. They are part of my substance.<sup>19</sup>

The encumbered self is characteristic of pre-modern societies (although we should not assume that modern selves cannot retain encumbered characteristics to some extent). If such an individual was to enter into a moral debate with another individual from her social group, that debate would represent an attempt to apply, straighten out, or clarify virtues that each self understood to be essential to their identity. In modernity, by contrast, a concept of self that exists independently of any commitments develops. This is the self of whom Sartre can say “existence precedes essence”. If the unencumbered self enters into a moral debate with another such self, then their debate has the character of an intractable clash of wills. Each of them has personal preferences, but neither of them has any sense that a framework of shared commitments (virtues) is definitional to their personhood. This lack of shared virtues also indicates a lack of a shared narrative framework about the purpose and meaning of human life. Previously, MacIntyre argues, this framework had been provided by a Christian-Aristotelian worldview. It had its basis

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<sup>18</sup> Marx is less evidently Aristotelian than the others, but see, for example, *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Third Edition* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 33.

in a narrativized conception of the self's *telos*, that is, an account of 'man-as-he-happens-to-be' and 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature'.<sup>20</sup> Pre-modern selves pursue happiness by aspiring to a conception of the good that exists independently of personal preferences.

For MacIntyre this concept of self is not merely theoretical, but is also translated into practice, the practice of moral debate for example. Ultimately, the modern self even influences modern political culture, a culture of bureaucratic individualism. MacIntyre writes:

It is clear that the enlightenment's mechanistic account of human action included both a thesis about the predictability of human behavior and a thesis about the appropriate ways to manipulate human behavior.<sup>21</sup>

For MacIntyre, the underlying zeitgeist, or sense of self, that shapes modern institutions involves the theory that individual wills are inherently prone to conflict and thus, in the practical realm, good governance involves the management and resolution of these conflicts by means of manipulative managerial techniques.

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor offers a comparable account of modern selfhood vis-à-vis modern political culture, although one which differs from MacIntyre in having a broader scope. Taylor does not give Aristotle the same exclusive centrality as MacIntyre, although he does, similarly, view the rejection of Aristotle as a fundamental feature of modernity and, furthermore, sees that rejection as resulting in a *modus operandi* reminiscent of MacIntyre's notion of bureaucratic individualism. The Aristotelian metaphysical view, Taylor writes,

bespeaks the predicament of an agent who sees rightful action as following patterns (essences) which must first be described in things. As against this, in nominalism, the super-agent who is God relates to things as freely to be disposed of according to his autonomous purposes. But if this is right, then we, the dependent, created agents, have also to relate to these things not in terms of the normative patterns they reveal, but in terms of the autonomous super-purposes of our creator. The purposes things serve are extrinsic to them. The stance is fundamentally one of instrumental reason.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 97.



For Aristotle (and for Plato), ethical activity (which is simultaneous with the pursuit of happiness) involves our capacity to identify the good that is really there in the world. We need to be able to use our judgement as to which objects are worthy of us and which are unworthy. This is not conceived of as a matter of inward examination, but rather as the describing of essences in external things. This view relies upon the theory of forms, such as goes hand-in-hand with moral realism. The late medieval nominalism of William of Ockham rejected the theory of forms and, along with it, the idea that the world revealed ethically normative essences. This was, in part, a move made to defend a certain interpretation of the Christian tradition: if God is truly omnipotent then his will cannot be bound by anything in nature. The good must be good because He wills it. Herein we find a picture of the deity which corresponds to the alienated self and its unfettered will. We might say, therefore (and Taylor would likely agree), that the zeitgeist which informs the modern sense of self has pre-modern roots in the reconceptualization of the nature of God in the later Middle Ages. We might also recognize the way in which the modern notion of happiness as subjective, although a key feature of our secular culture, is not necessarily a secular concept. As the combined examples of Ockham and Locke demonstrate, a certain conception of God can inform a certain conception of the will and of reason, which in turn can inform a certain conception of happiness.

For Taylor, however, the rejection of Aristotle is only one contributor to the culture of modernity. One of the most crucial is a fundamental alteration in our relationship with the world, such as came about through a shift from porous to buffered selfhood. These two notions of self are comparable although divergent from MacIntyre's. Taylor argues that one of the reasons why, in 1500, it seemed almost impossible not to believe in God, was that the majority of the population's sense of self was porous to and bound up with an enchanted world. In an enchanted world, Taylor writes, 'meanings are not only in minds, but can reside in things, or in various kinds of extra-human but intra-cosmic subjects'.<sup>23</sup> We can see evidence of this in pre-modern medicine, in which the cultural meanings attributed to things by human beings were taken to be properties of the things themselves. 'Why does mercury cure venereal disease?', writes Taylor, 'Because this is contracted in the market, and Hermes is the God of markets'.<sup>24</sup> The porous self, additionally, often interprets what we would consider to be mental pathologies as caused by external agencies. Their mental illnesses were their demons in a literal sense.

The buffered self, by contrast, inhabits a disenchanted world. Although not necessarily abstracted from the world in the same way as MacIntyre's unencumbered self, this is certainly a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

possible outcome for buffered selfhood. In a disenchanted world meanings pertain only to minds and not to things. This gives the buffered self a great deal of agency, for they can now more easily disengage from the sources of their distress. Taylor offers the example of depression, which, for the porous self, is black bile.<sup>25</sup> If the black bile is understood to be present, the porous self cannot simply wish it away as a figment of its imagination. The buffered self, by contrast, conceives of depression as mental illness. They have the option of viewing that illness as negative thought patterns. They can, on this account, seek to deny the reality that the depression wants to suggest, or can seek to change the thought patterns through therapy. The buffered self may not be able to overcome depression, for the illness is still likely to exert a powerful agency over them. However, they do have the option of disengagement, for they can come to view their depression as a matter of perspective, not as an external agency seeking to control them. Buffered selfhood, therefore, represents a great gain for the individual. It also comes with a sense of loss, however, for the enchanted world was inherently meaningful. What is more, the buffered self ‘can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it’.<sup>26</sup> This sense of invulnerability has a pathological dimension. For the buffered self it might seem as if nothing has any meaning outside of human consciousness, or, indeed, outside the remit of their own consciousness. Buffered selfhood, therefore, creates possibilities for nihilism and solipsism.

The movement from porous to buffered selfhood forms part of grand narrative, stretching over two thousand years, which Taylor terms ‘the great disembedding’.<sup>27</sup> Beginning with the axial age (a term first coined by Karl Jaspers to refer to broad changes in human culture such as occurred between the eighth and third centuries B.C.), which saw the emergence of Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christianity, Taylor describes the process by which the individual self is gradually abstracted from the world and from the community. This process, in Taylor’s view, is not good or bad in itself, but it can have a pathological dimension. We might think of the potential nihilism and solipsism of the buffered self as being key examples.

Alongside disenchantment, Taylor describes another crucial development that can be associated with the Enlightenment: the emergence of the modern social imaginary. This development has both intellectual and practical dimensions. On the intellectual side, Taylor describes how early modern thinkers articulated a view of society termed, by Taylor, the modern moral order of mutual benefit.<sup>28</sup> From the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onwards, the modern moral order replaced the old order in which society was imagined to be a hierarchy,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 146–58.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 170–71.

analogically mirroring the hierarchical structure of the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to this view, the modern moral order takes society to be composed of pre-political individuals who come together on the basis of a social contract, an understanding articulated by both Hobbes and Locke. As a result, society tends to be understood instrumentally, that is to say, the purpose of society is understood to be one of securing the mutual benefit of the individuals who participate in that society. A given social order is justified, therefore, in utilitarian terms. The view of the economy as objectified reality, which emerged in the eighteenth century, consolidates this perspective.<sup>30</sup> Eighteenth-century thinkers argued that forms of economic exchange are (and always have been) the foundations for civilization. Economic forces, therefore, can be considered as the materialization of the ethos of mutual benefit. As in MacIntyre's notion of bureaucratic individualism and as in the paradigm of Medieval nominalism, the modern moral order centres around the notion of a self that exists apart from the world/society but which can engage with them through the use of instrumental reason.

On the practical side, Taylor describes how this disengaged conception of the self came to be enshrined in social practice. From about 1400 onwards, Taylor argues, Europe saw the rise of disciplinary societies, most rapidly in Protestant countries. These involved, in the first place, an aristocracy committed to civility. Court civility was, among other things, a means by which the aristocracy could distance themselves from the populace. It involved the cultivation of etiquette as well as an education which encouraged familiarity with the arts. In a certain sense this ethos then spread to the middle classes, who, in the eighteenth century, practiced an ethos of politeness. Politeness, fuelled by the rising fortunes of the middle classes under the changing economic conditions of early capitalism, aimed at the creation of a gentlemanly social class, to some extent integrating the upper and middling sorts, who could contrast themselves to the "vulgar". In addition, to a greater degree than civility, politeness responded to urbanisation, and to the necessity of interacting peaceably with a diversity of people. This required a degree of disengagement, that is, a buffered capacity to distance oneself from one's beliefs and passions, and also required, as Lawrence Klein argues, public toleration for opinions divergent from one's own.<sup>31</sup> For Taylor both civility and politeness, for all their positives, can be seen as instantiations of a modern 'rage for order'.<sup>32</sup> Both civility and politeness mark a growing distaste for warrior aristocracies, carnivals, feasts of misrule and riots. Domestic peace and stability came to be prized

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-64.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 176-85.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence Klein, 'Property and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Whig Moralists The Case of the Spectator', in *Early Modern Conceptions of Property*, ed. by John Brewer and Susan Staves (Hove: Psychology Press, 1996), pp. 221-33 (p. 228).

<sup>32</sup> Taylor., pp. 63, 143-45.

as hallmarks of civilization.<sup>33</sup> This preference coincides with the Protestant ethos and with proto-Capitalistic economic practices, which favoured orderliness and productivity.

Both of these practices, then, are rooted in the capacity for disengagement and in a corresponding desire to construct a functional and productive society by means of an ethic of economic mutual benefit. Both of them, moreover, are rooted in ideas of self-discipline and self-fashioning, which are also enhanced by buffered disengagement. Just as society is to be reconstructed, individuals, too, are called upon to take ‘a stance of reconstruction’ towards themselves.<sup>34</sup> In self-fashioning, Taylor argues, ‘we treat our own baser nature as raw matter to be controlled, reshaped, and in certain cases eliminated, in order to impose a higher form on our lives.’ Notably, a crucial medium for the self-fashioning of the period was the diary, in which individuals learned to mould themselves by becoming a spectator onto themselves.

Again, it is possible to discern both gains and losses in the proliferation of these practices. The enhancement and spread of techniques for self-fashioning and self-discipline among the population are highly beneficial for both individuals and groups. They, too, however, can have a pathological dimension. When I disengage from myself in order to mould myself, I can develop a punitive attitude towards myself, one which will not tolerate any deviation from the mould that I have devised. What I term Boswell’s principled happiness will offer one example of this. Alternatively, self-fashioning can involve an over-investment in superficial self-images. This is particular evident today, when celebrity culture and social media encourage individuals to transform themselves into identity-images that lack depth, breadth, and complexity. Perhaps surprisingly, however, this is not only a recent phenomenon. What I term Boswell’s aesthetic happiness provides an exemplar of just such a structure unfolding in the London of the 1760s. In Boswell’s writing, we find two different examples of self-alienation born of the self’s disengagement from itself.

Taylor and MacIntyre share a similar sense of the way in which, in modernity, the self becomes disembedded from its world. A further similarity is found in their criticisms of Stoicism in these terms. For MacIntyre, Stoic ethics is problematic in so far as it emphasises a conception of will that transcends particular phenomena (not unlike the will of God in nominalism). For the Stoics, therefore, the rational law

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

has nothing to do with local particularity or circumstance. [...] Stoicism thus invites us to stand *against* the world of physical and political circumstance at the very same time that it requires us to act in conformity with nature.<sup>35</sup>

Stoicism, in other words, pre-empt the disengaged stance of modern selfhood. Although this tendency may not be fully developed in Ancient Stoicism, it becomes more apparent in the neo-Stoicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As an example of this, Taylor describes the way in which the Cartesian subject/object paradigm transforms key Stoic doctrines. The ancient Stoic conceived of the passions as wrong opinions, therefore, to silence them meant to become attuned to the rational law, to the cosmic logos, resulting in *ataraxia* (tranquillity). This is not possible within Descartes' dualistic framework however, because the passions, for him, are the only means by which the mind is linked to the body.<sup>36</sup> The emphasis shifts, then, from silencing the passions by means of attunement to the logos, to the maintenance of wilful, self-disciplined control over them.

As Jacob Risinger has recently pointed out, this disciplinary version of Stoicism is by no means the only variant that existed in the period. In particular, Risinger argues that the 'cognitive-evaluative' model of emotion proposed in Stoicism (although, we might note, also in Plato and Aristotle) was used to ameliorate the emphasis upon instinctual moral feeling that became predominant in the moral sentimentalism of the period.<sup>37</sup> Although I agree with Risinger's thesis that cognitive-evaluative (rather than purely sentimental) conceptions of emotion have an important place in the thinking of writers like Wordsworth, I nevertheless follow MacIntyre and Taylor in finding the disengagement incentivized by Stoicism as problematic. I will return to this point more fully in my discussion of Wordsworth.

MacIntyre and Taylor's critique of disengaged subjectivity is shared by Heidegger, who, in *Being and Time*, attacks the Cartesian view of human beings as *res cogitans* and instead describes our essence as *being-in-the-world*. In this conception, self and world, self and other are intertwined. Heidegger's later work explores how an understanding of being (and of human being) like that of the Cartesian subject/object paradigm could have emerged. This leads him to undertake the task of *destruktion*, of writing a critical history of the metaphysical tradition, beginning with Plato. This tradition, in Heidegger's view, seeks to represent being in terms of a metaphysical blueprint, and, in doing so, imposes an increasingly disciplinary form upon being.

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<sup>35</sup> MacIntyre, p. 169.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, p. 131.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Risinger, *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion*, *Stoic Romanticism and the Ethics of Emotion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 13–15 <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691223117>>.

For Plato, this form is the *eidos*, the idea that is taken to reveal the essence of what things are. In conceiving of being in this metaphysical way, Heidegger argues, Plato is naively drawing upon a paradigm taken from the material practices of his own society, that is, from the horizon of production. For Heidegger, as for MacIntyre and Taylor, the practical and the intellectual are intertwined. Heidegger's argument, as William McNeill writes, is that 'all production entails the prior forming of an image, a seeing in advance of what has yet to be produced, and this anticipated look of the thing to be produced is what the Greek ontology interprets in terms of the *eidos* or idea of the being'.<sup>38</sup> The craftsman must have an image, a blueprint of a table in his mind before he produces it by imposing that form upon the wood. What this means is that metaphysics, via Plato, comes to understand beings in the light of *technē*. *Techne* describes, in McNeill's words, 'the knowledge or artisanship that guides the production of artifacts'.<sup>39</sup> 'This horizon', McNeill continues, 'is problematically reductive' while at the same time powerfully influential in so far as it gives rise, not only to 'philosophy and ontology, but [also] to science and its outgrowth, modern technicity – itself a monstrous transformation of *technē*'. The metaphysical tradition asks about beings qua being, but it does so from within the horizon of *technē*, that is, from within a horizon that understands beings to be grounded in representational images, and, furthermore, which has its basis in the production of useful equipment. It is, therefore, characterized by instrumentality. Ultimately, then, Platonic metaphysics is the conceptual source for the modern *zeitgeist*, that of technical production.<sup>40</sup> For Heidegger, being should not be circumscribed in this technical manner, for being, in reality, is time. To be, therefore, is to be in flux.

Heidegger traces the transformation of Greek metaphysics through the course of Western philosophy and theology, ultimately resulting in, what Heidegger terms, the subject/object world picture. This world picture is the understanding of being that one finds in modernity. Heidegger lists five of the world picture's central features.<sup>41</sup> First is modern mathematical science, which represents nature in the form of a (reductive) blueprint. Second is the outgrowth of that science, which is machine technology, such as frees but also distances humanity from nature. Third is modern aesthetics, which, Heidegger argues, conceives of art in terms of subjective experience, of *aisthesis*, rather than in terms of the revelation of truth. Fourth

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<sup>38</sup> William McNeill, 'Tracing Technē: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Legacy of Philosophy', in *Heidegger's Question of Being*, ed. by Holger Zaborowski (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), pp. 71–89 (p. 74) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=5109042>> [accessed 22 December 2021].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 3–35.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *ibid.*, pp. 115–55 (pp. 115–17).

is the notion of a domain of culture, such as demarcates a realm of society that is separate from nature. Fifth is the absence of God or gods, such as leaves human beings to consider themselves the sole masters of what is meaningful. All of these developments are rooted in the notion of a disengaged subject, which projects its own meanings onto nature and which draws upon its technical capacity to predict and manipulate nature's "objective" processes. Notably, Heidegger implies that it is by means of representation that the subject cleaves itself from its being-in-the-world and thereby conceptualizes the object. In doing so, the potentiality that was latent in Plato's metaphysics is realized in the modern world picture. That picture is, in part, about control. It is by these metaphysical means that human beings become, in Descartes' words, '*maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*'.<sup>42</sup>

The first chapter of this thesis explores Boswell's alienated conceptions of happiness. In the *London Journal*, Boswell, inspired by Addison's 'Pleasures of the Imagination' series, pursues what I term 'aesthetic happiness'. Here, Boswell takes happiness to be the projections of the imagination onto an otherwise meaningless objective world. By contrast, in *Boswell in Holland*, he pursues 'principled happiness'. Inspired by Calvinism and neo-Stoicism, Boswell attempts to live in accordance with a strict, rational code of morality. Themes that are consistent across both practices of happiness include an emphasis upon politeness, an emphasis upon self-fashioning or self-discipline, and, most profoundly, a sense that the world outside of Boswell's mind is meaningless except for the meaning that he is able to project onto it. There is, in other words, something melancholic about Boswell's pursuit of happiness. Although he is desperate to feel happy, Boswell cannot help but conceive of the good life in a manner that instantiates his basic sense of alienation. This is related, as I suggest towards the end of the chapter, to his over-investment in a particular concept representation.

Chapter two turns to the work of Laurence Sterne. *Tristram Shandy* satirizes intellectual dogmatism, typified by Walter Shandy. Such thinkers believe that they have developed an adequate theory of the world and fail to recognize that their theories are peculiar to their subjective perspective. In this respect, Walter, like his brother and son, can be seen to be simply riding his hobby-horse. Theorizing is a game, pursued by the theorist (unbeknownst to them) simply for the purposes of enjoyment. There is not, in truth, a division between knowing things and being happy. How we know things has to do with how we pursue happiness. As such, Walter, like everyone else, enjoys a hobby-horsical happiness. However, because hobby-horse riders see the world in a manner circumscribed by their own perspective, they can never be fully happy.

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<sup>42</sup> Descartes qtd in Taylor, p. 113.

The things of the world consistently refuse to submit to the form that the hobby-horse rider seeks to impose upon them. The disappointment that this causes means that, tragically, all projects for hobby-horsical happiness are also the bases for misery. This subjectivist conception of happiness corresponds with what appears to be Sterne's defence of individualistic liberalism against dogmatism. We all pursue happiness in our own way and therefore we should all be left alone by others in order to do so. One wonders, however, how this view fits with Sterne the preacher, whose sermons defend the life of Christian virtue, a life which would seem to entail some shared commitments. Although there is a disanalogy between these two aspects of Sterne, this chapter closes by analysing the way in which the hobby-horse, which Sterne seems to intend as a symbol of subjective individualism, actually undermines the notion of atomized individuality. Although Sterne celebrates an alienated conception of happiness, he also sceptically undercuts aspects of alienation.

Across Boswell and Sterne, one can discern evidence of different facets of alienation as described by MacIntyre, Taylor, and Heidegger. In contrast to Boswell and Sterne, Wollstonecraft and particularly Wordsworth begin to articulate successful responses to alienation, they begin to articulate a conception of human existence as dwelling. This understanding of being lies closest to the Heideggerian response to alienation. In my understanding, this involves a relinquishing of the human aspiration to metaphysical knowledge and, relatedly, a relinquishing of our desire to make progress towards the highest good. This sense of progress is, I take it, not something that MacIntyre or Taylor would want to surrender entirely. Both of them are Christian thinkers and both have an Aristotelian-cum-Hegelian sense of historical teleology. Likewise, I would suggest that, while Wordsworth profoundly articulates dwelling, neither he nor Wollstonecraft is quite ready to give up on the *summum bonum*. I will return to this theme shortly.

## DWELLING

An important first step towards dwelling is the sceptical recognition that the supposedly authoritative depictions of nature and of human nature offered by the subject/object world picture are reductive and misconceived. Heidegger's notion of a world picture alerts us to the way in which representation is an important theme in this misconception. One marker of philosophical modernity is an emphasis on representationalist epistemology, such as one finds in Descartes, Locke, and Hume. For these thinkers, the fact that we can only perceive the world through internal images must result in a profound scepticism as to whether the world really is as it appears to us. This scepticism, however, is in a certain sense less sceptical than that of ancients



like Pyrrho, for thinkers like Descartes and Locke are, in reality, committed to a dogma regarding the existence of an entity called “mind”, conceived of as separate from the world. The case is perhaps more complicated with Hume. At the end of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), David Hume finds himself in a condition of ‘Philosophical Melancholy.’ Having attempted to offer a description of the human mind in terms of this representationalist epistemology, Hume is left at a sceptical impasse: there can be no certain knowledge of the outside world due to the fact that we only perceive the outside world indirectly through ideas. The self, moreover, appears nothing but a bundle of these ideas. However, Hume is famously led away from this skeptical melancholy by the hand of nature:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium [...] I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour’s amusement, I wou’d return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain’d and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.<sup>43</sup>

On a certain reading, Hume’s philosophical skepticism says more about the limits of systematic knowledge than it does about the given world. The same might be said of the commonsense school of philosophy, headed by Thomas Reid. Already in Reid, and perhaps in Hume, there is a hint that truth might not be found in representations but, instead, in presence.

A much more significant step is made in Kant’s Copernican revolution, whereby phenomena come to be understood as composites of subject and object. Cognition does not conform to objects, making copies of them in the subject’s mind. Instead, objects conform to cognition, only appearing in accordance with the transcendental categories which pertain to the subject. Heidegger maintains this Kantian sense of dual composition. In dwelling, our comprehension of things involves presentation rather than representation. For Heidegger, phenomena are not there independently of human beings, for thereness and hereness belong together. What is more, for Heidegger, being has a movement of its own, a movement which is in flux throughout history. In order for being to realize itself in new ways, however, human beings must *let it be*. Heidegger frequently turns to notions of letting, to the phrasal verb “to let be”, in order to describe an activity that he takes to be characteristic of dwelling (but not of technicity

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<sup>43</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature. 1739-40*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 268.

which instead involves a willful ‘challenging forth’).<sup>44</sup> Heidegger points to a conception of the human which can be described as “active passivity”. Being unfolds after its own manner, but human beings are responsible for letting that unfolding. This idea is also captured in Heidegger’s notion of truth as *aletheia*, that is, unconcealedness, where the true is what is brought out of concealment by human’s letting the truth come to light. In ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, Heidegger writes,

Mortals dwell in that they save the earth [...] Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from spoliation.<sup>45</sup>

In dwelling, things do not become meaningful because human beings project meaning on to them, nor are they mere objects that function in accordance with objective laws discernible to scientists, who produce knowledge on the basis of certain methodological assumptions. Instead, things are the loci of a meaningfulness that is part independent of and part created by human beings. To save the earth is to cultivate active passivity, to let beings be in the flow of time.

Another aspect of Heidegger’s later work that is crucial to dwelling, as explored in this thesis, is his turn to poetry. As Heidegger’s use of untraditional philosophical terminology like ‘letting’ and ‘dwelling’ and ‘saving the earth’ hints, an important preoccupation of the later Heidegger is poetic thinking (in contrast to technical thinking). The later Heidegger writes philosophy poetically and, in doing so, suggests that poetry might offer human beings a means to approach truth in a new way, one which does not have the Platonic-metaphysical character of creating a systematic blueprint that undermines phenomena. Poetry *saves the phenomenon* in this respect. In my understanding, poetry does this by calling attention to itself as a representational activity. A technical use of language asks us to forget that we are using a system of signs and abstract concepts to represent what is, in truth, an infinitely vibrant universe and to take that system as the truth. Truth comes to mean the assumed correspondence of a sign-system with reality, rather than meaning *aletheia* (unconcealedness). Poetry lets things be (an alethic activity) by revealing what was already there. It says: “look at how the dawn is rosy-fingered!”. When, as a result of this poetic revealing, one comes to see how the dawn *is*, in truth, rosy-

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<sup>44</sup> Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), pp. 141–60 (p. 148).

fingered, one does not take rosy-fingeredness to be a universal, metaphysical form. Instead, one can entertain the double-thought that the dawn both is that way and that it is that way because of human creativity. For Heidegger, in my understanding, this premise is true not simply for incidental metaphors but for being-in-the-world itself. To be human is to take something as something (the bit of wood with an iron head *as* hammer, but also those bits *as* wooden and iron respectively, and so on ad infinitum) and thus all of human existence has an essentially metaphorical structure. For Heidegger, to avoid our proclivity to take ourselves as masters and possessors of nature, we need to recognize this fact.

This dimension of Heidegger's thinking has proved influential in ecocriticism. Literary scholars Johnathan Bate and Robert Pogue Harrison both analyse the word 'ecology', in terms of its roots in the words *oikos* (home) and *logos* (reason, account, word).<sup>46</sup> Ecology, then, more properly refers to human nature as that of a language-being. We are necessarily separate from nature, for language imposes a relational quality upon our interactions with nature. Bate turns to poetry, through Heidegger, in order to develop his notion of ecopoetics. 'For Heidegger', Bate writes, poetry is the original admission of dwelling because it is a presencing not a representation, a form of being not of mapping.<sup>47</sup> However, as Bate notes, poetry is not merely presence, for it also speaks to the loss of a more immediate connection to nature. 'The poetic', writes Bate,

articulates both presence and absence [...] The poetic is ontologically double because [...] it is either (both?) a language (*logos*) that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language (*logos*).<sup>48</sup>

What Bate has to say about ontological doubleness is significant. In poetic dwelling, Bate identifies a dual sense of homecoming and nomadism. This nomadism is not exactly alienation, for it does not suggest a structural separation between self and world, self and other. It does, however, hint at a primordial separation between human beings and a (potentially imaginary) unity for which human beings yearn. It brings with it, also, a sense of finitude. Dwelling might involve resignation towards the finality of death and towards the limits of human knowledge, a relinquishing of a narrative of progress towards the highest good. This has a certain practical resonance in light of our awareness of ecological catastrophe, which serves as a yet another profound challenge to the incentive for technological progress, such as has held sway since the

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<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 75–76; Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 200–201.

<sup>47</sup> Bate., p. 262.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

Enlightenment, and which may even require economic degrowth. It may also require a renewed sense of human culture as natural, as bound up with and subordinate to the rhythms of the earth. Culture should not be viewed as getting above nature, in this respect.

To return, then, to a tension identified earlier, it seems that dwelling may require a conception of happiness that relinquishes a vision born over two thousand years ago, the influence of which was felt powerfully in the Enlightenment. Before there was happiness, McMahon describes, there was hap. In the culture of the Greek Dark Ages, as in pre-Christian Europe, happiness is a gift of the gods. It is the condition of being blessed. As McMahon notes, notions of fate, fortune, and luck, lie at the root of almost all contemporary Indo-European words for happiness. This is the “hap” of happiness, a root which also appears in “happens” and “perhaps”.<sup>49</sup> It is also the “daimon” of eudaimonia. Walter Burkert describes the daimon in Greek religion as ‘occult power, a force that drives men forward where no agent can be named’.<sup>50</sup> In such a world, meanings can be said to be revealed by nature, for there is no strict distinction between the subjective world of meanings and the objective world of matter. The self is porous and the world is enchanted.

The emergences of Greek philosophy and the Judaeo-Christian God (alongside the emergences of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in the East) mark a period of human cultural evolution known as the axial age. A new conception of happiness as the *summum bonum* emerges, in which there is a strong moral dimension. In Christianity, for instance, there is a good that goes beyond ordinary human flourishing. In orienting themselves towards this good, people are required to sacrifice their ordinary desires, such as for food, health, sexual gratification, strength in battle etc. As a result of this sacrifice, individuals are promised, not merely bountiful hunting or the safe delivery of a child, but perfect happiness after the eschaton. Additionally, in pre-axial religions, as Taylor describes, ‘the world of God, or gods, of spirits, or heaven [...] contained elements which were both favourable and unfavourable to the human good’.<sup>51</sup> In post-axial religions, however, they become ‘unambiguously affirmative of this good’. One finds this same sense of the ultimate good that lies beyond all other goods in Socratic philosophy. McMahon details Socrates and Plato’s rejection of the cults of Dionysius, which, in practice, amounted to a rejection of bodily pleasure as the basis for happiness.<sup>52</sup> Socrates and Plato argued that human beings should instead seek to transform their ordinary desires and to orient themselves towards a higher happiness. Plato argued that true happiness was to be found in ‘the

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<sup>49</sup> *Happiness: A History*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> Taylor, p. 152.

<sup>52</sup> *Happiness: A History*, pp. 26–27.

rapturous contemplation' of 'the pure form of beauty'.<sup>53</sup> It is notable that Nietzsche, favouring pagan affirmation over post-axial denial, attacked Socrates on the grounds that he, like Christ, betrayed the tragic wisdom of a hap-based culture.<sup>54</sup> In certain respects, dwelling rekindles the understanding of life as tragedy.

My third chapter explores the career of Mary Wollstonecraft, centring upon three different conceptions of happiness in her work. In the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft proposes a rational reconstructivist happiness. There are, Wollstonecraft believes, a set of metaphysical laws governing the universe that are discernible to human beings. The goal of enlightenment is to realize this plan in society. After the French Terror, Wollstonecraft's faith in rational progress is severely damaged. In *Short Residence*, she takes a Romantic turn, asserting that the imagination, instead of reason, is the central human faculty. Alienated by the failure of the revolution and by what she perceives to be the corruptive influence of commerce on society, Wollstonecraft affirms that the imagination can synthesize self and world, self and other, and thereby enable the continuation of progress. On the basis of this view, Wollstonecraft expresses a conception of happiness as anticipation, as maintaining a sense of connection to the world while awaiting the arrival of a good that is yet to materialize. As Wollstonecraft's depression worsens, however, she becomes alienated once more. Under the influence of this isolated sense of self, the imagination mutates into the fancy, into a faculty that will enable her dark desire to escape from the world and thereby to protect her from pain. After surviving a second suicide attempt, Wollstonecraft writes 'On Poetry', now vesting a muted faith in progress in the figure of the poet.

The final chapter explores alienation and dwelling in Wordsworth's poetry of the great decade. Central to these poems is a myth which describes a three-stage process of development. Primordially, human beings lived under nature's sway, which means that they experienced nature as having intrinsic meaning independent of the mind. Later they became conscious of themselves as separate from nature, a consciousness which gave them a strong sense of their own agency, but which also made them alienated. The third stage involves a return to nature, but one which preserves the self-consciousness and certain other features of the second stage. Wordsworth draws an analogy, also, with the child and the adult. The third stage will involve relearning how to be a child, while at the same time maintaining certain adult characteristics.

This synthesis, however, is not easy to accomplish. I argue that, throughout Wordsworth's poetry, a tension persists between two tendencies — nature's presence and mind's power —,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 36, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

tendencies which overlap with one another. Under the domain of the former, nature is taken to give meaning to human life. The self is, in a sense, once again porous to nature's influxes. (There is ambiguity, here, too, for Wordsworth seems unsure as to what he is porous. It could be God, or gods, or the human spirit.) There is a distinction, however, between primordial porousness and the porousness of a self-conscious individual. For the "primitive" person, sign and signifier are bound up with one another, whereas, after the second stage of development has occurred, language appears to be artificial rather than natural. In light of this, the relationship between the non-signifying meaningfulness of nature and the expression of those meanings in signs manifests as a tension. On account of this tension, Wordsworth can be seen to shift into the mode of mind's power. In this mode, Wordsworth seeks to harness his capacity to represent nature in language to try to mould the world in accordance with a nature-independent will. This can lead to a kind of alienation, for Wordsworth worries that he might have left nature behind and is now seeking to impose a form upon it that is in accordance with a metaphysical super-Nature. Thus, while Wordsworth hoped to affect a reconciliation between the first and second stages of development, a series of tensions – between receptivity and will, presentation and representation, nature and Nature – persist throughout his poetry.

A comparable tension is evident in two different Wordsworthian conceptions of happiness. In a manner that allies with the nature's presence tendency, Wordsworth sometimes describes happiness in terms of what I call 'blessedness'. I use this term to invoke Wordsworth's sense of assuredness in his own happiness, an assuredness rooted in his belief that he has been chosen by nature. In blessedness, Wordsworth depicts human happiness in terms of receptivity and porousness. However, as in the case of the porous self, receptivity also means vulnerability. As such, it follows that blessedness might, in accordance with the whims of fortune, give way to cursedness. Cursed human beings, like Margaret in 'The Ruined Cottage', or the figures in Wordsworth's encounter poems, are particularly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of hap. Just as Taylor sees buffered disengagement as a viable response to this vulnerability, mind's power offers Wordsworth a means of responding to hap. In 'The Ruined Cottage', for example, the Pedlar/Wanderer figure counsels the poet to disengage from suffering that is evident in the world and to instead come to recognize the existence of a higher (metaphysical) plane. This is a Stoical incentive, one which emphasises the possibility of attaining invulnerable *ataraxia* (tranquillity) by means of an orientation towards the rational law of the cosmos. To some extent this also entails that one leaves the world behind.

Another way in which the tension between mind's power and nature's presence is manifested is in a distinction between different uses of language, which I read through the lens

of Heidegger's distinction between *techne* and *poiesis*. This theme will be picked up in the 'Epilogue' to the thesis, in which the cultivation of a proper relationship between the technical and poetic will be explored in relation to the question of happiness in the contemporary world. As for Wordsworth, much of what he has to say about language seems to centre around a distinction between a kind of technical or systematic or unnatural language which seeks to impose form upon things. Wordsworth prefers a spontaneous or natural conception of language. He wants language to be responsive to nature's presence. This involves, I argue, a sense of poetic language as a form of representation which artfully displays the fact that it is merely a representation of an original, ineffable presence. Technical language, by contrast, obscures its own provisionality. Although Wordsworth is committed to *poiesis*, his desire to write 'The Recluse' is in tension with this commitment, for in 'The Recluse' he is supposed to impose a new form upon society, the blueprint for which has already been conceived by himself and Coleridge. The tension between *poiesis* and *techne*, mind's power and nature's presence, *ataraxia* and blessedness, is not one that ever finds complete resolution in Wordsworth's verse. It persists as a (potentially fruitful) *aporia*.

The account of happiness offered in this introduction has aimed to be ambitious and is perhaps overly so. It is not my intention to imply that the discussion of happiness above, or in the body of this thesis, can offer any substantial contribution to a question of almost ultimate significance, that is, the question of the nature of the good life. I would, however, venture to advance that the act of inquiry, even if it furnishes no notable answers, is valuable in itself. This thesis, then, represents the outcome of a *praxis* of inquiry, one which I have not undertaken alone, but which has taken the form of a dialogue. This dialogue has been conducted with a series of philosophers – most centrally Aristotle, Heidegger, MacIntyre, and Taylor – and with four long eighteenth-century writers, each of whom has something significant to say about happiness. Thinking about happiness is itself a valuable activity, not least of all because, in the contemporary world, many of us seem to be working with a reductive conception of the good life. Aristotle argued that the good life is the life led explicitly and deliberately. In order to be truly happy, in his view, we need an account of what happiness is. Whether or not this is the case, *Alienation and Dwelling* aims to be an exercise in precisely this, an exercise in thinking happiness.

# ‘AS LITTLE MISERY AND AS MUCH HAPPINESS AS POSSIBLE’: THE ART OF LIVING IN JAMES BOSWELL

In an entry in the *London Journal*, dated Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> July 1763, Boswell writes that, due to his new friendship with Samuel Johnson, he has ‘more seriously considered the duties of morality and religion [...] [and he has] considered that promiscuous concubinage is certainly wrong.’<sup>1</sup> He reflects, too, on Johnson’s advice on personal economy, ‘that £30 a year was enough to make a man live, without being contemptible’. Finally, he records a conversation with Johnson on the topic of journal writing:

He advised me to keep a journal of my life, fair and undisguised. He said it would be a very good exercise, and would yield me infinite satisfaction when the ideas were faded from my remembrance. I told him that I had done so ever since I left Scotland. [...] He said indeed that I should keep it private, and that I might surely have a friend who would burn it in case of my death. [...] I rather encourage the idea of having it carefully laid up among the archives of Auchinleck. [...] I told Mr. Johnson that I put down all sorts of little incidents in it. “Sir,” said he, “there is nothing too little for so little a creature as man. It is by studying little things that we attain the great knowledge of having as little misery and as much happiness as possible.”<sup>2</sup>

Boswell contrasts the duties of morality and piety with his tendency to pursue vulgar pleasures. This gives way to consideration of the importance of personal economy. What is more, through the recollection and inscription of a live conversation, Boswell emphasises the importance of truthful self-writing in the pursuit of happiness. Johnson recommends keeping this writing private, whereas Boswell evidently already dreams that his private life might be made public. These reflections upon pleasure, religion, morality, economy, and public/private life form a coherent web of concerns that animate Boswell’s life-writing project.

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<sup>1</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell’s London Journal, 1762-1763* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.



Clustered around these themes, this chapter identifies two distinct practical philosophies of happiness in Boswell's journals.<sup>3</sup> The first, articulated by Boswell in the *London Journal* but also important in subsequent years, is what will be termed *aesthetic happiness*. In aesthetic happiness, Boswell models his self-writing project on the notion of the polite imagination that he finds in Joseph Addison's *Spectator*. In this mode, Boswell views happiness as an imaginative mental projection of vivid or beautiful ideas onto the world. In collecting beautiful images in the journal the individual stands to increase their capacity for happiness, either through the capacity to see the world through the lens of a storehouse of images, or through the pleasurable recollection of past scenes in reading.

The second practical philosophy of happiness will be termed *principled happiness*. The volume *Boswell in Holland* will be explored as the philosophy's central instantiation. In *Boswell in Holland*, principled happiness is primarily brought into being through Boswell's converse with Johnson. Additionally, principled happiness is motivated by a desire to counter the negative aspects of melancholy. It aims to do so by inspiring the sufferer to adhere to a rational code of behaviour and to the principles of religion. In this mode, Boswell's journal serves mainly as a textual space for the writing of resolutions and for the disciplinary observation of past behaviour. The influence of the Protestant spiritual diary tradition is felt here.<sup>4</sup>

While aesthetic happiness and principled happiness appear to be antagonistic to one another, a similar background informs them both. They both emphasise the importance of polite self-control and of self-fashioning. They also both take atomized individualism as the starting point for happiness. Finally, they both offer what might be called a disenchanted understanding of happiness. Neither in the pursuit of aesthetic happiness, nor in the pursuit of principled happiness, does Boswell find himself operating within a world in which entities have intrinsic value independent of what minds project onto them. Where happiness arises from absorption in the world or absorption in relationships with others, this is often counterbalanced by a sense that such absorption is imaginary. Alienation is, therefore, the basic fact of Boswell's self-understanding. He is, as Zaretsky argues, a paradigm case of a man conflicted by his simultaneous adherence to and repulsion from enlightenment reason and the corresponding diminishment of

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of a practical philosophy pursued through diary writing might invite comparisons between Boswell's thought and what Catherine Parke terms Samuel's Johnson's biographical thinking; *Samuel Johnson and Biographical Thinking* (University of Missouri Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> On this tradition, see: Fabio Battista, 'Spiritual Autobiography in Seventeenth-Century England. Trends in Literary History and Criticism, 1948 - 2012', *SQ* 2.3, 2012; Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) <<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0199245754.001.0001/acprof-9780199245758>> [accessed 25 September 2018].

the role of faith and revelation in human affairs.<sup>5</sup> Before offering an account of Boswell's aesthetic and principled happinesses, this chapter will explore alienation as a feature of Addison's aesthetic theory.

## THE POLITE IMAGINATION

At its inception modern aesthetic theory was not merely concerned with art but was also preoccupied, as Brian Michael Norton puts it, with happiness as 'the art of living'.<sup>6</sup> In an article focused on Addison's *Spectator* series 'The Pleasures of the Imagination', Norton argues that the emergence of modern understandings of happiness and the emergence of modern aesthetic theory are interrelated phenomena. A central aspect of modern happiness is the conviction that the good life is defined in terms of pleasurable experience. Likewise, many forms of modern aesthetic theory tend to value the experience of beauty in so far as it is accompanied by sensations of pleasure. In both cases, emphasis is placed upon pleasurable feeling. At the foundation of both, moreover, lies a new understanding of the subject. In the modern period, the subject tends to be defined as an individual. The 'I' is understood to precede any communal identity. Ashfield and de Bolla comment that, in the context of these developments, the eighteenth-century understanding of 'the aesthetic is not *primarily* about art but about how we are formed as subjects, and how *as subjects* we go about making sense of our experience'.<sup>7</sup> Happiness, likewise, comes to be understood in terms of subjectivity.

However, as Norton makes clear, it is important to clarify Addison's seeming modernity in two respects. Firstly, *aesthetic happiness* should be distinguished from an altogether cruder conception, one in which happiness is conceived of as individual desire fulfilment, as "vulgar" pleasure. Addison's happiness is not overtly one of desire, pursuit, and consumption, it is rather one in which the subject achieves an enlivened presence to the world through sensory experience. Secondly, for Addison, the ability to experience aesthetic pleasure is one which is implanted in human beings by God. In orienting one's subjective perceptual faculties towards the world in the proper manner, one opens oneself up to the beauty of God's creation and therein discovers the human end. Drawing upon Aristotelian metaphysics, Addison views happiness as having its final cause in God. Addison's aesthetic theory is thus placed within the domain of a providential order.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Zaretsky, *Boswell's Enlightenment* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Michael Norton, 'The *Spectator*, Aesthetic Experience and the Modern Idea of Happiness', *English Literature*, 2.1 (2015), p. 89 <<https://doi.org/10.14277/2420-823x/16p>>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

Turning to ‘The Pleasures of the Imagination’ essays themselves, three features of Addison’s aesthetic theory call for particular attention. The first aspect is what might be referred to as the subject/object foundation of Addison’s aesthetic theory. The second aspect, closely related to the first, is the essays’ depiction of superstition vis-à-vis melancholia. Third is the role of politeness in aesthetics. Turning to the first feature, Addison describes the operations of the imagination in terms laid out by Lockean psychology. In the opening essay of the series, published on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1712, Addison establishes the imagination as the mental faculty capable of ‘retaining, altering and compounding’ the ‘images’ derived from visual experience.<sup>8</sup> These images are not innate, for they solely originate from the senses, and therefore the imagination is limited in its operations by what can be perceived. Nevertheless, the capabilities outlined above give the imagination significant power.

Addison divides the pleasures of the imagination into two categories: primary and secondary. The operations of the imagination related to the primary pleasures seem to be largely involuntary, proceeding instantaneously from sense experience. Through the secondary pleasures, however, the mind has extraordinary agential power. ‘By this faculty’, Addison writes, ‘a man in a dungeon is capable of entertaining himself with scenes and landscapes more beautiful than any that can be found in the whole compass of nature’. Ordinary people, Addison suggests, can mentally refashion sense experience into a vision of things that far exceeds the beauties of nature. To put it another way, the pleasures of the virtual can far outshine those of the real.

This sense of mental mastery in the realm of the secondary pleasures relates to Addison’s discussion of the primary imagination. In essay 413, Addison alludes to the ‘great modern discovery’ that ‘light and colours, as apprehended by the imagination, are only ideas in the mind, and not qualities that have any existence in matter’.<sup>9</sup> For readers unaware of this discovery, Addison recommends they read Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The view that light and colour are in the mind rather than in things is an important incentive for Addison’s formulation of a subjectivist theory of beauty. In essay 412, Addison writes: ‘There is not perhaps any real beauty or deformity more in one piece of matter than another’.<sup>10</sup> He later acknowledges that certain properties in matter tend to *cause* the perception of beauty, nevertheless, ontologically, Addison understands beauty to belong to the mind and not to matter.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Addison, *Critical Essays from the Spectator by Joseph Addison: With Four Essays by Richard Steele*, ed. Donald F Bond (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 176  
<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198710509.book.1/actrade-9780198710509-book-1> [accessed 27 August 2018].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

This point is made in one sense more clearly and in another more ambiguously in essay 413. Addison writes:

Things would make but a poor appearance to the eye, if we saw them only in their proper figures and motions: and what reason can we assign for their exciting in us many of those ideas which are different from anything that exists in the objects themselves, (for such are light and colours) were it not to add supernumerary ornaments to the universe, and make it more agreeable to the imagination? We are everywhere entertained with pleasing shows and apparitions [...] but what a rough unsightly sketch of Nature should we be entertained with, did all her colouring disappear [...] In short, our souls are at present delightfully lost and bewildered in a pleasing delusion, and we walk about like the enchanted hero of a romance [...] but upon the finishing of some secret spell, the fantastic scene breaks up, and the disconsolate knight finds himself on a barren heath, or in a solitary desert.<sup>11</sup>

Addison clarifies that one of the major functions of the imagination is to add ‘supernumerary ornaments’ to the universe. However, his description creates ambiguity as to the distinction between the primary and secondary pleasures of the imagination. One can maintain the distinction by assuming the first to be passive, that is to say that the individual agent does not cause them to appear in the mind, and assuming the second to involve deliberate mental activity on the part of the agent. What becomes particularly ambiguous, however, is the meaning of ‘nature’ within this context. The secondary pleasures of the imagination deviate from nature and thereby mentally create scenes that are more beautiful than one finds in reality. In the passage above, however, this seems true, also, of the primary pleasures, which adds supernumerary ornaments inter-mentally. Correspondingly, nature seems ambiguously both to signify the mechanistic universe and also the natural providential order. The latter would include the mental phenomenon of colour as part of nature in the sense that God created human beings to experience the universe in this way.

Addison’s Romance metaphor, moreover, creates even more ambiguity as to the division between the real/unreal in phenomena as they appear in the mind. Were we to see the universe as disclosed by mechanist physics, Addison suggests, we would be as disconsolate knights on barren heaths. As it is, thanks to the imagination, we live as if we were in the enchanted world of Romance. Addison has distinguished between the primary imagination, which is an essential

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 182–83.

aspect of perception, and the secondary imagination, which relates to fiction. In this Romance analogy, however, Addison blurs the distinction between the two. The beautiful phenomena that we experience through the operations of the primary imagination are likened to the bewitching fictions of courtly mythology.

This relates to the second point, Addison's discussion of superstition. Addison derives the motto for essay 419 from Horace: *mentis gratissimus error* (a most pleasing delusion). Addison's theme for this essay is

a kind of writing, wherein the poet quite loses sight of nature, and entertains his readers imagination with the characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence, but what he bestows on them. Such are fairies, witches, magicians, demons, and departed spirits.<sup>12</sup>

In the Romance analogy the relationship between the primary and secondary (illusionary) imagination is ambiguous. In essay 419, this ambiguity extends into the consideration of the relationships between the primary imagination and superstitious beliefs. The imagination is entertained by such things as have 'no existence, but what [the poet] bestows on them', but this, in terms of the Romance analogy, also describes the perception of colour. Presumably, Addison would argue, along with Locke, that real objects have some property which, while not identical to the colour experienced, does consistently cause the experience of colour in the mind. He might also argue that superstitious writing is delusional because it has lost 'sight of nature'. Again, nature, for Addison, relates not just to physics but also to human nature and to nature as providential order. We are naturally meant to perceive colours, but superstitions are unnatural aberrations.

Addison complicates his position, however, when he sows doubt as to the supposed non-existence of these aberrations. At first Addison explains the belief in such things as witches or fairies as originating in the stories that we are told as children. Such beliefs survive into adulthood because they are stimulated by 'those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject'.<sup>13</sup> The adult/child analogy naturally leads Addison to another popular eighteenth-century binary: politeness/barbarism. 'Our forefathers', Addison writes,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

looked upon Nature with more reverence and horror, before the world was enlightened by learning and philosophy, and loved to astonish themselves with the apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms and enchantments. There was not a village in England that had not a ghost in it [...]

Addison explains superstition in psychological terms. The mind is naturally disposed towards the experience of terror, it therefore tends to fabricate horrific fantasies and to project them onto nature. Only through enlightenment have the English people been able to dismiss such spectres. Superstitious writing, therefore, is not purely a product of private delusion, but has its basis in barbarism.

However, Addison, while offering psychological explanations for the prevalence of such beliefs, confesses that he, too, partakes in them. In opposition to ‘Men of cold fancies, and philosophical dispositions’, Addison defends the value of superstitious poetic works: while they may be fanciful, they maintain a degree of probability, due to the fact that ‘we are sure, in general, [that] there are many intellectual beings in the world besides ourselves, and several species of spirits’. In *Spectator* 12, moreover, Addison writes that he is ‘apt to join in opinion with those who believe that all the regions of nature swarm with spirits’.<sup>14</sup> Addison’s somewhat contradictory perspective would not have been unusual among his cultural milieu. Samuel Johnson, for instance, famously declared that, as to the existence of ghosts, ‘All argument is against it; but all belief is for it’, and Boswell displayed a lifelong interest in the “second sight”.<sup>15</sup>

As was typical in eighteenth-century England, Addison, Johnson, and Boswell all associate superstition with Britain’s gothic past and hence with Catholicism. It is noteworthy, here, that a young Boswell seriously considered converting to Catholicism, and that he remained fascinated with its spectacles. For Johnson, meanwhile, in so far as the dangers of Catholicism could be guarded against by a sensible Anglicanism, the primary source of superstition was now, as Potkay comments, ‘the irrational [fear] that can prey on the melancholy temper’.<sup>16</sup> The link between superstition and melancholia is present, also, in Addison. ‘The English’, Addison writes, ‘are naturally fanciful, and very often disposed by that gloominess and melancholy of temper,

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator, Vol. 1*, ed. by Donald F Bond, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 54

<<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198186106.book.1/actrade-9780198186106-book-1>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

<sup>15</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson, Vol. 3: The Life (1776-1780)*, ed. by George Birkbeck Norman Hill, and L.F. Powell, (1776-1780) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 230

<<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198702184.book.1/actrade-9780198702184-book-1>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

which is so frequent in our nation, to many wild notions and visions, to which others are not so liable'.<sup>17</sup> What at first may have appeared to be an exorcism of the spectres of Catholicism, turns out to be the re-interpretation of enchantment as mental pathology. In the Gothic imagination of Addison, Johnson, and Boswell, Britain's Catholic past is associated with superstition, which is in turn associated with mental pathology. Curiously, all three resist that past and that sense of superstition and yet, contradictorily, feel themselves to be connected to it, on account of their dispositional melancholy.

Finally, we turn to the role of politeness in aesthetic happiness. In essay 411, Addison writes:

A man of a polite imagination, is let into a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving. He can converse with a picture, and find an agreeable companion in a statue. He meets with a secret refreshment in a description, and often feels a greater satisfaction in the prospect of fields and meadows, than another does in the possession. It gives him, indeed, a kind of property in everything he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures: so that he looks upon the world, as it were, in another light, and discovers in it a multitude of charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of mankind.<sup>18</sup>

Several aspects of politeness and its relationship to aesthetic happiness become evident, here. In the first place, Addison writes of a 'polite imagination'. Politeness is deeply interwoven with the notion of civilization, which, in the eighteenth-century context, means civilization through commerce.

Lawrence Klein has argued that Addison's *Spectator*, as one of the instantiations of a new, commercial ideology, sought to portray commerce as the foundation of the entire economy, including that of the landed interest. It sought to overcome the opposition between those whose wealth was derived from inheritance and those whose wealth was derived from commerce. This involved the championing of commercial society, while at the same time drawing influence from aristocratic notions of civility. Klein writes that

the [*Spectator*] papers did not endorse a possessive individualism [...] [the papers] invoked the complementary relations between the commercial life and the process of

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<sup>17</sup> Addison, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

refinement and politeness; it linked politeness to the refinement of passions; and it pointed to the coffeehouse [...] as a significant location in the moral landscape.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, in response to the diversity of opinion, entertainment and rank brought about by commercial life, the *Spectator* encouraged the cultivation of a particular kind of selfhood. Addison's polite spectator, Klein argues, was a man easy-going enough to mix with a great many different people, but at the same time capable of disengagement from them. The polite gentleman must possess an aloofness so as to maintain a 'protean ability' to remain agreeable to a diversity of people.<sup>20</sup> The spectator achieves this through 'a certain plasticity of self'. Politeness, therefore, involves both the capacity to disengage from others and to disengage from one's self in order to fashion oneself in a manner that can be agreeable to a diversity of people.

Addison describes aesthetic capabilities in the related terms of conversation, of private versus public, and of distinction from vulgar pleasures. The subject/object model of Addison's aesthetic theory is here described in terms of a 'converse'. Because the pleasures of the primary imagination arise only when the properties of objects are intra-mentally combined with subjective properties like colour, perceiving beauty requires a kind of back-and-forth reminiscent of conversation. The perception of beauty, therefore, mirrors in an important way, the polite ideals of commercial society. This agreeable conviviality, however, involves a kind of restrained secrecy. There is a 'secret refreshment' in description for the man of polite imagination. His is a private, inward satisfaction which does not require the approbation afforded by outward displays of wealth and social status. This gives him a kind of 'property in everything he sees'. He is, nevertheless, distinguished from the vulgar, not on account of land ownership, but by his ability to look 'upon the world [...] in another light'. This happiness is, therefore, a polite happiness, but also a subjectivist one, rooted, not in one's relationship with the world outside, but in one's capacity to take a certain perspective on that world. The locus of happiness is one's inner mental condition. The emphasis upon private happiness is meant as a complement to an ethic of self-control. Polite happiness is to be distinguished from pure pleasure seeking. It is not, therefore, hedonistic in the most basic sense of the word. Addison writes:

There are, indeed, but very few who know how to be idle and innocent, or have a relish of any pleasures that are not criminal; every diversion they take is at the expense of some one virtue or another, and their very first step out of business is into vice or folly. A man

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<sup>19</sup> Klein, pp. 225–26.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 228.



should endeavour, therefore, to make the sphere of his innocent pleasures as wide as possible [...] Of this nature are those of the imagination, which do not [...] suffer the mind to sink into that negligence and remissness, which are apt to accompany our more sensual delights [...].<sup>21</sup>

Addison here introduces another, central aspect of aesthetic happiness: it is to be pursued in hobbies. The activity of the imagination is not meant to replace ‘our more serious employments’, but to complement them. Addison’s concern, therefore, is that when a man is done with the day’s business and finds himself with free time, his hobby-horse should not be ridden at ‘the expense of some one virtue or another’. The goal is not to pursue happiness in virtuous activity, but simply not to pursue it in vicious activity. Politeness, therefore, involves various elements: a connection to commerce; inwardness; respect for the values of others but also a sense of distance from others; the instantiation of a division between work and hobbies.

These aspects of Addison’s aesthetic theory, shape Boswell’s understanding of happiness. All of them can be viewed as having their foundations in alienation. Aesthetic theory, as alluded to earlier, emerges as a cultural framework within which questions of art and beauty could be asked in terms of this new understanding of the subject. This subject, however, as Boswell’s example will show, is constantly threatened by the loss of meaning and by isolation from others. These, ironically, are fundamental aspects of melancholia.

## AESTHETIC HAPPINESS

On 15<sup>th</sup> November 1762, Boswell left Scotland for London and began the *London Journal*. Towards the beginning of the journal, he gives an account of his constitutional melancholy. In 1760 Boswell fled from Glasgow to London with the intention of converting to Catholicism. He was ultimately dissuaded from this course of action by Lord Eglinton. Eglinton lured Boswell away from his Catholic enclave by inducting him into the pleasures of libertinism. Of this moment in his life Boswell comments that Eglinton freed him ‘from the gloom of superstition’ but then led him ‘to the other extreme’.<sup>22</sup> Boswell’s melancholy imagination nourished a desire for “superstitious” Catholic spirituality; his love of pleasure, on the other hand, took him away from Christian morality altogether. In the *London Journal*, Boswell relates how this period of his life left him ‘dissipated and thoughtless’. ‘I threw myself’, he writes,

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<sup>21</sup> Addison, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 267.

loose as a heedless, dissipated, rattling fellow who might say or do every ridiculous thing. This made me sought after by everybody for the present hour, but I found myself a very inferior being [...] I was, in short, a character very different from what God intended me [...] <sup>23</sup>

For Boswell, dissipation means moral incontinence, the indulgence in low pleasures without the guiding influence of rational restraint. At the same time, it refers to the lack of a solid sense of self, a sense of the self as a mere bundle of dispersed impressions, lacking a fixed centre. These two meanings are interrelated. The lack of rational control, for Boswell, often means the same as the inability to mould himself into the ideal character he projects for himself. Both of them, moreover, are relevant to Boswell's melancholia.

Boswell's melancholy experience can be said to fall within three emotional and behavioural tendencies. The first is the quality of indifference that it invokes in him. A symptom of melancholia, or, to use Boswell's preferred term, hypochondria, is withdrawal from the world and withdrawal from others. The "hypochondriack" the world is viewed indifferently, nothing in it is seen to inspire a desire for engagement. This, in turn, often leads to a second aspect of melancholy experience. In periods of melancholic indifference, Boswell often falls into dissipation, seeking gratification in vulgar pleasures. We might understand this as desire to seek stimulation so as to avoid that sense of indifference. This stimulation seeking, however, often only exacerbates the problem. In later life, Boswell will increasingly turn to drinking. His sexual promiscuity, moreover, would have adverse effects on his marriage. Finally, Boswell's melancholia has a manic aspect. The seventeenth-century physician Thomas Willis identified a continuum running between melancholia and mania. Along with melancholia Boswell often experiences mania which, while sometimes positive in nature, often brings with it the experience of superstitious delusions. At points, Boswell worries that melancholia will not merely lead him into indifference but into madness.

Melancholia is in tension with politeness for Boswell since politeness is precisely the capacity to exert rational control over one's behaviour in conformity with the norms of society. 'I remember', Boswell writes,

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<sup>23</sup> *London Journal*, p. 62.

My friend Johnston told me one day after my return from London, that I had turned out different from what he imagined, as he thought I would resemble Mr. Addison. I laughed and threw out some loud sally of humour, but the observation struck deep.

Biographically, Addison's influence over Boswell is palpable. The younger Boswell, in a manner particularly evident in his *London Journal*, is ever seeking an exemplar figure upon whom he can mould himself. In London in 1762-63, however, the man that Boswell perhaps most desires to be is the author of the *Spectator* himself. 'I felt strong dispositions to be a Mr. Addison', Boswell writes.<sup>24</sup> Somewhat analogous to Addison is Boswell's "man of economy", who politely knows when to spend and when to save, both in terms of money and in terms of self-divulgence. In contrast to the man of economy is the "man of pleasure", who seeks happiness in vulgar stimulation.<sup>25</sup> In *Boswell in Holland*, these two masculinities will be replaced by the "man of principle". It is appropriate that Boswell, in his diaristic self-fashioning, should seek to become an Addison, for it is Addison, at least in the London years, who most influences Boswell's self-fashioning practice.

In opening the *London Journal*, Boswell defines his purposes in an introduction which resonates strongly with Addison's notion of the polite imagination. He invokes Socrates's 'Know thyself', 'for surely this knowledge is of all the most important'.<sup>26</sup> Central to the project of the *London Journal* is a notion of the self's malleability. 'Knowing that I am to record my transactions', Boswell writes, 'will make me more careful to do well. Or if I should go wrong, it will assist me in resolutions of doing better.' In line with Addisonian spectatorial consciousness, or Adam Smith's notion of the impartial spectator, Boswell speculates that if he feels that his actions are subject to observation then he will be more concerned that his actions should be applaudable. This understanding of moral behaviour gives virtue a theatrical quality. Boswell was a student of Smith's at the University of Glasgow and, as such, his teacher's influence is palpable in Boswell's thinking.

Alongside the motivation to improve moral conduct, Boswell theorizes the role that his journalizing will play in the pursuit of happiness. Boswell will record 'the anecdotes and stories [he] hears', his 'various adventures', and 'the sallies of [his] luxuriant imagination'. This record, is likely to prove indispensable for happiness because 'very often we have more pleasure in

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<sup>24</sup> *London Journal*, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> For Boswell's masculinities see David M. Weed, 'Sexual Positions: Men of Pleasure, Economy, and Dignity in Boswell's "London Journal"', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31.2 (1997), 215-34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

reflecting on agreeable scenes that we have been in than we had from the scenes themselves'.<sup>27</sup> This comment recalls Addison's argument that a man in a dungeon might create scenes more beautiful through the powers of the imagination than can be found in reality.

In the first daily entry of his journal, Boswell demonstrates his indebtedness to the psychological mechanisms suggested by Addison's aesthetic happiness. After taking leave of his parents and after, in the guise of the man of economy, advising his brother Davy 'to be diligent at his business as a banker and to make rich and be happy', Boswell says a fond farewell to Arthur's Seat. Having bowed thrice to the 'lofty romantic mountain' Boswell records that he

felt the raptures of a soul filled with ideas of the Magnificence of God and his Creation. [...] I have a strong turn to what the cool part of Mankind have named Superstition. But this proceeds from my genius for Poetry, which ascribes many fanciful properties to everything. This I have great pleasure from; as I have now by experience and reflection gained the command of it so far, that I can keep it within just bounds by the power of reason, without losing the agreeable feeling and play to the Imagination, which it bestows. I am surely much happier in this way, than if I just considered Holyroodhouse as so much Stone and lime which has been put together in a certain way; and Arthur Seat as so much earth and rock raised above the neighbouring Plains.<sup>28</sup>

In a manner comparable to Addison, Boswell invokes a divine order of nature; he associates poetic genius with superstition; he emphasises the polite requirement to exert rational moral control over oneself amidst the lower pleasures; and he asserts a subject/object ontology. To expand upon this last point, Boswell suggests that were it not for the imagination, Arthur's Seat would not be Arthur's Seat, but simply a pile of earth. In a manner that links to his self-declared superstitious poetic genius, Boswell suggests that it is the imagination that provides the foundation for his happy appreciation of beauty. Were it not for this inner faculty, Boswell implies, he would find himself, like Addison's disenchanted knight, not on Arthur's Seat, but on a barren heath.<sup>29</sup>

Aesthetic happiness finds its central metaphorical exposition, not in Boswell's words nor in Addison's, but in those of his friend Dempster. Boswell records:

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<sup>27</sup> *London Journal*, p. 40.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Glover argues that Boswell wishes to find things meaningful in a manner that is independent of the mind that views them, but usually finds this desire overcome by his habits of introspection. Brian Glover, 'Spectacle and Speculation on James Boswell's German Tour, 1764', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 57.3 (2017), 561-81 (p. 572) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2017.0024>>.

Dempster said he intended to write a treatise on the causes of happiness or misery. He considered the mind of man like a room, which is either made agreeable or the reverse by the pictures with which it is adorned. External circumstances are nothing to the purpose. Our great point is to have pleasing pictures in the inside. A beggar or a man of fortune could be happy or unhappy depending on their internal pictures. The great art is to have an agreeable collection and to preserve them well. This is really an ingenious and lively fancy.<sup>30</sup>

Dempster's depiction of the mind as a room or gallery partakes in what Sean Silver has called the 'guiding metaphor' of enlightenment epistemology: the mind is a collection.<sup>31</sup> A similar image will re-appear in the Grand Tour journals, where Boswell describes happiness in terms of 'gathering ideas like flowers'.<sup>32</sup> One can identify several sceptical aspects of Dempster's aesthetic happiness. Firstly, it is implicitly underscored by Lockean representationalist psychology. Perception occurs in the mind and is mediated by representations, such as have had subjective properties superadded to them. Secondly, this representationalism is extended into the ethical dimension: happiness is understood to be purely a quality of mind, one which is clearly in converse with the world from which it takes its images, but is not reliant upon the world for its own realization: 'external consequences are nothing to the purpose'. Thirdly, this representationalist ethics leads to a weakening of rigid moral commitments. Social status, for example, becomes somewhat relative. One may be a beggar, or any kind of person that one chooses, and still be happy, provided that one's mental representations have the right colouring. Finally, implicit in this relativism is a Humean notion of the self as a bundle of impressions. Public character is not seen to fix who a person is "inside", the contents of one's inner identity, moreover, takes the form of a collection of images.

Boswell was always divided in his opinions of Hume. He was deeply troubled by the implications of Hume's sceptical philosophy. Nevertheless, he greatly valued Hume's historical writings and was fond of Hume as a person. 'Were it not for his infidel writings', Boswell writes, 'everybody would love him'.<sup>33</sup> Boswell's attitude towards Hume is replicated in his opinions of

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<sup>30</sup> *London Journal*, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> Sean Silver, *The Mind Is a Collection, Case Studies in Eighteenth-Century Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland, 1764* (McGraw-Hill, 1953), p. 65; This phrase somewhat resembles the florilegium of the common place book tradition. See David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* by David Allan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1766-1769*, ed. by Frank Brady and Frederick Albert Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 279.

Dempster. Dempster is a Humean sceptic. When Johnson tells Boswell that he has no liking for Dempster, that he is a man ‘totally unfixed in his principles’, Boswell tells Johnson that ‘Dempster’s principles were poisoned by David Hume’.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Dempster’s metaphor of the mind as a gallery encapsulates Boswell’s practical philosophy of aesthetic happiness.

In a letter sent to Boswell in Holland, Dempster advises him ‘have recourse to our usual scepticism. Remember how much all pleasures depend on the mind’.<sup>35</sup> The idea, here, is equivalent to that of external circumstances being ‘nothing to the purpose’. Dempster’s advice in the letter has been motivated by Boswell account of a severe melancholic episode. He takes the sceptical view that Boswell’s mental state could be improved by disengaging from dogmas. There are times in his life when Boswell would be inclined to agree. However, Dempster’s solution to Boswell’s problem is only partial. The melancholiac may, at points, form obsessions against which scepticism could be an antidote. Often, however, it is precisely scepticism that drives the melancholiac away from the world and into alienated loneliness. In Holland, Boswell, desiring a happiness grounded in principles, dismisses Dempster’s advice, now considered to be poisonous. At this time, consciously melancholic, Boswell refers to his past self as the ‘gay sceptic’.

Given that aesthetic happiness is about the collection of a set of refined, beautiful experiences, the appreciation of the fine arts themselves becomes a central happy-making activity. Boswell writes: ‘The fine arts enliven me exceedingly. I never went into a good painter’s but I became happy.’<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the goal of collecting images fits well with Boswell’s journalizing practice. The journalizing project is undertaken, in part, with the intent of collecting a written record of the scenes of life. In reference to his plan to join the London Guards Boswell imagines himself as a commissioned officer experiencing a variety of men and manners: ‘fitting myself for a pleasing, quiet life in old age’, Boswell writes, ‘by laying up agreeable ideas to feast upon in recollection’.<sup>37</sup> The desire to establish a fine collection of images even seems to shape Boswell’s choice of profession.

Another central aspect of aesthetic happiness is its politeness. For Addison, the cultivation of a pleasure-inducing attitude towards beauty offers businessmen a means to attain contentment in their leisure time, while simultaneously avoiding the vicious activities which leisure might encourage. What is more, for Addison, as also for Hume, the cultivation of the arts

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<sup>34</sup> *London Journal*, p. 317.

<sup>35</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 13.

<sup>36</sup> *London Journal*, p. 218.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

and the possession of artistic taste, were indications of polite civilization. The comparative other, in each case, is a barbarous nation lacking the refinement of the arts and a savage who seeks pleasure in sex, violence, and riotous behaviour.

During the eighteenth-century, the English, and Londoners in particular, were the arbiters of politeness. Correspondingly, in Boswell's desire to be a polite Mr. Addison, a certain cultural anxiety is notable. While in London, Boswell sometimes dines with the Scottish Kellie family. He finds them pleasant, but nevertheless observes in their manners a certain *hameliness*, which he finds intolerable. The Kellie women, Boswell suggests, have much to recommend them. However, because of their hameliness they

do not inspire that awe that women with less parts and good looks than they have, would do, provided they have studied address, and learned the nice art of neither being too free nor too reserved; who know exactly and who practice their knowledge of how much they ought to show, And how much to conceal. Politeness is just what gives that. [...] What I admire is Nature improved by Art: for Art certainly may and does improve nature.<sup>38</sup>

To avoid hameliness one must not speak in dialect, one must not be too familiar with others, one must adopt the correct modes of social performance, one must not, in summary, feel oneself to be at home. To do so would be to risk lapses of polite behaviour. One might add, given the fact that, historically, civility and politeness engendered a distancing from certain bodily functions, that one must also not feel oneself to be too at home in the body. Politeness brought about an altered sense of the division between the private and the public and a new set of cultural codes regarding what one 'ought to show' and what 'to conceal'.

These codes are described using the vocabulary of aesthetics. To be polite is to be *tasteful*. Art distinguishes the savage from the civilized. There is a strange sense, nevertheless, that art is opposed to or at least in tension with homeliness. Aesthetic happiness is inward, refined, and quiet. One acknowledges that the world is mechanistic and is only made beautiful in the mind of the subject. Aesthetic happiness also involves restraint, distancing oneself from others, withdrawing into one's private imagination. Boswell puts it this way: 'the great art of living easy and happy in society is to study proper behaviour, and even with our most intimate friends to observe politeness'.<sup>39</sup> This art, for Boswell, is what makes life worth living, but there is a tension now installed between living well and being at home in the world.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

As an ideal, the man of polite imagination is one who is diligent in his business, but innocent in his hobbies; self-interested in his pursuit of commerce, but not selfish in his pursuit of pleasure or in his treatment of others. This ideal, however, is difficult to attain. Boswell understands this difficulty to be the result of his melancholia. Melancholy makes it difficult to pursue a career, since it makes all pursuits seem meaningless. It also makes it difficult to maintain politeness, because melancholia drives Boswell to seek a cure in vulgar pleasure. As is so often the case with him, Boswell attempts to understand his predicament through different characters. In this case, Boswell compares his two friends Andrew Erskine and Sir James MacDonald, the first exemplifying indifference, the second desire. The fact that Erskine would later commit suicide, strengthens the link between indifference and melancholic withdrawal. Boswell writes:

I am determined to have a degree of Erskine's indifference [...] and a degree of MacDonald's eagerness for real life [...] "[...] Is a general more happy than an Ensign?" No. But a Man who has had his desire gratified of rising by degrees to that rank in the army, has enjoyed more happiness, than one who has never risen at all. The great art I have to study is to balance these two very different ways of thinking properly. It is very difficult to be keen about a thing which in reality you do not regard, and consider as imaginary. But I fancy it may do, as a man is afraid of ghosts in the dark, although he is sure there are none; Or pleased with beautiful exhibitions on the Stage, although he knows they are not real. Although the Judgment may know that all is vanity, yet Passion may ardently pursue.<sup>40</sup>

Here, Boswell implies that, although melancholic indifference may uncover the dark truth about the world, the truth that life on earth is meaningless, desire may counteract this indifference and encourage an irrational, though beneficial engagement with life. Although Boswell knows that the view of things as meaningful is imaginary, he is confident in his ability to counteract indifference with desire. This confidence emanates from the fact that, although it is known that the universe merely works through natural laws, superstition remains and, although when one attends the theatre one knows the characters on the stage are merely actors, one remains absorbed in the spectacle. Engagement with the world, then, involves the willing suspension of disbelief.

In what is a highly sceptical piece of reasoning it is appropriate that Boswell should conceal a reference to Hume. In the *Life of Johnson*, in the midst of a conversation on the topic

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 79.



of Deism, Boswell mentions David Hume's notion 'that all who are happy are equally happy; a little miss with a new gown at a dancing school ball, a general at the head of a victorious army'.<sup>41</sup> This notion, Adam Potkay notes, is derived from one of Hume's four essays on Happiness, one entitled 'The Sceptic'.<sup>42</sup> Although, as Potkay argues, one should be careful in identifying the true opinions of Hume with those he puts into the mouth of the Sceptic, it is evident that Boswell equates the two. Boswell's own reference to the distinction between a general and an ensign seems to recall that of the general and the little miss. Again, then, one finds the influence of Hume problematizing Boswell's pursuit of polite happiness.

In summary, Boswell's aesthetic happiness closely follows Addison's 'Pleasures of the Imagination'. However, due in part to the influence of Hume, Boswell cannot help but experience the sceptical resonances at the foundations of such a philosophy. If happiness is merely a collection of images in the mind, then external circumstances are nothing to the purpose. This is a boon for the individual, for it now seems that happiness can be entirely of their own making. The relationship between happiness and the world, however, and the relationship between happiness and communal virtue, now seems highly uncertain. Neither Boswell, nor Hume, nor Dempster, advocates a pursuit of happiness at the expense of causing harm to others. Nevertheless, the idea that happiness may be rooted purely in selfish pleasure does give Boswell cause to wonder. Ultimately, Boswell is, for the most part, able to counterbalance his desire for selfish pleasure with his polite desire to protect the self from the disapproval of others. Boswell's happiness is problematized, however, both in its aesthetic and its polite aspects, by melancholia, in so far as it leads him both to withdrawal and to moral incontinence amidst the pleasures. In a somewhat circular move, Boswell hopes to counter melancholic indifference by the same faculty as that which makes the disenchanted world appear enchanted: the imagination.

## PRINCIPLED HAPPINESS

In the *London Journal*, Boswell's understanding of happiness is intellectually influenced by Addison and Hume. In *Boswell in Holland*, the most obvious intellectual influence is Samuel Johnson. Boswell met Johnson at the end of his time in London and Johnson accompanied

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<sup>41</sup> James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson, Vol. 2: The Life (1766-1776)*, ed. by George Birkbeck Norman Hill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 9

<<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198702177.book.1/actrade-9780198702177-book-1>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

<sup>42</sup> *The Passion for Happiness*, p. 62.

Boswell to Harwich when he embarked for Holland. Although the two did not correspond often while Boswell was away, Boswell reads the *Rambler* while in Holland and places great emphasis on the letters that he does receive from Johnson during this time. Almost immediately after arriving in Holland, Boswell is overcome by melancholy. He recounts: ‘I went out to the streets, and even in public could not refrain me from groaning and weeping bitterly. I said always, “poor Boswell! is it come to this? Miserable wretch that I am! what shall I do?”’.<sup>43</sup> One can clearly see the way in which melancholia troubles Boswell’s desire for politeness. In this condition he has so little self-control that he cannot even restrain himself from weeping madly in public. In London, Boswell and Johnson acknowledged each other as fellow sufferers from melancholy. As such, in Holland, Johnson’s counsel becomes especially valuable. However, while Potkay has delineated a nuanced Johnsonian philosophy of happiness, a philosophy based around Johnson’s notion of the ‘multiplicity of agreeable consciousness’, Boswell’s version of Johnson does not provide a robust philosophy of happiness.<sup>44</sup> In Boswell’s eyes Johnson becomes an austere Protestant neo-Stoic.

In a letter dated 8<sup>th</sup> December 1763, Johnson writes to Boswell on the theme of happiness and the importance of moral principles. ‘You know a gentleman’, Johnson writes, addressing Boswell through the third person,

who, when first he set his foot in the gay world, as he prepared himself to whirl in the vortex of pleasure, imagined a total indifference and universal negligence to be the most agreeable concomitants of youth [...] Vacant to every object and sensible of every impulse [...] He tried this scheme of life a while, was made weary of it by his sense and his virtue; he then wished to return to his studies; and finding long habits of idleness and pleasure harder to be cured than he expected [...] concluded that Nature had originally formed him incapable of rational employment. Let all such fancies, illusive and destructive, be banished hence forward from your thoughts for ever. Resolve, and keep your resolution; choose, and pursue your choice...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> *The Passion for Happiness*, p. 72; See also: Rudolf Freiburg, ‘«The Multiplicity of Agreeable Consciousness» Samuel Johnson’s Sceptical Philosophy of Terrestrial Happiness’, *English Literature*, 2.1, 2015, 43–68 <<https://doi.org/10.14277/2420-823x/el-2-1-15-14p>>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

Important themes in this letter are the negative depiction of pleasure; the view of Boswell's past life as unhappy; a negative view of idleness; the importance of rational employment, of virtue, and of fixed resolution.

In line with Johnson's guidance, Boswell rejects both hedonism and the polite pleasures of aesthetic happiness. It is appropriate that, at this time, Dempster should write to Boswell and depict gloomy Calvinist Utrecht in contradistinction to the art academies of Paris as 'the dark watery passage which leads to an enchanted and a brilliant grotto'. Boswell may have at one point been inclined to agree. Inspired by Johnson, however, Boswell comes to view Utrecht in a positive light:

I shall ever reverence Utrecht, for it was there that I first began to act upon steady and manly principles. [...] No longer ago than last winter I was the ardent votary of pleasure, a gay sceptic who never looked beyond the present hour, a hero and philosopher in dissipation and vice. Now I am all devoted to prudence and to morality.<sup>46</sup>

In such moments of retrospection, Boswell tends to depict his former self as the man of pleasure and, in doing so, ignores the more aspirational figure of the man of economy that was also important to him at the time. Boswell's new central aspirational figure is the steady man of principle. That is not to say, however, that politeness and personal economy have receded from Boswell's view. If anything, they have become more important.

In contrast to Dempster's collection of images, in Holland, Boswell attempts to capture the essence of happiness, not in an image, but in the rational propositions of his 'Inviolable Plan'. This plan, written towards the beginning of his time in Holland, puts forward a set of principles to which Boswell must submit. The plan demands constant piety: 'have a sense of piety ever on your mind, and be ever mindful that this is subject to no change'.<sup>47</sup> It also demands polite self-command but in a manner far more rigorous than was desired in London: 'Have constant command of yourself [...] Never talk of yourself, nor repeat what you hear in company. Be firm, and persist like a philosopher [...] To *bear* is the noble power of man.'<sup>48</sup>

The Inviolable Plan also expresses an altered understanding of the self, such as is figured in the alteration of Boswell's motto. Boswell's "know thyself" related to the malleability of self and to the capacity to gain self-knowledge through diaristic exploration. In the Inviolable Plan,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>47</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 388.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 389.

however, Boswell's motto changes: 'reverence thyself. But at the same time be afraid for thyself. Ever keep in mind your firm resolutions. If you should at times forget them, don't be cast down. Return with redoubled vigour to the field of propriety'.<sup>49</sup> Boswell's invocation of reverence and fear suggests that he has returned, in his structure of feeling if not in his doctrinal commitments, to the Calvinism of his youth. This would seem appropriate, since, in Holland, Boswell was surrounded by Calvinist pastors in the Calvinist city of Utrecht. The self is no longer a collection of images, it is rather a pre-experiential self that must be revered because it emanates from God.

This turn towards a revered, rational self also relates to Boswell's turn away from pleasure. In Holland, Boswell often uses his written memoranda to remind himself of the negative consequences of pleasure: 'remember Johnson. Pleasure ruins the mind. All will be gone if you grow loose [...] Keep to plan and you'll be happy', and 'withstand pleasure or you will be dissolved'.<sup>50</sup> This sense of dissolution in pleasure refers both to moral incontinence but also to the loss of the integrity of the self. Where one seeks the good in pleasure, as in London, the self becomes dispersed, lost in a vortex, as Johnson puts it. The goal is not to grow loose in converse with the world, but to maintain a rigid center of selfhood in opposition to the world. This intense renouncement of pleasure is hard to sustain. At one point, Boswell has to upbraid himself for letting slip to a Calvinist preacher his opinion that his 'greatest quantum of happiness had been enjoyed in vice'.<sup>51</sup>

Another important aspect of the Inviolable Plan is its fixation upon virtue. This is not, however, virtue in the Aristotelian sense of excellence, as in training oneself to take pleasure in worthy objects. Overwhelmingly, when Boswell refers to virtue, he seems to refer to the virtue of *restraint*. Boswell's most central moral imperative in Holland is, arguably, be '*retem'*'; be reserved.<sup>52</sup> It is in this way that the ideal of politeness seems even more important for Boswell in Holland than it does in London. Now, however, politeness calls for disengagement in a more severer sense. The virtues in the 'Inviolable plan' are mostly negative in character. Among them are being bound to the duties of the *Laird* of Auchinleck, avoiding idleness, attaining propriety of conduct, and showing displeasure in profanity. Vivasvan Soni has pointed out the increasingly negative definition of virtue in the eighteenth century. In *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), most centrally, virtue has the meaning of that which Pamela stands to lose: her virginity.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 80, 86.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>53</sup> See, Soni, pp. 177-210.

Boswell's understanding of virtue seems to be a polite, masculine version of the virtue which Pamela stands to lose. In Boswell's case he will lose it if he fails to maintain self-command amidst impolite pleasures. His reward, if he can do so, will be the same as that of Pamela: happiness.

Boswell's revered self with its Inviolable Plan is exemplary of modern disengaged agency. Charles Taylor argues, as discussed in the introduction, that this mode involves taking 'a stance of reconstruction towards ourselves', such as involves methods of self-control and self-fashioning that are typical of politeness.<sup>54</sup> Taylor also links this mode to neo-Stoicism, as exemplified in Descartes, but also to reform Protestant cultural doctrines, most notably those of Calvinism.<sup>55</sup> The historical origin of these modes of discipline was, in part, Taylor argues, a new 'sense of the unlimited sovereignty of God [such as] was instrumental in destroying the older view of the cosmos as the realization of Form', that is to say, the nominalist rejection of the Aristotelian cosmos, as described in the introduction.<sup>56</sup> It is notable that, during this period of time, Boswell generally conceives of God in terms of immutable and unquestionable moral laws: 'Make up your mind that GOD is just and that the soul is immortal', Boswell writes.<sup>57</sup> 'Morality is permanent', he continues.<sup>58</sup> Boswell's principled happiness, in this respect, might be seen as supported, both by the continued popularity of neo-Stoical and Calvinist perspectives and by a sense of God as manifested in a set of moral precepts.

In Holland a neo-Stoical perspective, such as Boswell identifies with Johnson, becomes central to his understanding of happiness. In a letter to his friend, John Johnstone, Boswell writes that Johnson has supplied him 'with the weapons of philosophy', that Johnson's *Rambler* 'proceeds upon the supposition that we are here in a state where there is much gloom, and fortifies the mind to enable it to support the evils which attack it'.<sup>59</sup> Instead of a semi-permeable gallery, the mind, supported by the Inviolable Plan, is now conceived of as an impenetrable fortress. Elsewhere, Boswell writes,

You have now a rational system. Formerly you made your general plan yield to the present moment. Now you make the present moment yield to the general plan, as it soon passes. [...] Learn the usage of life. Be prudent and *retenu*. [...] Be quite temperate and have self-command amid all the pleasures. Would Epictetus or Johnson be overturned

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Taylor, p. 112.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>57</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

by human beings, gay, thoughtless, corrupted? No; they would make the best of them and be superior. Have real principles.<sup>60</sup>

The goal of polite converse with the world through the pleasures of the imagination has now given way to an emphasis on the importance of moving through the world in accordance with a rational plan.

Boswell, for the most part, remains committed to the view of happiness founded on principle. When an acquaintance of his, Charles de Guiffardiere, implies otherwise, Boswell corrects him: 'Believe me, Sir [...] Morality is permanent, although our sight be wavering; happy are they who can keep it constantly in view. I have experienced a good deal of variety, and I am firmly convinced that the true happiness of a Man is propriety of conduct and the hope of divine favour.'<sup>61</sup> From entries such as these, a picture emerges: the united goals of neo-Stoicism and polite self-control are, for Boswell, also united with an austere Christian worldview, in which happiness is a God-given reward for virtuous restraint.

This, in turn, leads to a newly conceived understanding of melancholia in these terms. In a passage originally written in French as part of his daily language practice, Boswell describes his daily sufferings:

[Indolence] attacks me especially in the morning. [...] I think gloomily of the vanity and misery of human life. [...] Happy the man who can forget that he exists. [...] The truth is that man is made for action. When he is busy, he fulfils the intention of his Creator, and he is happy. Sleep and amusement serve to refresh his body and his mind and qualify him to continue his course of action. How is it then that I feel so gloomy every morning, and that these convincing arguments have not the least influence on my conduct? I believe the explanation is some physical disorder. [...] it is with the utmost difficulty that I can get up. I have thought of having my bed constructed in a curious fashion. I would have it so that when I pulled a cord, the middle of the bed would be immediately raised and me raised with it and gradually set up on the floor.<sup>62</sup>

In the letter sent to Boswell at the beginning of his trip, Johnson counsels Boswell that idleness is the primary cause of melancholy. Throughout his time in Holland, Boswell is confronted with

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-98.

this view continually. It is the opinion of his father, of his father's friend Sir David Dalrymple, and it is the opinion of many of the Calvinist preachers he meets in Utrecht. The ubiquity of this view is not surprising. In the wake of Protestant Reform, Jackson argues, 'the neglect-idleness-indolence aspect' of melancholia is increasingly emphasized whereas previous notions, such as that of *acedia*, of distance from God, gradually fall out of usage.<sup>63</sup>

Also evident in Boswell is the tendency to associate melancholia with the body. This identification is not historically novel, as Jackson demonstrates, nevertheless for much of its history in medieval Europe, melancholia was understood as a disease of the soul. Elsewhere Boswell draws upon an anti-corporeal Christian tradition to castigate the body as the source of melancholia:

O earthly body, it is you who cause me thus to be brought into bondage. Troublesome burden, it is to you that I owe almost all my ills. My immortal soul is so bound to you that it suffers all your pains, that it can barely resist your desires...<sup>64</sup>

Boswell now tends to understand the self to be identical with the immortal soul. This immortal soul, however, has the same trappings as the modern disengaged subject, it is understood to be a fixed, pre-experiential entity, after the manner of the *cogito* in Descartes. For this reason, the pleasures of the body, as with the passions in Descartes' neo-Stoicism, threaten the integrity of the soul that is chained to them. Melancholia is caused by the indolence of the body.

In a letter written to Boswell in April, Lord Auchinleck contradicts the Addisonian notion that melancholia can be dispersed through

variety of company and diversions [...] it is just the reverse. [...] The only certain cure is to acquire the knowledge of as many things that you may constantly command as possible, for this is clear: that idleness to those who have a vicious turn is the mother of all manner of vice, and to those who have a virtuous turn, it commonly produces melancholy and gloom.<sup>65</sup>

Lord Auchinleck tells Boswell that, while it is true that Boswell's grandfather also suffered from melancholia, this was only when the court was not in Session time: 'Business drove it away'. The

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<sup>63</sup> Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 140.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19.

cure for melancholia, therefore, which is now also the means through which one can achieve happiness, is work. Boswell, in this respect, becomes an exemplar of the Protestant work ethic. Unlike aesthetic happiness, principled happiness is strongly oriented towards a particular moral vision: the vision of ceaseless productive activity. There is, additionally, a renouncement of pleasure in principled happiness and a desire to exercise self-control, such as one finds in neo-Stoicism. On the basis of this view, Boswell views that which is external to the self as hostile to the self. The aim is to renounce natural spontaneity in favour of adherence to a rational plan. Amusement and even sleep are merely goods in so far as they refresh human beings for work.

Throughout *Boswell in Holland*, Boswell includes reminders as to the relationship between bodily indolence and melancholy. ‘Laziness is my true enemy’, he writes in January, ‘laziness is worse than a privation of existence, for it is impossible to be lazy without being depraved. Man was created to be busy, and all his faculties, of soul as well as of body, become useless and spoil in idleness’.<sup>66</sup> There is a clear connection, here, between Protestant incentives for work and for their shared distaste for social disorder. In laziness, Boswell argues, man not only fails to live up to his purpose as a worker, but also risks falling into the vices brought about by unemployment. In February, he comments, ‘you cured dire gloom merely by dancing. You see how corporeal...’<sup>67</sup> The body, as a biological machine, can be altered through instrumental procedures. Ideally, a brisk walk should be enough to excite the nerves and disperse the vapours in the head; if the melancholiac finds him or herself unable to walk, then a mechanical bed which forces him or her to do so would be highly efficacious. Physical cures for melancholy vary between those that can be found in ordinary cultural activities, such as dancing, and more invasive cures, such as the usage of imagined mechanical beds.

Some qualification, however, is required. While Boswell, in *Holland*, sometimes orients himself towards melancholy in an instrumentalizing manner, and while he continues to do so to an even greater extent while on the Grand Tour, Boswell does not solely seek the cure for melancholia in the exertion of rational mastery over the body. Indeed, Boswell’s overriding impulse seems to be to turn towards others for advice. Ingram argues that, in the long eighteenth century, the most sophisticated approaches to melancholia were often found among nonconformist ministers rather than medical practitioners.<sup>68</sup> Correspondingly, Boswell often turns to members of the clergy, including his closest friend Temple, a future clergyman, for

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>68</sup> A. Ingram, ‘Deciphering Difference: A Study in Medical Literacy’, in *Melancholy Experience in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century: Before Depression, 1660-1800*, by A. Ingram et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), pp. 170-202 (p. 187).



advice. It is ultimately a Calvinist pastor, Reverend Archibald Maclaine, who, having read Boswell's Inviolable Plan, suggests to him that it may be overly strict and unsuitable for a 'sprightly, brilliant, amiable [...] man that hates restraint'.<sup>69</sup> Boswell will, ultimately, follow Maclaine's advice and discard his strictures demanding total, rational self-control. He is saved, in some sense, by his willingness to speak openly with others, by the talking cure.

## CONCLUSION: THE ART OF LIVING

Aesthetic happiness and principled happiness are the goods towards which Boswell aims in two modes of self-fashioning. In the first place, there is the mode of self-surveillance that is particularly appropriate to *Boswell and Holland*. In an article which compares style and selfhood in Boswell and Hume, Susan Manning argues that, for the former, melancholia was 'the most intractable, unwriteable part of himself'.<sup>70</sup> This incapacity to write melancholy is figured by the truncation of Boswell's journal entries. Often, rather than seeking to put melancholy experience into words, Boswell simply writes something like 'was gloomy'.<sup>71</sup> In Holland, Boswell generally depicts melancholia as irrational and thus as the dark opposite of his rational plan for happiness. He writes, for example, that 'of the operations of melancholy, reason can give no account'.<sup>72</sup> Of melancholy thinking, he writes 'I really believe that these grievous complaints should not be vented [...] they should be considered absurd chimeras, whose reality should not be allowed in words.'<sup>73</sup> These are joined by frequent, fragmentary imperatives to 'be *retent*'. Manning argues that Boswell, following Hume's philosophy, exhibits a great faith in the 'language of analytic empiricism'.<sup>74</sup> He believes that a diaristic account should be able to accurately represent the self by means of propositions about the self. Using the methods and language of analytic empiricism, Boswell aims to observe himself in order to learn how to control himself. Therefore, if he is melancholy, he has failed in this task.

In the second place, Alan Ingram notes that Boswell's self-fashioning typically involves the selection of an image, or character, in accordance with which Boswell seeks to mould

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<sup>69</sup> *Boswell in Holland*, p. 208.

<sup>70</sup> Susan Manning, 'This Philosophical Melancholy: Style and Self in Boswell and Hume', in *New Light on Boswell: Critical and Historical Essays on the Occasion of the Bicentenary of The Life of Johnson*, ed. by Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 126.

<sup>71</sup> For instance: *Boswell in Holland*, p. 145.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

himself.<sup>75</sup> This is particularly prominent in the *London Journal*. Examples of these that have been alluded to throughout this chapter include Addison, the man of pleasure, and the man of economy. The resulting problem, Ingram argues, is that Boswell often seeks to mould himself in terms of a circumscribed image of the self.

A good example of the process of self-construction through images can be found in the Louisa episode of the *London Journal*. In describing his attempts to court the actress Louisa, Boswell presents their conversations in the form of a theatrical dialogue. It is somewhat appropriate, therefore, that during his first intimate encounter with Louisa, Boswell should suffer from performance anxiety: 'For here was I, a young man full of vigour and vivacity, the favourite lover of a handsome actress and going to enjoy the full possession of my warmest wishes. And yet melancholy threw a cloud over my mind. I could relish nothing.'<sup>76</sup> Melancholia again signifies that which lies outside the rational, in this case, Boswell's incapacity to play the role of the gallant to which he assumes himself suited. On a later date, Boswell is able to overcome his anxiety, and, commenting on his liaison writes, 'I have painted this night as well as I could. The description is faint; but I surely may be styled a Man of Pleasure'.<sup>77</sup> In living up to the role of the gallant in his behaviour, Boswell is able to earn the identity of a man of pleasure. However, he earns this in spite of the faintness of the image that he is able to paint in his journal. Presumably, a more vivacious image equates to a more securely held identity.

On the one hand, therefore, there is a mode of self-fashioning which emphasises self-surveillance and adherence to a plan, on the other hand, there is a mode based in the desire to mould the self in accordance with an image. In both cases, however, Boswell's self-fashioning requires that he conform himself to representations of the self. Manning argues that, unlike Boswell, Hume is successful in writing melancholia because of the scepticism that underwrites his philosophical assertion and because he is adept at consciously imposing form upon his experience as a literary exercise.<sup>78</sup> Although Hume, and not Boswell, is the great philosopher, Hume is able to see his description of the self as an expression of something that is too complex to understand theoretically. This might be linked to what was said of Hume in the introduction. Hume's sceptical impasse regarding common sense experience actually seems to give way to a Pyrrhonic scepticism regarding the limits of philosophy. Hume's sceptical melancholy, therefore, tends to resolve itself in the decision to leave philosophy behind and to go out into the world. In the world he finds the cure.

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<sup>75</sup> See, in particular, pp. 1–10.

<sup>76</sup> *London Journal*, p. 117.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>78</sup> Manning, p. 137.

The Boswellian tendency to over-invest in representations bears some relation, I argue, to Boswell's understanding of the relationship between art and nature, between representation and presence. It is appropriate that agreement over the nature of poetry should bring together the otherwise opposed figures of indifference and desire, Andrew Erskine and Sir James MacDonald:

[Lord Eglinton] mentioned poetry. Sir James said it was just personification, animating every object and every feeling, and that measure was not necessary. Erskine agreed with him. I maintained that personification was only one requisite in poetry, and that measure was absolutely necessary, without which it ceased to be Poetry and must be denominated some other work of the Imagination. That indeed it might be called Poetical, as it partook in the Nature of Poetry.<sup>79</sup>

While Boswell distinguishes poetry by the use of metre, he, Erskine and MacDonald are all of agreement regarding the nature of the poetic. The poetic personifies, it animates those things which are inanimate, namely, objects. In so far as natural philosophy is in itself sufficient to describe nature, the personifying act of poetry must be understood as an embellishment of nature. This relates, too, to the difference between Boswell's writing of melancholy and that of Hume. 'Boswell's images', Manning argues, 'are not a means to explore feelings, but a kind of gift wrapping of known ideas'.<sup>80</sup> We might recall, also, that in London Boswell views the remedy for indifference to the world as the willing suspension of disbelief. Boswell's tendency is to draw a distinction between nature and art in the terms laid out by modern ontological dualism, a philosophy which understands our access to the world to be mediated through representations.

In a series of essays published between the years 1777-1783, Boswell, writing under the pseudonym 'the Hypochondriack', reveals the continued relevance of this dualism to his understanding of happiness and melancholia. In an essay of 1780 entitled 'On Hypochondria', one of several essays to bear that title, Boswell seeks to describe melancholia through the use of the third person:

Every thing appears to him quite indifferent. He repeats from Hamlet, "How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, | To me seem all the uses of the world." He begins actually to believe the strange theory, that nothing exists without the mind, because he is sensible, as

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<sup>79</sup> *London Journal*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

he imagines, of a total change in all objects of his contemplation. What formerly had engaging qualities has them no more. The world is one undistinguished wild. [...] he cannot even have the idea of happiness [...]<sup>81</sup>

Boswell derives the conceptual framework for his description of melancholy from Cartesian dualism and from the sceptical philosophy of Hume. The Hypochondriack believes that 'nothing exists without the mind' and can have no 'idea' of happiness when in this condition of belief.

Boswell suggests a potential remedy: 'the Hypochondriack must take care to have the principles of our holy religion firmly established in his mind [...] Dreadful beyond description is the state of the Hypochondriack who is bewildered in universal scepticism'.<sup>82</sup> In 1780, just as in Holland in 1764, the solution to melancholia lies in the possession of firm principles. Religious belief, in this context, takes the form of a set of rational laws and, as Boswell later says in the same essay, of 'arguments'. God becomes just one more set of rational precepts intended to enable the soul to resist the body and to enable the self to remain *retenu* in the face of experience.

While Boswell is willing to describe the kind of language that is used in poetry as mere embellishment, he seems much less sensitive to the possibility that rational propositions might themselves be fanciful representations. On the Grand Tour, Boswell will read Thomas Reid and be much taken by the common-sense school of philosophy.<sup>83</sup> Be that as it may, this interest in common sense is not alone sufficient to challenge the subject/object dualism of Boswell's thinking on happiness. This dualism seems to bring with it, moreover, a series of related dualisms: mind versus world, politeness versus savagery, art versus nature.

Where Boswell pursues aesthetic happiness one of the major purposes of his writing is the collection of ideas. The journal is thus an *aide-memoire* for the recollection of beautiful scenes. Boswell picks up on this theme in his 1783 essay, 'On Memory'. He writes:

An Hypochondriack is subject to forgetfulness, which may be owing to another cause; that there is a darkness in his mind, or that its perceptive eye is injured or weak at times. Or it may be thus: his ideas hide themselves like birds in gloomy weather; but in warm sunshine they spring forth gay and airy. It is plain they cannot rise if they are not there. Let an Hypochondriack then have his park well stocked. Let him get as many agreeable

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<sup>81</sup> James Boswell, *The Hypochondriack: Being the Seventy Essays by the Celebrated Biographer, James Boswell, Appearing in the London Magazine, from November, 1777, to August, 1783, and Here First Reprinted*, ed. by Margery Bailey (California: Stanford University Press, 1928), pp. 208–9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>83</sup> For Boswell's approval of common sense, see Bruce Silver, 'Boswell on Johnson's Refutation of Berkeley: Revisiting the Stone', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54.3 (1993), 437–48 (p. 447).

ideas into his mind as he can; and though there may in wintery days seem a total vacancy, yet when summer glows benignant, and the time of singing birds is come, he will be delighted with gay colours and enchanting notes.<sup>84</sup>

Recalling Addison, Boswell describes happiness as invested in internal ideas which bring with them ‘gay colours and enchanting notes’. These ideas do not, in themselves, seem to have the power to overcome the mechanistic understanding of nature as unveiled in melancholy consciousness. They are, after all, merely mental embellishments. In this passage, melancholia, not happiness, is the state that reveals the foundations of human existence. This relates to the alienated world picture that lies at the heart of Boswell’s understanding of happiness. This picture is as follows: the universe is made up of inanimate matter, only individual minds give it meaning; human beings are savage by nature and made polite through discipline and the cultivation of taste; melancholia is natural whereas happiness is artificial.

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<sup>84</sup> *Hypochondriack*, p. 341.

**‘BE-VIRTU’D, –BE-PICTUR’D, –BE-BUTTERFLIED’:  
HOBBY-HORSICAL HAPPINESS IN LAURENCE STERNE’S  
*TRISTRAM SHANDY***

In *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne satirizes the intellectual pretensions of all manner of dogmatists, including philosophers, natural scientists, and clergy. All of them tend to claim to possess infallible knowledge systems that can fully explain human existence. The most central example of this is Walter Shandy. Through Walter, Sterne satirically explores the inadequacy of all knowledge systems. Dogmatists like Walter are ultimately exposed to be hobby-horse riders. In the context of *Tristram Shandy* this means that their systems are merely idiosyncratic hobbies, absorbing and enjoyable, but not ultimately revelatory of truth. In this, Walter is not different from his brother Toby, or from his son Tristram, each of whom spend their lives absorbed in their own particular hobby-horsical pursuits, in Toby’s case the construction of battlefield miniatures and in Tristram’s the writing of his autobiography.

One central aspect of the hobby-horse is what will be referred to as Shandean circularity. As the riders of hobby-horses, Walter, Toby and Tristram necessarily understand things through a circumscribing perspective. Things present themselves to the rider’s eye only as part of an intelligible framework. This intelligible framework, however, does not give the rider complete access to the thing, but only to one of its aspects. Therefore, the hobby-horse rider comes to understand things, not as they are in themselves, but through a pattern formed by the multiple reflections of parts of things. As Tristram writes of his father:

[his] road lay so very far on one side, from that wherein most men travelled, –that every object before him presented a face and section of itself to his eye, altogether different from the plan and elevation of it seen by the rest of mankind.—In other words, ’twas a different object.<sup>1</sup>

Each thing presents a different aspect to Walter than it does to others. There is, then, no shared starting point upon which a shared set of values can be established. There is no *sensus communis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: The Text.*, ed. by Melvyn New and Joan New, Vol. 1 (University Press of Florida, 1978), p. 456  
<<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780813005805.book.1/actrade-9780813005805-book-1>> [accessed 2 May 2019].

Hobby-horse riders mistakenly come to see the whole as the mere multiplication of one of its parts. If a hobby-horse rider tried to understand the design of a house, they would neglect the fact that a house is composed of doors, windows, bricks etc. and assume that the door handle alone offered an intelligible framework for understanding the house as a whole. Via the medium of the hobby-horse, Sterne devotes Menippean satirical energy to ridiculing the intellectual pretensions of all manner of dogmatists.<sup>2</sup>

The ramifications of hobby-horsicallity are certainly epistemological, but they are also ethical. Tristram writes that the riders of hobby-horses ‘by long friction and incumbition, have the happiness, at length, to get all be-virtu’d,—be-pictur’d,—be-butterflied, and be-fiddled.’<sup>3</sup> In the first place, the process of coming to know things in the light of the hobby-horse, of becoming ‘be-butterflied’ or ‘be-fiddled’, seems to bring happiness with it. In the second place, it seems that, for Tristram, a concern for virtue, for becoming ‘be-virtu’d’, is not categorically distinct from the hobbies that one might pursue. To be virtuous is to have an inclination for a communal moral standard in the same way that an amateur lepidopterist has an inclination for butterflies. If this is the case, hobby-horsical happiness, like hobby-horsical knowledge, can be understood to be subjective, founded upon individual perspectives and inclinations, lacking roots in a common standard of the good.

If the pursuit of individual happiness is in tension with the pursuit of the communal good then citizens must be free to live their lives according to their own whims and fancies. Tristram infers as much when he proclaims:

have not the wisest of men in all ages, not excepting Solomon himself,—have they not had their HOBBY-HORSES;—their running horses,—their coins and their cockle-shells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets, their maggots and their butterflies?—and so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably and quietly along the King's high-way, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him, pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?<sup>4</sup>

Individuals should be free to ride their hobby-horses, however idiosyncratic these horses might be, with the important limitation that that hobby-horse must not disturb civil order. This notion

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<sup>2</sup> For Sterne’s as Menippean satirist see Garry Sherbert, *Menippean Satire and the Poetics of Wit: Ideologies of Self-Consciousness in Duntton, D’Urfey, and Sterne* (New York: P. Lang, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 102

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

of happiness shares similarities with the view of happiness taken by John Locke.<sup>5</sup> It also shares similarities with John Stuart Mill's harm principle, which dictates that a person should be free to act howsoever they wish so long as their actions do not harm others. In so far as both Locke and Mill are most closely identified with political liberalism, the view of happiness that they and Tristram propose might be viewed as a liberal individualist conception of happiness.

This chapter will explore how Sterne's sceptical satire on the insufficiency of human knowledge relates to his presentation of happiness. In particular, this chapter will make two major claims. Firstly, that Sternean happiness follows the logic of the hobby-horse. It is a hobby-horsical happiness. I will argue that hobby-horsical happiness reconciles a modern tension between knowing things and being happy. Tristram Shandy implies that there is not, in everyday experience, an ontological distinction to be made between objective nature (physics) and the subjective world of values (ethics in the sense of ethos). However, Sterne's scepticism is rooted in his sense that the way we come to know things is inevitably partial. No matter how much knowledge we accrue we can never understand the whole. For this reason, there can be no perfect happiness brought about by the perfection of human reason. To pursue happiness in a particular way is always to circumscribe human existence. As such, new possibilities for happiness inevitably open up new possibilities for unhappiness.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, I will argue that there is an apparent gap between hobby-horsical happiness and virtue, but that, due to the dynamics of what I term 'Shandean circularity', this gap also gets called into question. We will return to the concept of Shandean circularity shortly. Tristram tends to describe hobby-horsicality in terms of liberal individualism. However, the text also implies a subtly ironic critique of this, hinting that happiness is necessarily bound up with conceptions of the good life that go beyond the individual. Hobby-horsical happiness can be both liberal and critical of liberal philosophical assumptions because it embodies Shandean circularity. The

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<sup>5</sup> There is a long tradition of reading Tristram Shandy as an instantiation or as a critique of Locke's philosophy. See, for example, Peter M. Briggs, 'Locke's "Essay" and the Tentativeness of "Tristram Shandy"', *Studies in Philology*, 82.4 (1985), 493–520; Paul Davies, 'Uneasiness: The Line between Sterne's Novel and Locke's Essay', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2017), 247–64 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1228845>>; Lila V. Graves, 'Locke's "Essay" and Sterne's "Work Itself"', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 12.1 (1982), 36–47; Arthur H. Cash, 'The Lockean Psychology of Tristram Shandy', *ELH*, 22.2 (1955), 125–35 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2871836>>; One might draw another, indirect link between Sterne and Locke, on the grounds that the fiction of the former is greatly interested in material things and the philosophy of the latter has been seen as having influenced the development of eighteenth-century it-narratives. On these topics see: Mark Blackwell, 'The People Things Make: Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding and the Properties of the Self', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 35.1 (2006), 77–94 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2010.0047>>; Hilary Englert, '"This Rhapsodical Work": Object-Narrators and the Figure of Sterne', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 37.1 (2008), 259–78 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.0.0028>>; See, also, Christina Lupton, 'Giving Power to the Medium: Recovering the 1750s', *The Eighteenth Century*, 52.3/4 (2011), 289–302.

<sup>6</sup> For Sterne on melancholy, see; Christopher Tilmouth, 'Sceptical Perspectives on Melancholy: Burton, Swift, Pope, Sterne', *The Review of English Studies*, 68.287 (2017), 924–44 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hgx031>>.



hobby-horse emphasises individualism and singularity, yet at the same time Tristram's hobby-horsical autobiography depicts the self, not as an autonomous subject, but, like the thing, as an entity which only shows itself partially and only ever in relation to other things. This is why Tristram must 'draw [his] uncle *Toby's* character from his HOBBY-HORSE', for the rider cannot appear apart from the horse.<sup>7</sup> It is also why Tristram's autobiography entails an account of the lives of his father and uncle and the inclusion of a wide range of references to the intellectual-cultural history of the West. The singularity of the hobby-horse, therefore, is asserted but at the same time ironized in light of the fact that human beings can never truly be single.<sup>8</sup>

## SHANDEAN CIRCULARITY

Sterne signals the centrality of happiness to his work when he preponds a motto derived from Epictetus to *Tristram Shandy*: 'Men are tormented with the Opinions they have of Things, and not by the Things themselves'.<sup>9</sup> This motto has two central aspects relevant to hobby-horsicallity. In the first place, the motto seems to speak to the absence of the things themselves, such as is an issue for epistemology. In the second place, it refers to a Stoical, ethical understanding of happiness. Turning first to the epistemological aspect of the motto, it will be necessary to explore further the notion of Shandean circularity. In this notion, my reading of Sterne is influenced by Jonathan Lamb's notion of Shandean relativity. In *Sterne's Fiction and the Double Principle*, Lamb describes Sternean scepticism as having two main aspects, both of which can also be found in the scepticism of David Hume. The comparison between Sterne and Hume is particularly notable in light of Thomas Reid's criticism of Hume's philosophy as 'like a hobby-horse, which a man in bad health may ride in his closet, without hurting his reputation; but if he should take him abroad with him to church, or to the exchange, or to the play house, his heir would immediately call a jury and seize his estate.'<sup>10</sup> Reid's common sense criticism of Hume's

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<sup>7</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> My approach in these respects is influenced by Christina Lupton, firstly, in her determination to read Tristram Shandy, not in terms of the 'philosophical-problems-played-out-in-literature model', but in terms of the literature and philosophy 'side-by-side' model. Christina Lupton, 'Tristram Shandy, David Hume, and Epistemological Fiction', *Philosophy and Literature*, 27.1 (2003), 98–115 (p. 99) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2003.0029>>; Secondly, I am influenced by Lupton's reflection upon *Tristram Shandy* as a text which uses 'language to point usefully towards its own material substratum'. Christina Lupton, 'Paper Ontologies: Reading Sterne with Bruno Latour', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2017), 299–313 (p. 299) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1228848>>; On this latter topic, see also Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Reid, *The Edinburgh Edition of Thomas Reid: An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. by David R. Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 36 <<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780748607228.book.1/actrade-9780748607228-book-1>> [accessed 15 October 2018].

empirical scepticism emphasises the ethico-epistemological failing of a philosophy that has no bearing on communal life (although Hume, as suggested in the introduction, may have already implied this in his own work). Of Shandean relativity, Lamb argues that, in the first place, it is impossible to know things themselves because this would involve an analytic severance of things from the contexts and situations in which they appear. In the second place, there is an uncertain relationship between representations of things (in language and in art) and the things themselves. The thing, in *Tristram Shandy*, does not seem to have a foundational substance, such as defines it as a singular thing, independent of all other things. Things vary, in Sterne, according to who encounters them and in accordance with their contexts.

This is true of *Tristram Shandy* “literally”, in terms of scepticism one, in so far as the work depicts material things in relational contexts, but also linguistically, in terms of scepticism two, in so far as the linguistic contexts of words (‘a sot, a pot, a fool, a stool’) and the semantic or metaphorical proximity of one word to another word (wit and judgement; noses and male genitalia) necessarily place object-signifiers in an associative linguistic web.<sup>11</sup> It would seem that the two kinds of scepticism that Lamb describes, are somewhat simultaneous with one another. The word “literally”, illustrates this point, in so far as, in the above sentence, its use was to distinguish Tristram’s objects from the object signifiers by which they are designated, yet it cannot help but recall us to the word “literary”. The two words share a common etymology of *literalis*, meaning that which belongs to letters or writing. One can’t gesture to the literal without running into the literary. One can’t gesture to things without running into language. Shandean circularity is about the movement between sign and thing, thing and sign. It is about the way in which things resist being made sense of, but also about the way in which human beings cannot help but make sense of things.

An exemplification of Shandean circularity can be found in ‘The Author’s Preface’. In the preface (which comes, not at the beginning, but *in medias res*, in the middle of things), Tristram interrupts his philosophical refutation of Locke’s distinction between wit and judgement with an invective against rationalistic theories:

I hate set dissertations, — and above all things in the world, 'tis one of the silliest things in one of them, to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception, —when in all likelihood, if you had looked about, you might have seen something standing, or

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<sup>11</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 235.

hanging up, which would have cleared the point at once,— for what hinderance, hurt or harm, doth the laudable desire of knowledge bring to any man, if even from a sot, a pot, a fool, a stool, a winter-mittain, a truckle for a pully, the lid of a goldsmith's crucible, an oyl bottle, an old slipper, or a cane chair,” — I am this moment sitting upon one. Will you give me leave to illustrate this affair of wit and judgment, by the two knobs on the top of the back of it<sup>12</sup>.

There is a circular movement in such passages, whereby the material and signifiatory aspects of the work take turns to announce themselves, but in such a way as always seems to give rise to the announcement of the opposing category. The passage opens with Tristram's declared preference for things over words, in line with the motto of the work. Yet, no sooner have we doubted this than Tristram recalls to us that even language, composed of 'tall, opaque words', has a material basis. This circular dynamic continues in his quotation of Rabelais, in the first place because the route that Tristram takes to arrive at his material exemplar deviates through intertextual quotation (through opinions rather than directly to the things themselves) and, in the second place, because the reader must question to what extent the connection between things such as 'a sot, a pot, a fool, a stool' is not, in fact, a connection between the things themselves, but between the material qualities of their signifiers, that is, the connection between them would seem to be that the words rhyme. Nevertheless, it is possible to imagine practical reasons why these things might have been grouped together: there are cooking pots but there are also drinking pots and a sot might drink from a drinking pot; sot is a synonym of the word fool; pots and stools might go together with sots and fools in a rustic kitchen, or even in the kitchen of Shandy Hall.

Finally, Tristram alters the Rabelais quotation by appending the words 'a cane chair' to it, so as to surreptitiously provide himself with an intertextually authoritative basis for referring to the chair upon which his readers are to imagine him to be sitting. This chair is to be the practical exemplar with which he will demonstrate that wit and judgement are inseparable from each other. We might judge that exemplar to be ridiculous, nevertheless, Sterne's ironic, associative wit would seem to make the point adequately. At the same time, we must realize that Tristram is not really sitting in any chair, that he is a fictional character, and that our momentary belief in his reality arose because of the representational capacities of language. We only believed that Tristram was sitting there because we forgot the materiality of the book in our hands (or on our screens). Language has claimed us at such a deep level that what the words signify, the thoughts which they give rise to, are more obvious to us than the materiality of their ink.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

Another example of Shandean circularity is that of the green bays bag carried by Obadiah on horseback.<sup>13</sup> Dr Slop's medical instruments, which in a different context could be the foci of theological debates regarding baptism in vitro or obstetrical discussions regarding the use of forceps, become, in the context given to them by Obadiah, musical instruments. On the level of the "literal", this contextual manifestation of the thing is driven by their context-dependent properties. The instruments, once in the bag on horseback, clank up-against each other, though in a different context they would not be experienced in this manner, we might think of Tristram's alternative experience of the forceps crushing his nose. Depending on their contexts, the instruments are capable of clanking or destroying proboscises. However, on the level of the literary, what drives the episode is the different semantic possibilities of the word "instrument" to mean both a tool and a musical instrument. The distinction between the "literal" and the literary is further blurred by the fact that the instrument-things, specialist forceps and squirts designed for the baptism of infants in vitro as detailed by Tristram, would not have been constructed were it not for ludicrously obscure obstetrical debates in the first instance or ludicrously obscure theological debates in the second. Literal things come into being because of the literary, and the literary can only come into being because of things (printers, pages, and ink).

Yet another example could be the marbled or black pages that Tristram inserts into his work. 'Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader!', Tristram writes,

for without much reading [...] you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unraval the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one.<sup>14</sup>

The marbled and black pages (two things) are inseparable from the readings (the ideas) which promise to illuminate their meaning. The notion that things might have a moral, moreover, speaks to the blurring of the lines between epistemology and ethics, such as is a central aspect of hobby-horsical happiness.

In summary, then, Shandean circularity describes a dynamic process in Sterne's fiction whereby an idea, a word or a representation announces the existence of the thing, the materiality of the book, or matter itself, and whereby a thing vice versa announces the presence of an idea. The effect is to remind readers both of the tension between idea and thing and, conversely, of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-96.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

the necessity of their relationship, for there can be no disembodied idea, just as there can be no thing (nothing) that is independent of a human framework of intelligibility.<sup>15</sup> While idea and thing are dependent upon each other for their appearance, however, Sterne characterizes their relationship, not merely as necessary, but also as in tension. For example, in revealing the material basis of language in his mention of ‘tall, opaque words’, Tristram at the same time emphasises the potential obscuring qualities of language. He thus alights on the cane chair as a non-linguistic means for communicating his point, but he ends up using the chair linguistically, that is to say, as a signifier for the word-concepts ‘wit’ and ‘judgement’. The process is one in which ideas are interrupted by things, but then things become part of the ideas.

We see this, also, in the episode of the green bays bag, involving the servant Obadiah and Dr Slop’s medical instruments. These things are truly jarring for Obadiah as he trots away on horseback, because they refuse to be merely what they are said to be: medical instruments. However, this thing-resistance is soon re-appropriated into a signifiatory context, as they jokingly come to signify musical instruments. Another example of this, discussed by both Lamb and Norton, is that of Phutatorius and the hot chestnut, in which the former cannot truly respond to and experience the pain caused when the latter falls into a slit in his trousers, until he incorporates that painful sensation into some framework of intelligibility.<sup>16</sup> He leaps up in fright when his mind finally fixes upon the image of a snapping lizard. In all of these examples the necessity of the relationship between idea and thing is affirmed, nevertheless, Sterne reminds us that things have the power to be in tension with ideas, just as ideas have the power to incorporate things. The awareness of the process is ultimately one that encourages scepticism because the tension between things and ideas means that things will always refuse to make sense even though we will always try to make sense of them. Moving on to the second sense of the motto, it is possible to follow Brian Michael Norton in his ethical exploration of it. Norton argues that, while Sterne scholarship has tended to focus upon the gap between perceiving subject and perceived object in

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<sup>15</sup> The view that such anti-dualism is a feature of Sterne’s depiction of the relationship between the mind and the body has found much scholarly support, as has the view, taken in this chapter, that this anti-dualism is a feature of Sterne’s understanding of ideality/materiality in general. See: Ala Alryyes, ‘Uncle Toby and the Bullet’s Story in Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*’, *ELH*, 82.4 (2015), 1109–34 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2015.0043>>; Robert Chibka, ‘Every Jerkin Has a Quicksilver Lining: Tristram’s Rumpled Dualisms’, in *Sterne, Tristram, Yorick: Tercentenary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Melvyn New, Peter de Voogd, and Judith Hawley (Newark: University of Delaware Press; Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 121–32; Additionally, Melvyn New writes of Sterne’s fiction as an exploration of ‘the infinite fertility of matter’ and matter’s refusal to be subdued by human reason. Melvyn New, ‘Sterne and the Modernist Movement’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 165.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Lamb, *Sterne’s Fiction and the Double Principle* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 7–8; Brian Michael Norton, *Fiction and the Philosophy of Happiness: Ethical Inquiries in the Age of Enlightenment* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2012); *Tristram Shandy*, pp. 377–86.

terms of Lockean or Humean epistemology, the work's opening quotation from Epictetus reminds us that we might also read this gap in ethical terms.<sup>17</sup> 'From the Stoic point of view', writes Norton, 'the gap between subject and object is less an epistemological obstacle than an ethical boon.'<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, the reference to Stoicism might offer us an opportunity to consider epistemology and ethics as, themselves, circularly interconnected in Sterne's work.

For the Stoic, the capacity to withhold assent from sense impressions and thoughts had its basis in the rational constitution of adult human beings. Judgement regarding the validity of sense impressions and thoughts (the judgement as to which were to be taken as real and which were not) presupposed the cultivation of reason. Reason, for the Stoics, meant living in accordance with nature, where nature is understood to be structured by a rational cosmic order. Living in accordance with nature thus had an epistemological component, for it allowed the Stoic sage to attune himself to the cosmic reason and thereby distinguish false sense impressions and thoughts from real sense impressions and thoughts. It also had an ethical component. To live in accordance with nature is also to live in accordance with human nature, which means rationally choosing those things and pursuing those activities which lead to the fulfilment of human nature in happiness. For the Stoic, the path to happiness was identical with the path of virtue. Thus, to be happy means to live in accordance with a rational cosmic order, accessible to human beings through the use of their own reason. By contrast, for the modern dogmatists who populate *Tristram Shandy*, knowing the truth requires disengagement from what is now construed as the "subjective" mode of knowing nature, and henceforth the translation of natural phenomena into a set of "objective" abstract rules, which are sometimes held to be more real than the phenomena themselves. These rules, moreover, are formulated with the intention of producing desired effects in nature and thereby allowing the wielders of reason to become (to paraphrase Descartes) the masters and possessors of nature.

The motto from Epictetus, then, seems to invite both epistemological and ethical reflection upon the gap between the opinions of men and the things themselves in *Tristram Shandy*. At the same time, however, the distinction between epistemology and ethics, when retrospectively applied to the Stoic understanding of happiness, would not appear to be clear-cut. In fact, being happy, for the Stoic sage, had much to do with his capacity to *know* the cosmic truth through the power of reason. However, in reading *Tristram Shandy*, it would seem that reason, between the time of the ancient Stoics and the time of the Shandies, has degenerated. It is no longer the capacity to live happily in accordance with the cosmic order, but reason is rather

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<sup>17</sup> Norton, *Fiction and the Philosophy of Happiness*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

the faculty by which dogmatists set up coercive frameworks of principles in the attempt to fix and control the lives of others and the nature of things. There no longer seems to be a self-evident correspondence between nature and reason, or between reason and virtue, or between virtue and happiness.

## THE HOBBY-HORSE

Reason's fall from the logos to dogmatic systematism is best exemplified by Walter Shandy. Walter believes that his reason discovers things as they really are, but, in reality, he discovers things partially and in accordance with his hobby-horse. His brother Toby instinctively (not explicitly) knows that his worldview is partial and thus knows that his hobby-horse is his own and not to be proscribed to everyone. In exploring the hobby-horses of Walter and Toby, this section will reference four analytic concepts that are intended to help delineate the nature of hobby-horsicallity. These are: singularity; Shandean circularity; frameworks of intelligibility; the interrelationship of happiness and unhappiness.

To summarize these briefly, hobby-horses are singular. This means that they cannot be judged by any common ethical standard. 'There is no disputing against hobby-horses', Tristram writes.<sup>19</sup> Tristram pleads that hobby-horse riders be left alone, so long as they ride them 'peaceably and quietly along the King's high-way'. Nevertheless, the riders inevitably find themselves at odds with a world that cannot understand their singular frameworks of intelligibility. Shandean circularity highlights the way in which things can only be understood through ideas and those ideas are always only connected partially to the things they represent. A hobby-horsical framework of intelligibility represents the singular worldview that emerges from the conglomeration of these partial ideas. For Walter everything and everyone that he encounters is understood in terms of his erudite and ludicrous theoretical preoccupations; for Toby everything ultimately leads him back to the battlefield miniatures on the bowling green. Walter, Toby and (as shall later be discussed) Tristram, inevitably interpret things in accordance with their own particular framework of intelligibility. This speaks to the epistemological, sceptical aspects of Sterne's work, that is, the incapacity to know things in themselves due to human partiality. As has been argued above, however, *Tristram Shandy* exposes the necessary relationship between epistemology and ethics, between knowing things and being happy.<sup>20</sup> Walter, whose hobby-horse

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<sup>19</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> As Judith Hawley notes, personal feelings and intellectual projects are closely interwoven in *Tristram Shandy*; 'Tristram Shandy, Learned Wit, and Enlightenment Knowledge', in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence*

involves a great deal of theoretical activity, is not *merely* theorizing. His theories shape his existence, ultimately dictating the way he relates to others, how he orders his household, how he reflects upon life. The hobby-horse, then, dictates where happiness is to be found for each singular individual. It governs what counts as success or failure, fortune or misfortune. What is more, because of the partiality of the intelligible framework, because no hobby-horse ever gets close to encapsulating the diverse notions of things, schemes for hobby-horsical happiness always fall short. In mounting a hobby-horse, the rider not only chooses what will count as happiness, but also what will count as unhappiness.

Turning to these issues as exemplified in the character of Walter, it is first necessary to situate Walter amidst a collective of dogmatists against whom Sterne's satire is directed. There are many examples of dogmatists in *Tristram Shandy*; among them Dr Slop, the learned Doctors of the Sorbonne, the slew of nose-debating intellectuals that feature in Slawkenbergius' tale. There is also the motif of gravity. The grave gentry, for example, are depicted in 'The Author's Preface' as contributing to Locke's mistaken view that the mental faculty of judgement is foundational to knowledge, whereas wit is merely unnecessary ornament. The 'graver gentry' had little of either wit or judgement, but, 'in spite of their *gravities*', they were not content to go 'with their insides naked' and, not able to possess judgement without a dose of wit, they appropriated the wit of others under their wigs, while raising a 'hue and a cry' at the lawful owners of the wit as a means of distraction.<sup>21</sup> 'The great *Locke*', Tristram writes, 'who was seldom outwitted by false sounds, —was nevertheless bubbled here. The cry, it seems, was so deep and solemn a one, and that with the help of great wigs, grave faces, and other implements of deceit, was rendered so general a one against the *poor wits* in this matter, that the philosopher himself was deceived by it'.<sup>22</sup> This comical origin myth regarding the view of wit as superfluous to judgement depicts gravity as a rhetorical force. Noisy rhetoric conceals the wrongful appropriation of wit from its rightful owners by denouncing the poor wits as inferior to grave judges. The emphasis Tristram places on gravity, moreover, suggests that this story may also have something to do with Locke's aspiration to construct a science of the mind based upon Newtonian principles.

A similar pattern emerges in the life narrative of Sterne's alter-ego Yorick, the character in *Tristram Shandy* most closely identifiable with the wits and one who is, correspondingly, always

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*Sterne*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 34–48 (p. 43) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521849722.004>>; Elsewhere, she argues that Sterne and his contemporaries would have understood philosophy, not merely as an academic discipline, but also as a discipline related to learning to live well; 'Tristram Shandy, Philosopher', *Textual Practice*, 31.2 (2017), 233–46 (pp. 240–41) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1228844>>.

<sup>21</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 237.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 237–38.



in conflict with the world. 'The moral of my story', Tristram writes in retelling the life of Yorick, is 'to shew the temper of the world in the whole of this affair'.<sup>23</sup> Yorick, Tristram tells us, 'had an invincible dislike and opposition in his nature to gravity', in particular to the 'affectation of it'.<sup>24</sup> This is combined with his lack of attentiveness to the different forms of decorum required in different situations. Yorick would attack gravity where he saw it, 'without much distinction of either personage, time, or place'.<sup>25</sup> Yorick's imprudent attacks on gravity combined with his jesting nature so as to have made him a target for the world's onslaught. 'The Mortgager and Mortgagee', writes Tristram, 'differ the one from the other, not more in length of purse, than the Jester and Jester do, in that of memory'.<sup>26</sup> Yorick would jest and forget, but in doing so incurred debts with many individuals. When the opportunity was right, they came to collect their pound of flesh. Yorick dies broken hearted.

Yorick is a figure inimical to dogmatism, such as is associated with the grave gentry and with the faculty of judgement. Yorick is introduced to the reader ahorseback and, like all hobby-horse riders, the framework by which things become intelligible for him is idiosyncratic. Yorick, therefore, cannot ever understand or conform to the world's epistemological and ethical framework. Relatedly, his jester-nature, in contrast to the moral gravity of those he lampoons, makes Yorick the last of a dying breed. Tristram believes Yorick to be descended from a long line of jesters, among them the Yorick of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The jester, as Tristram notes, had, by the eighteenth-century, 'been totally abolished as altogether unnecessary, not only in [Hamlet's] court, but in every other court of the Christian world'.<sup>27</sup> Tristram's implication may be that the law of gravity has usurped the traditional place of the jester. The jester is a carnivalesque figure who knows that order and chaos are necessarily reciprocal. He knows that the straight line of reason is the line of instrumental control. The jester deviates from this line, making it crooked for the good of society.

*Tristram Shandy* embodies this witty, jesting spirit, explicitly opposing the straight line of gravity to its own digressive lines.<sup>28</sup> The straight 'line of gravitation' mockingly becomes the 'pathway for Christians to walk in!', the 'emblem of moral rectitude', and the '*best line!*' for cabbage planters.<sup>29</sup> Newton, Locke, the Christian divines, the moralists, and the cabbage planter all seem

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 570-71.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 572.

to have made the mistake of assuming that the straight line of gravity can exist independently of the irregular line of wit. In doing so, they forget that straightness and order are relative and only become what they are in contrast to irregularity and chaos.

Turning to Walter, and to the central instantiation of dogmatic reason, we find a character who applies the laws of gravity to even the most ordinary aspects of life. Walter lives his life according to a regimen of such regularity that his daily routine could almost be viewed in terms of Newtonian mathematical principles. He winds the clocks on the first Sunday night of every month, after which he performs his monthly conjugal duties with his wife.<sup>30</sup> Of his brother's attitude towards sex, Toby comments: 'My brother does it [...] out of principle.—'<sup>31</sup> In being so principled, Walter not only embodies the Newtonian new science of nature and the Lockean new science of the mind but also echoes the Enlightenment's emphasis on independent thought to an extraordinary degree. '—Mr. Shandy, my father,' Tristram writes,

would see nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light;—he would weigh nothing in common scales; [...] [he aimed] to avoid all friction from popular tenets;—without this the minutiae of philosophy [...] will have no weight at all.— Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible in infinitum;—that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole world.<sup>32</sup>

Walter's belief that knowledge is composed of atomistic data means, as Tristram subsequently confesses, that he must attend to even the dust on a butterfly's wing in his pursuit of truth. This would seem to be the theoretical underpinning for his lifelong habit of philosophizing on such ordinary things as asses, door hinges and noses. It also marks his undoing in accordance with Shandean circularity, for what inevitably ends up happening when he focuses on atomistic data is that he begins to construct the whole from a forever incomplete knowledge of its parts. Walter disregards 'popular tenets' in favour of his own idiosyncratic opinions of things in order to avoid error. It is, however, precisely in this disregard for the world that he errs.

Walter's systematism is depicted, by Tristram, as an act of violence against things. My father, Tristram writes, 'was a philosopher in grain, — speculative, —systematical'.<sup>33</sup> What this turns out to mean is that he likes to derive abstract systems from the observed relations between

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 170–71.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

mundane or idiosyncratic collections of objects and henceforth tries to apply these abstract systems to other objects and relations. As Tristram comments, ‘the singularity of [his] father’s notions’ combined with his sense of himself as ‘absolutely right’ results in merciless dogmatism. ‘Like all systematick reasoners’, Tristram writes, Walter ‘would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture every thing in nature to support his hypothesis’.<sup>34</sup> This is evident in the case of Aunt Dinah, who, as Toby complains, Walter will not allow to rest in peace, regardless even of the damage it might do to the Shandy family character. ‘What is the character of a family to an hypothesis?’, Walter asks.<sup>35</sup> When Toby refers to this attitude as ‘downright MURDER’, Walter corrects him: ‘in *Foro Scientiæ* there is no such thing as MURDER,— ‘tis only DEATH, brother.’ Murder is not in science, for science is understood, here, as the sum total of positivistic propositions. Where ratiocination has gone thus far there is no other option than to cease to argue rationally. This Toby does by whistling the *Lilliburlero*.

Walter is the most evidently satirical character in *Tristram Shandy*, in so far as his dogmatism allies him to the line of gravity. Walter’s systems are his hobby-horse and, as such, they are not merely neutral methods for describing the reality of things. They are, quite to the contrary, idiosyncratic ways of knowing the world such as dictates the nature of his happiness. Walter ultimately pursues the life of reason because he finds happiness in reading works of philosophy. This happiness, however, is perpetually oscillating with unhappiness. ‘My father had the happiness’, Tristram writes,

of reading the oddest books in the universe, and had moreover, in himself, the oddest way of thinking, that ever man in it was bless'd with, yet it had this drawback upon him after all, — that it laid him open to some of the oddest and most whimsical distresses<sup>36</sup>.

In this example, the wheel of fortune turns from happiness to unhappiness, such as is usually the case with Walter.

There are occasions, however, when the reverse is true, such as when Tristram’s brother Bobby dies and Walter’s hobby-horsical love of knowledge enables him to translate misfortune into a consoling recitation of erudite sayings on death.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, however, Walter’s

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 418–25.

systematism is so intensely combative with things that unhappiness is much more common, for him, than happiness. Walter lives

a whole life [that is in] contradiction to his knowledge! —his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oyl) serving but to sharpen his sensibilities, to multiply his pains and render him more melancholy and uneasy under them!—poor un-happy creature<sup>38</sup>.

Walter's example demonstrates that, in *Tristram Shandy*, it is not what happens to a character, but rather what happens to a character as mediated by the hobby-horse that dictates their quality of life: 'Men are tormented with the Opinions they have of Things, and not by the Things themselves'. Walter is a hobby-horse rider who does not know that he is hobby-horsical. The comedy of this situation emerges from the fact that things inevitably resist Walter's schematizing attention with the effect that his schemes for life inevitably go awry.

In many of these respects, Toby's hobby-horse is the opposite to that of his brother's. Due to his modesty, Toby is instinctively aware of the hobby-horsicallity of his hobby-horse. This does not and cannot prevent him from understanding things in accordance with it. Nevertheless, he seems to understand that this does not mean that others must accord with it also. Whereas Walter unsuccessfully attempts to dominate recalcitrant things by means of reason, Toby's engagements with things and with people are practical and non-dominating. In reference to a 'prodigious suffusion of blood' in Walter's countenance, Tristram writes,

Any man, I say, madam, but my uncle Toby, the benignity of whose heart interpreted every motion of the body in the kindest sense the motion would admit of, would have concluded my father angry and blamed him too.<sup>39</sup>

Tristram's point, here, is that Toby is of a kindly disposition towards others, but in making the point he depicts the singularity of his uncle. Toby interprets suffusions of blood in the face in accordance with his own (kindly) nature and not in accordance with any shared understanding of physiological markers.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

Tristram describes his uncle as a modest man. He expresses uncertainty, however, as to ‘whether this modesty of his was natural or acquir’d’.<sup>40</sup> The natural and the acquired could both mean a variety of things based on the context in which they emerge. Tristram has only just written about the English climate’s tendency to produce a nation of singular people.<sup>41</sup> He has also referred to singularity as an inherited trait of the Shandy family. Climate and blood, then, are two possible explanations for hobby-horsicallity. One strong implication, however, is that Tristram is referring to the question of whether Toby was born with his modesty or whether he became modest after a falling parapet stone crushes his pelvis and perhaps also his genitals. This possibility is underscored by Tristram’s comparing of his uncle’s modesty to ‘the modesty of a woman: That female nicety [...] and inward cleanliness of mind and fancy’.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Tristram specifies his uncle’s modesty was modesty ‘not in regard to words, for he was so unhappy as to have very little choice in them, —but to things’.<sup>43</sup> This thing-modesty (which contrasts with Walter’s thing-arrogance) could mean one of two things in relation to Toby. It could mean that he is receptive to things in a way that Walter is not. It could also mean, in relation to the first point, that Toby’s own framework of intelligibility refuses to admit the sexual ideas that might arise from things. This would seem to be the case in his courtship with Widow Wadman, where Toby is persistently blind to the sexual implications of the Widow’s inquiries. The inference of the Wadman-Toby episode is that Toby’s “modesty”, in one way or another, contributes to preserving his bachelorhood, his singularity.

Toby’s hobby-horse, then, although non-dogmatic, is, like Walter’s, entailed in unhappiness. In the case of Toby, there is the unhappiness of his wounded groin, his unhappiness in the domain of language, and the unhappiness of his failed courtship with Widow Wadman. However, chronologically, the first two modes of unhappiness are necessary for the discovery of the hobby-horse and therefore for the discovery of new modes of happiness. After first receiving his wound, Toby spends a considerable period of time in misery. He is little comforted when the surgeon tells him that the injury ‘was more owing to the gravity of the stone itself, than to the projectile force of it’.<sup>44</sup> This the surgeon ‘would often tell him was a great happiness’. The surgeon, it would appear, has his own hobby-horse, a mathematical interest in forces and their effect on the human body. His incapacity to communicate this to Toby suggests that the two men find happiness in quite different things. As time goes on, Toby’s inability to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 74.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 74–75.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

explain the circumstances of his wound, an inability due to his pre-existent linguistic ineptitude, causes him much frustration and unhappiness until, 'lying upon his back in his bed, the anguish and nature of the wound upon his groin suffering him to lye in no other position, [...] a thought came into his head'.<sup>45</sup> The inception of the idea seems to involve accidental receptivity. In the midst of passive suffering, Toby unexpectedly receives the idea that a map might help him to explain how he came by his wound without having to wield complex descriptive language. The acquisition of maps will later lead Toby to the full expression of his hobby-horse in the siege replicas on the bowling green. This idea, then, is ultimately responsible for the transformation of original unhappiness into a new mode of happiness.

However, as the example of Toby's misunderstanding of Widow Wadman's intentions demonstrates, the fact that Toby's hobby-horse is non-dogmatic does not mean that it is not just as partial as Walter's. Toby's fixation upon his hobby-horse is ludicrous to the extent that all situations are understood with reference to the battlefield. Walter's metaphorical mention of the word 'siege', for example, operates 'like a talismanic power' and leads Toby's fancy to 'take a short flight to the bowling green'.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, he interprets his courtship of Widow Wadman hobby-horsically, that is, in terms of sieges, cannons and other battlefield things. While, therefore, Toby seems to be more fortunate than Walter, his hobby-horse, too, imposes limitations. Tristram describes his uncle, in pursuing his hobby-horse, as

in this track of happiness for many years without one interruption to it, except now and then when the wind continued to blow due west for a week or ten days together, which detained the *Flanders* mail, and kept them so long in torture,—but still 'twas the torture of the happy<sup>47</sup>.

Toby is made happy by his exploits on the bowling green. However, because these exploits, like all things, necessarily take place within a framework of intelligibility that is partial, the conditions for Toby's happiness are never purely under his control. Toby needs battlefield updates in order to continue to pursue his hobby-horse, but he cannot dictate the passage of the wind. The arrival of the Flanders mail, which, for Walter, the maid Susannah and Obadiah would be an entirely insignificant event, for Toby becomes the condition of his happiness or unhappiness. A delay in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 537.

the mail, for other characters an event so insignificant that it would not even register in their thoughts, is, for Toby, torture.

In the case of both Walter and Toby, then, to ride a hobby-horse means to be in possession of a singular framework of intelligibility, such as dictates the way that the individual in question comes to know things, which in turn opens them up to new modes of happiness and unhappiness. We see other examples in Yorick's jesting, which brings with it a gravitational assault, and Obadiah's whistling, which is interrupted by the clanking of instruments. In all cases, as Fred Parker comments, 'A hobby-horse is a personal, incommensurable thing; its fascination is not communicable.'<sup>48</sup> However, it is precisely communication, 'the pressure of social convention and expectation', that would enable the Shandies to fend 'off a kind of solipsism, where each individual's experience would become a country with its own language. In *Tristram Shandy* such social pressures are weak or negligible or positively flouted [...] and hobby-horses thrive.'<sup>49</sup> Yorick dies after his lifelong battle with the world gets the better of him, Walter is perpetually at war with things, and Toby's modesty condemns him to singular bachelorhood. Moving on from this chapter's first argument, it will be necessary to explore whether or not the riders of hobby-horses, given their singularity, can truly be said to be virtuous, when virtue is taken to require a commitment to a good that goes beyond individual preference.

## HAPPINESS IN THE SERMONS

Before returning to further exploration of the hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy*, this section will explore happiness in Sterne's sermons. In the sermons Sterne offers a less equivocal depiction of happiness, such as has firm foundations in Christian scripture. Whereas singularity seems to rule *Tristram Shandy*, the sermons emphasize the necessity of communal virtue over and against self-interest. The sense that there is a conflict between Sterne the cleric and Sterne the author of *Tristram Shandy*, has been a feature of Sterne's reception history from the beginning. Many of Sterne's contemporaries were scandalized by Sterne's bawdy satire, deeming it unfit for a clergyman. Twentieth-century readers of Sterne, meanwhile, have often struggled to square Sterne's scepticism against his religious faith. Donald Wehrs, by contrast, situates Sterne within a tradition of fideistic scepticism, descending from the rediscovery of classical Pyrrhonism by

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<sup>48</sup> Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature: An Essay on Pope, Hume, Sterne, and Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 213.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

Erasmus, Montaigne and Cervantes.<sup>50</sup> As Richard Popkin argues, during the Renaissance, scepticism often did not lead to relativism. The sceptical acknowledgement of the insufficiency of human reason often brought with it a conviction that certain axioms are based in faith. Popkin writes: 'fideists are persons who are sceptics with regard to the possibility of our attaining knowledge by rational means, without our possessing some basic truths known by faith (i.e., truths based on no rational evidence whatsoever).'<sup>51</sup> Popkin, like Sterne, advocates for scepticism as a necessary antidote to dogmatism.<sup>52</sup> Drawing upon the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin, Wehrs contrasts Sterne's polyphonic text – open to multiple interpretations, inconclusive, disunified – with the monologic (and therefore potentially dogmatic) uniformity of the eighteenth-century novel.<sup>53</sup> In the sceptical, digressive work *Tristram Shandy*, Wehrs argues, one is confronted with the partiality of human experience and, as such, is offered the chance to recognize that, in the face of finitude, 'at least mortal life offers a joy that may, through faith, be experienced as a partial anticipation of a fulfilment that will not be partial.'<sup>54</sup> Wehrs thus sees Sterne's scepticism to be in harmony with his religious faith.

Sterne's anti-dogmatic fideism features interestingly in the sermons. In the 'Inquiry after Happiness', for example, Sterne explores the insufficiency of didacticism as a means to encourage the cultivation of virtue. Taking up the familiar theme of the vanity of human wishes, Sterne depicts a man encountering a slew of different figures, each of whom offers him a contradictory account of happiness. One tells him to seek it in the gay pleasures of youth, another tells him to seek happiness in the pursuit of riches and social status. A miser counsels the man against extravagance, an epicurean tells him to pursue happiness in the gratification of appetites, and a philosopher to seek it in solitary contemplation. Finally, the psalmist asserts the necessity of grace, that man should both love and fear God, and that true happiness is only possible in heaven. Sterne declares that the wisdom of the psalmist discloses the true secret to happiness: 'that there can be no real happiness without religion and virtue, and the assistance of God's grace and the Holy Spirit to direct our lives in the true pursuit of it.'<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Donald R. Wehrs, 'Sterne, Cervantes, Montaigne: Fideistic Skepticism and the Rhetoric of Desire', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 25.2 (1988), 127–51.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Popkin, *History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. xxii.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

<sup>53</sup> 'Fideistic Scepticism', pp. 134–35.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>55</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Sermons of Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Melvyn New (Florida University Press, 1996), IV, p. 6 <<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780813013855.book.1/actrade-9780813013855-div1-2>> [accessed 9 June 2021].



However, Sterne emphasises that the wisdom of the psalmist is not a proposition that one can agree with straight away, rather it represents the culmination of a temporal or narrative progress through different forms of life. After the initial framing of the pursuit of happiness in terms of a consultation of different opinions, Sterne acknowledges that the theme of the vanity of human wishes has become so overused as to become trite. ‘Though so many good things have been said’, Sterne writes,

they have generally had the fate to be considered the overflowings of disgust from sated appetites which could no longer relish the pleasures of life, or as the declamatory opinions of recluse and splenetic men who had never tasted them at all [...] ‘tis no great wonder [...] that the best lectures that have been read upon the vanity of the world, so seldom stop a man in the pursuit of the object of his desire.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from their triteness, then, lectures fail to convince on two counts. Firstly, because of the necessary situatedness of those who propound them. A young man, keenly bent on pursuing the pleasures of life, is unlikely to consider the chastening perspective of an old man without at least questioning the character of that man. The truth of a philosopher’s message is not to be understood independently of the interpersonal and social dynamics through which that truth is disclosed. Secondly, because lecturing itself seems an insufficient medium for this wisdom. This wisdom cannot be communicated merely through precepts and explanation. Sterne announces that he will repeat the subject-matter of his sermon but will now place it in a temporal, narrative form. The discursive structure of the previous section, whereby the man hears from different lecturers how he should choose to live his life, is replaced by ‘a survey of the life of man from the time he is come to reason, to the latest decline of it in old age’.<sup>57</sup> Only in this structure, Sterne suggests, having explored the different forms of life through our own life narrative, can we come to realize the psalmist was wise after all. That narrative, moreover, turns out to be one of ‘our pilgrimage through this world’ and the insufficiency of all forms of life to bring about happiness.<sup>58</sup> This is the sense of insufficiency, that ‘whosoever drinketh of this water will thirst again’.

The narrative recognition of this insufficiency subsequently brings Sterne to the matter of virtue. This involves an interesting refutation of hedonism. Sterne writes:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

I believe this is no uncommon picture of the disappointments of human life —and the manner our pleasures and enjoyments slip from under us in every stage of our life. And though I would not be thought by it, as if I was denying the reality of pleasures, or disputing the being of them, any more, than one would, the reality of pain —Yet I must observe on this head, that there is a plain distinction to be made betwixt pleasure and happiness. For tho' there can be no happiness without pleasure —yet the converse of the proposition will not hold true. —We are so made, that from the common gratifications of our appetites, and the impressions of a thousand objects, we snatch the one, like a transient gleam, without being suffered to taste the other, and enjoy that perpetual sunshine and fair weather which constantly attend it. This, I contend, is only to be found in religion —in the consciousness of virtue— and the sure and certain hopes of a better life, which brightens all our prospects, and leaves no room to dread disappointments— because the expectation of it is built upon a rock, whose foundations are as deep as those of heaven and hell.<sup>59</sup>

Worldly existence, Sterne argues, must always involve the pursuit of happiness, but also the insufficiency of it. He goes on to describe this in terms of a distinction between pleasure and happiness. Happiness requires pleasure, but there can be pleasure without happiness. Pleasure, as Sterne describes it, involves the intent circumspection of attention. As such, we fail to attend to the 'perpetual sunshine' that is there always. In the necessary pursuit of the partial, we fail to attend to the whole. Here is another ethico-epistemological moment in Sterne, where that which prevents us from attaining certain knowledge is also what prevents us from untroubled happiness. The only way to alleviate the entrapment of this circular pursuit — desire and disappointment, knowing and failing to know — is the path of virtue. Virtue, unlike pleasure, is responsive to that foundation which transcends human partiality.

There are similarities and differences between Locke's theory of happiness and the description offered by Sterne in his sermon. Both emphasise that happiness is based in pleasure and both eventually arrive at the conclusion that the promise of the afterlife is necessary to make sense of worldly happiness. Locke, however, attempts to marry happiness and virtue by arguing that we should sacrifice pleasure to virtue, because we can calculate that, in doing so, we will receive greater pleasure in the afterlife. Sterne, by contrast, argues that when we recognize the partiality of human pleasure, we are led to consider the necessary existence of a non-partial

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 10–11.

wholeness. It is this wholeness with which religion concerns itself and, in light of this, encourages the consciousness of virtue. In describing the pursuit of happiness in this way, Sterne implies that it is scepticism, rather than reason, that leads us to recognize the insufficiency of pleasure-based happiness and to thereby become conscious of the necessity of virtue and religion. Moreover, Sterne focuses only on the advent of the ‘consciousness of virtue’ rather than upon virtuous acts themselves. The implication is that we will, necessarily, continue to pursue happiness but that our consciousness of virtue may occasionally transcend hedonic self-interest. What is at stake for Sterne, however, is the possession of a consciousness of virtue, whereas Locke’s emphasis falls upon our capacity to rationally pursue virtue in accordance with our desire to maximize pleasure long term.

Sterne enriches his Christian account of partiality, virtue, pleasure, and happiness in ‘The House of Feasting and the House of Mourning Described’. As in ‘Inquiry into Happiness’, Sterne’s sermon sets out from a scriptural foundation, plays with and modifies the wisdom held therein, then ultimately affirms the truth of the scripture. Again, he quotes Solomon: ‘It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to the house of feasting’.<sup>60</sup> He initially lampoons such a notion as suitable ‘for a crack’d-brain’d order of Carthusian monks, I grant, but not for men of the world’. ‘For what purpose’, he continues, ‘do you imagine, has God made us? [...] are the sad accidents of life, and the uncheery hours which perpetually overtake us, are they not enough, but we must sally forth in quest of them,—believe our own hearts, and say, as your text would have us, that they are better than those of joy?’ Sterne goes on to imply, by contrast, that this is a mistaken reading of the text. In ‘Inquiry into Happiness’, it is not for us to work out, through propositions and through the use of instrumental reason, that we must be conscious of virtue; we are made conscious of virtue by the insufficiency of happiness. In ‘The House of Mourning’, similarly, we do not adopt misery as a means to signal virtue, misery is brought to our door in a manner that makes us conscious of virtue.

That is not to say that the world is a place of misery. Sterne prefers to think of feasting and mourning in terms of absorption in the God-given delights of the partial and in terms of moments of interruption in which our awareness of this partiality is intensified. We are travellers, Sterne writes, ‘allowed to amuse ourselves with the natural or artificial beauties we are passing through’ but ‘we have set our faces towards Jerusalem [...] a place of rest and happiness’ the path to which is usually virtuous.<sup>61</sup> The implication is that we must not get lost in feasting and forget our transcendence. The absorptive power of everyday pleasures, however, are not taken lightly.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

Sterne mimics the necessity and benevolence of this human waywardness in his own sermon, where he hints at his own linguistic waywardness: 'I would choose rather to go on with this allegory', later adding, 'But let us not lose sight of the argument in pursuit of the simile'. Later, he makes a similar point where he writes 'let us turn aside, from this gay scene; and suffer me to take you with me for a moment to one much fitter to your mediation'.<sup>62</sup> We are to imagine that reflecting upon pleasure absorbs us in a like manner to the pleasures themselves, and that reflection on mourning is needful suffering.<sup>63</sup>

'The House of Mourning' emphasises the role of mourning in the coming to consciousness of virtue. This coming to consciousness of virtue is also an awareness of the wholeness that transcends worldly partiality and, as the emphasis on 'mourning' makes clear, an awareness of death. Mourning wrests us from our forgetful absorption in things. The transcendence and towards-death-ness that is revealed in the house of mourning is contrasted with the absorptive delights of the house of feasting. Both of these are constituent of human beings and it is not the case that one is good and the other evil. It seems rather to be a matter of the higher calling and the lower calling, where both are necessary constituents of existence. These are *callings*, in the sense that they are not goals or targets or objectives, but pre-given conditions to which people submit, not on the basis of domination, but of accession.

We are not to imagine, therefore, that the house of feasting is a den of iniquity, nor that those who inhabit it are vicious. Sterne writes:

It is not necessary [...] to bring intemperance into this scene [...] Let us admit no more of it therefore, than will gently stir them, and fit them for the impressions which so benevolent a commerce will naturally excite. [...] how soon, and how insensibly, they are got above the pitch and first bounds which cooler hours would have marked. When the gay and smiling aspect of things has begun to leave the passages to a man's heart thus thoughtlessly unguarded— [...] Behold those fair inhabitants now dispossessed —turned out of their sacred dwellings to make room —for what?— at the best for levity and indiscretion —perhaps for folly— it may be for more impure guests [...]<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Wehrs makes a similar argument in describing Sterne's dramatizing of the interruption of an individual's joy with a call to the ethical, an ethical call that is described in the philosophy of Levinas; 'Levinas and Sterne: From the Ethics of the Face to the Aesthetics of Unrepresentability', in *Critical Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Melvyn New (Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1998), pp. 311–29.

<sup>64</sup> *Sermons*, pp. 15–16.

Sterne describes how ‘benevolent commerce’ can easily give rise to moral dissipation. One can think, here, of Boswell, whose aesthetic of happiness was never far from selfish hedonism. Just as Sterne emphasises that the wisdom of the psalmist only gains force in the context of a life narrative, dissipation is explained temporally. Without the consciousness of virtue that mourning brings, innocent desire is likely to give way to corrupted desire. To stay too long in the house of feasting, without the necessary balancing consciousness discovered in the house of mourning, is to risk the dispossession of sacred dwelling.

In Sterne’s sermons the two-fold insufficiency of human life, the insufficiency of knowledge and enjoyments, is brought into line with a Christian perspective in the manner outlined by Wehrs in his discussion of Sterne’s fideistic scepticism. However, it might be suggested that the sermon’s solid epistemological and ethical foundation in Christian scripture is not shared by *Tristram Shandy*. The existence of a non-subjective foundation for truth would appear to be at issue in *Tristram Shandy* in a manner that it is not in the sermons, for, in *Tristram Shandy*, hobby-horsicallity, not biblical revelation, is the basis for knowing things and being happy.

## A HOBBY-HORSICAL WORK

In the sermons, trust in scripture provides fragmentary human beings with an epistemological and ethical guide, a shared foundation that leads beyond solipsism. However, that there is such a shared foundation in *Tristram Shandy* is uncertain. On the one hand, Walter, Toby, and other characters can break out of their private hobby-horsical worlds in moments of shared experience. A central instance of this is the episode of Trim’s hat. When Walter’s son Bobby dies, the servants are able to momentarily break free of their individual preoccupations, when Trim, in a moment of Shandean circular eloquence, is apparently able to accurately represent death by the dropping of a hat. The falling hat, although by no means a conventional symbol of death, seems, momentarily, to become intelligible to all of the characters in the same way and thus offers a way out of blinkered idiosyncrasy. This moment recalls the sermons, in so far as mourning momentarily suspends the selfish absorption of the inhabitants of the house of feasting, and thereby opens up the possibility of a community founded upon a shared consciousness of virtue. On the other hand, the question remains as to whether these brief moments of community can hold weight against what seems to be the most obvious driving force of the work: hobby-horsical singularity. Indeed, the falling hat is itself a ludicrous example of a communally intelligible symbol, a fact that would seem to problematize any simple interpretation

of the scene as an example of the inception of a communal consciousness virtue. Instead, the falling hat might ironically seem to be yet another instance of idiosyncratic subjectivism. There is an ironic movement in this episode between what at first seems to be a moment of *sensus communis* to the joking re-assertion of Shandean subjectivism.<sup>65</sup> There is no escape from hobby-horsicallity, this movement seems to tell us.

This movement from seeming virtue to hobby-horsical singularity occurs frequently in *Tristram Shandy*. For example, in introducing Yorick, Tristram offers a long narrative intended to demonstrate Yorick's virtue and how this virtue was misunderstood by the world. Appropriately, this story involves a horse. Yorick had, at one point in his life, been in the habit of riding a very fine horse, equipped with a 'handsome demi-peak'd saddle'.<sup>66</sup> As such, however, this horse was consequently in demand by the parish midwife and, due to over exertion, fell prone to all sorts of illness, until Yorick was forced to retire it. This happened with several horses. The reader is left to wonder whether these horses are literal horses, as Tristram insists, or whether the entire story is a literary innuendo for Yorick's fornication with parish women and their subsequent pregnancies. At any rate, he calculates that his spending on horses has come to far outweigh his duties in other areas of parish life and, since he can never refuse a request for the use of his horse, he decides to saddle up 'a horse of chaste deportment', a horse, in other words, that no one else can ride.<sup>67</sup> Tristram pleads that Yorick's actions be considered in good faith and that his decision to save his expenditure on horses was not motivated by 'the love of money' but by his desire to spread his "generosity" beyond 'the child-bearing and child-getting part of the parish' and to the 'aged', 'the impotent', and the poor.<sup>68</sup> While Tristram may plead the case for Yorick's virtue, the reader is given reason to doubt whether Yorick's singular virtue is not simply disguised self-interest. In the first place, it is questionable whether his calculated decision to avoid expenditure on horses is really motivated by his concern for the needs of the parish, or whether it is simply his own financial selfishness. In the second place, the whole episode might be an innuendo for Yorick's self-interested licentious behaviour. In both cases, there is an ironic movement between Tristram's declaration of Yorick's virtue to the contrary implication that Yorick self-interestedly refuses to submit to the world's morals.

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<sup>65</sup> Henke has read in Sterne a resistance to common sense and an anti-rationalist preference for common sentiment. This, he argues, is representative of a discursive shift in eighteenth-century culture on the whole. My sense, however, is that even the world of common sentiment is problematized by singularity. Christoph Henke, 'Laurence Sterne and Common Sense. Discursive Shifts in Eighteenth Century English Culture.', in *Sterne, Tristram, Yorick: Tercentenary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Melvyn New, Judith Hawley, and Peter de Voogd (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016), pp. 59-74.

<sup>66</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 19.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

If Yorick was simply depicted as a character who disguises self-interest as virtue, then the brunt of the satire would be directed at his superficiality. This is not the case, however, for Yorick's disguised self-interest is subsequently reappropriated as an instantiation of wit over and against the world's moralism. The moralism of those who insist upon virtue becomes allied to the gravity to which Yorick's (and by implication Sterne's) wit is depicted as an antidote. As Tristram's story continues, Yorick's horse riding (whatever that might mean) dovetails with his status as a wit and sets off the chain of events which will see the world, spurred on by their grave distaste for Yorick's jesting, visiting retributive violence upon Yorick. In allying Yorick to wit and opposing him to gravity, Tristram suggests a link between Yorick's disguised self-interest and the hobby-horsicallity of the work itself. The fact that the story of Yorick's horse subtly retells certain biographical details from Sterne's own life, alluding to his extra-marital liaisons, only adds to the sense that it is moralistic virtue that is being satirized in this instance, not hobby-horsical self-interest.<sup>69</sup> Tristram's declaration of Yorick's virtue might be satirized, but the movement of Sterne's irony nevertheless makes a tragi-comic hero of Yorick. He appears as a man doomed by his heroic commitment to hobby-horsical happiness in the face of the dogmatic straight line of virtue. Yorick, Tristram seems to suggest, would have been better served had he been left to ride his horse peacefully down the king's highway.

Another example of this ironic movement can be found in the reading of Yorick's sermon in volume II. The sermon, actually one of Sterne's, makes a point not altogether dissimilar from the second perspective on Yorick's life narrative, that is, that singular "virtue" is actually disguised self-interest. In concluding, the sermon states its overarching point:

remember this plain distinction, a mistake in which has ruined thousands, —that your conscience is not a law; —No, God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine [...] like a *British* judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law, but faithfully declares that law which he knows already written.<sup>70</sup>

In this passage, an argument in favour of receptivity to a religious construal of virtue, such as one finds in Sterne's sermons, seems to find a home in the otherwise idiosyncratic world of *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne/Yorick's argument in the sermon is that private conscience must not legislate in place of the cosmic law, such as is unveiled to human beings in the bible. There is, then, a limit

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<sup>69</sup> For a short biography of Sterne, see; Ian Campbell Ross, 'Laurence Sterne's Life, Milieu, and Literary Career', in *The Cambridge Companion to Laurence Sterne*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 5–20.

<sup>70</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 164.

imposed upon the domain of the hobby-horse. However, as soon as the sermon seems to point to a foundation for morality and knowledge that lies beyond individual conscience, Tristram ironizes the sermon's purported moralism. 'In case the character of parson *Yorick*,' Tristram writes, 'and this sample of his sermons is liked, —that there are now in the possession of the *Shandy* Family, as many as will make a handsome volume, at the world's service'.<sup>71</sup> The joke is that Yorick's defence of virtue in the sermon is actually motivated by self-interest, in this case, a commercial self-interest which recognizes that sermons on morals sell well in the current market. The expression of religious sentiments on virtue provides Sterne and Yorick opportunities for personal financial gain.

In light of these examples, we might take Sterne to be espousing a philosophy of happiness consonant with liberal individualism. Sterne depicts individuals as hopelessly and charmingly singular. For that reason, he satirizes moralists (those who seek to enforce a general standard of the good) as the minions of gravity. In opposition to gravity, Sterne celebrates Yorick's witty refusal to conform to the world's standards of virtue. The tragic aspects of Yorick's life might have been avoided were individuals free to do as they liked. This is certainly an aspect of hobby-horsicallity.

However, a philosophy of happiness consonant with liberal individualism no sooner emerges from *Tristram Shandy* than it is sceptically ridiculed. Sterne also satirizes the ontological assumptions which undergird such a conception of happiness. In particular, Sterne hints that the supposed individuality or singularity of hobby-horsical happiness might itself be based in a dogmatic circumscribing of a relational and circular selfhood. Just as Shandean circularity dictates that no thing can be independent of an idea, nor any idea independent of a thing, it also dictates that the self cannot be understood independent of the world. Were '*Momus's* glass' to be fixed 'in the human breast', Tristram writes, 'nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look'd in,— view'd the soul stark naked'.<sup>72</sup> This self-transparency would be most fortuitous, though it might also lead to misfortune: if this were the case, Tristram writes, we would have to pay 'window-money every day of our lives'. Momus, the Greek personification of mockery, would have direct access to the soul in its stark nakedness. Notably, Tristram again uses a commercial metaphor to describe the interactions between singular individuals and the world. The oscillation between fortune and misfortune continues when Tristram recognizes the fact that such a corporeal composition 'is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 82.



planet, — in the planet *Mercury* (belike) it may be so' but, due to its proximity to the sun, the heat must, unfortunately, 'long ago have vitrified the bodies of the inhabitants'.<sup>73</sup> The untransparent nature of human flesh, the refusal of matter to yield clear access to hidden ideas but also the refusal of ideas to yield clear access to matter is, in this sense, both a source of happiness and unhappiness. It is this lack of transparency, significantly, that leads Tristram to proclaim: 'I will draw my uncle *Toby's* character from his HOBBY-HORSE'.<sup>74</sup>

The hobby-horse is neither idea, nor thing, neither mind, nor body, it is rather a symbol which discloses the necessary inseparability of these logical oppositions. What is important in the hobby-horse is not so much the analytical distinctions, but the fact that these distinctions are always in the process of collapsing by means of Shandean circularity. This is underscored by Tristram's own philosophical musings upon the hobby-horse. 'A man and his HOBBY-HORSE,' Tristram writes

tho' I cannot say that they act and re-act exactly after the same manner in which the soul and body do upon each other: Yet doubtless there is a communication between them of some kind, and my opinion rather is, that there is something in it more of the manner of electrified bodies,— and that by means of the heated parts of the rider, which come immediately into contact with the back of the HOBBY-HORSE.—By long journies and much friction, it so happens that the body of the rider is at length fill'd as full of Hobby-horsical matter as it can hold; —so that if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion of the genius and character of the other.<sup>75</sup>

Tristram underscores the hobby-horse's role as an ontological concept by comparing its relationship with the rider to the mysterious relationship between the body and the soul. This would seem to invite a particular range of theological or philosophical explanations as to the hobby-horse. However, Tristram deliberately deranges any attempt to circumscribe the operations of the hobby-horse within a particular knowledge discipline by then comparing its operations to the effect of electricity on the body. Something material is coming into contact with something immaterial, but it is not clear to what either of these categories pertain. There can be no answer to the question "is the hobby-horse real or ideal?" because it seems to pertain to both.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-87.

The hobby-horse oscillates between its physical reality as a thing and its signifying essence, between the literal and the literary.

This necessary but incommensurable relationship between idea and thing is the basis, it has been argued, for the necessary relationship between happiness and unhappiness. This latter aspect of the hobby-horse is evident in the account that Tristram gives of his uncle and father. It is also evident in the life of Tristram and, therefore, in the very fabric of the *Life and Opinions*. The fact that Momus' glass is not fixed in the human breast may be frustrating for the biographical writer intent upon giving a clear depiction of his subjects. However, it is also the necessary condition for biography itself. Were human beings not composed of 'uncrystallized flesh and blood', then there would be no need for a writer like Tristram, whose entire project is founded upon the hobby-horsical process of transforming ideas into a thing, into a book.<sup>76</sup> Tristram's book, moreover, is written 'against the spleen in order, by a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostal and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall bladder'.<sup>77</sup> If human beings were purely transparent, there would be no reason to write this book and, therefore, Tristram and his readers would have no cause for the mirthful sublimation of unhappiness into happiness. This sublimation is itself an effect of the circularity of idea and thing, for laughter is described by Tristram as the mutual action and reaction of humorous ideas with bodily humors. This movement of unhappiness into happiness can, of course, be reversed. The happiness of writing is counterbalanced by Tristram's many frustrations in his incapacity to advance in his autobiographical work.

The happy unhappiness of Tristram's project is hinted at again where Tristram writes that 'in mentioning the word *gay* [...] it puts one [...] in mind of the word *spleen*'.<sup>78</sup> It is also enshrined in the motto (reworked from Rabelais) of volumes III and IV of *Tristram Shandy*, which James Work translates as 'I do not fear the opinions of the ignorant crowd; nevertheless I pray that they spare my little work, in which it has ever been my purpose to pass from the gay to the serious and from the serious again to the gay'.<sup>79</sup> This motto includes the sense of the singular individual in confrontation with a hostile world and of the necessary oscillation between happiness and misery that is typical of hobby-horsicallity.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 360.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 603.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol. 3: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: The Notes* (University Press of Florida), p. 205  
<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780813007380.book.1/actrade-9780813007380-book-1> [accessed 2 May 2019].

To bring these points together, Tristram's repeated assertion that the hobby-horse is singular is itself a hobby-horsical statement. Walter and Toby circumscribe experience and therefore only attend to a singular aspect of a thing, ignoring its other aspects, and therefore arriving at a framework of intelligibility that is inevitably partial. In Walter's case his partiality is invested in rational systems and, in Toby's case, in battlefield reconstructions. In Tristram's case this partiality comes in the form of writing an autobiography. Tristram will draw his uncle's character from his hobby-horse just as he will draw his own character in his *Life and Opinions*. As the law of Shandean circularity demands, however, Toby is not knowable apart from his hobby-horsical activities, nor is Tristram knowable apart from his book. Tristram must cloth himself in words, just as the self must cloth itself in flesh and blood, in order to appear. Moreover, the book that allows Tristram to appear actually focuses very little on Tristram himself and far more on the contexts (be they learned history or the lives of his father and uncle) that are the materials for Tristram's autobiographical self-expression.

Tristram's autobiography follows the logic of Shandean circularity because that project is defined by Tristram's singularity – by his being understood as a man *unlike* most men and therefore a worthy subject for autobiography – but, in reality, is almost entirely composed from the fragments of the lives and opinions of others. 'Shall we for ever make new books,' asks Tristram, 'as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another?'<sup>80</sup> Tristram's self, like his book, is a conglomeration of old mixtures. Tristram could not have his hobby-horse, that of writing a singular work of autobiography, without circumscribing the mixtures of which he is comprised into a singular self. Without a life-writing project, moreover, Tristram would have no means by which to pursue happiness. However, Tristram's *Life and Opinions* is necessarily bound up in the lives and opinions of others and so he cannot give an adequate account of himself without giving an account of others. This account, however, which must include Aristotle, Solomon, obstetrical theoreticians, midwives etc., might potentially include the entirety of human history and culture. Tristram's pursuit of happiness, therefore, is doomed to failure in so far as his project will never attain its completion. The *Lives and Opinions* began in medias res and it will end when Tristram ends.

In addition, Sterne hints that, although the kinds of behaviour generated by the hobby-horse tend not to be shared widely with others, the structure of singularity is a *general* hobby-horsical trait. Singularity is something that all Shandean have in common and, as it is at one

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<sup>80</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 408.

point suggested, perhaps something that all English people have in common also. ‘—Pray what was that man's name,—’, Tristram writes,

for I write in such a hurry, I have no time to recollect or look for it, —who first made the observation, “That there was great inconstancy in our air and climate?” Whoever he was, 'twas a just and good observation in him.—But the corollary drawn from it, namely, “That it is this which has furnished us with such a variety of odd and whimsical characters;”—that was not his;—it was found out by another man, at least a century and a half after him [...] [this] is the true and natural cause that our Comedies are so much better than those of *France* [...] the great *Addison* began to patronize the notion, and more fully explained it to the world in one or two of his *Spectators*;—but the discovery was not his.<sup>81</sup>

Tristram suggests that singularity is, and has long been, an English characteristic, most likely brought about by the climate. Singularity, in this respect, is bound both to other people and to nature. The structural capacity to be singular, therefore, is something which the individual inherits from their people and from their environment. Furthermore, Tristram cannot find a singular origin for the idea of singularity because the idea seems to have been produced by multiple writers working within a tradition.<sup>82</sup>

Relatedly, the riders of hobby-horses never seem to choose, but rather to receive their horses. Tristram describes Walter's reason as ‘that precious gift of God to him’.<sup>83</sup> Toby, meanwhile, receives his hobby-horse in stages, one of which is the inception of a thought coming into his head, as described earlier. This is true of Dryden, too, who ‘fortunately hit upon’ the connection between comic genius and English whimsy. In Toby's case, pre-dating the inception of the thought, is the parapet stone which crushes his groin. This stone, notably, falls from the gate of St. Nicholas in Namur. St. Nicholas is, of course, a celebrated gift giving figure. He appears again in Slawkenbergius's tale, where he is the guiding light of the Cervantick character Diego. Sat atop of his mule, Diego soliloquises:

—But why to *Frankfort*?—is it that there is a hand unfelt, which secretly is conducting me through these meanders and unsuspected tracts?—

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>82</sup> Lamb has discussed Sterne's dramatization of the futile quest for origins. Due to Shandean relativity, Lamb argues, there can be no logically comprehensible sense of an origin or a beginning. See; *Double Principle* pp. 31–55.

<sup>83</sup> *Tristram Shandy*, p. 239.

—Stumbling! by saint *Nicolas*! every step why at this rate we shall be all night in getting in—

—To happiness —or am I to be the sport of fortune and slander— destined to be driven forth unconvicted —unheard— untouched if so, why did I not stay at *Strasburg*, where justice but I had sworn! —Come, thou shalt drink —to St. *Nicolas*—

The hand unfelt appears to exert influence over the riders of hobby-horses. Neither Walter nor Toby chose their hobby-horse. Nor did Tristram, whose life-writing hobby-horsical project seems to originate from a combination of his ill-health, his crushed nose, and the taste for erudition inherited from his father. Diego, riding his mule towards happiness while all the time aware that misfortune or the slander of the world might assail him, appears as the archetypal hobby-horse rider. He is depicted as a man, not so much in *pursuit* of happiness, but rather led to happiness and unhappiness by a force beyond his control. In the midst of this absurdity, he offers up a toast to St. Nicholas, the gift giver. The hobby-horse, then, is a gift horse.

## CONCLUSION

*Tristram Shandy* is a work that satirizes those who seek to mould and control the lives of others by claiming to possess the correct understanding of things. Moreover, Sterne affectionately depicts a cast of characters who pursue their own singular happiness, while (for the most part) remaining harmless. These aspects of *Tristram Shandy* give us good reason to suppose that hobby-horsical happiness has much in common with the understanding of happiness that has become predominant under the influence of political liberalism. However, Sterne also exposes the partiality of the liberal individualist notion of happiness. He depicts the self, not as an autonomous entity, but as a vessel filled only in so far as it emerges in the midst of a pre-existent culture. Furthermore, he suggests that riders' pursuits of happiness are not, in fact, grounded upon free choice, instead, they are given to them. Bringing this all together, we find a happiness based upon the free choice of individuals ironically transformed into a notion of a happiness that is pre-defined by forces that lie beyond the control of particular persons, who are themselves not so much individuals as they are particular expressions of the lives and opinions of other human beings. The notion of happiness as individual freedom to choose and the notion of happiness as the unchosen and determining framework, by means of which people make choices and by means of which they experience their lives as happy and unhappy, are both present in *Tristram Shandy*.

Ultimately, hobby-horsical happiness resists finality. Sterne advances and satirizes both a liberal individualist conception of happiness and a communal, perhaps religious conception of happiness. Hobby-horsical happiness, therefore, is characterized less by its instantiation of a clearly defined understanding of happiness and more by its provisional advancement of a conception of happiness while remaining open to alternatives. It is notable that the inhabitants of the house of feasting and the hobby-horse riders of *Tristram Shandy* have in common an absorption in the partial. For both of them, this absorption is prevented from becoming final by an extrinsic interruption. For the inhabitants of the house of feasting this interruption is mourning, for the hobby-horse riders it is the words and things which jar against their frameworks of intelligibility. From the perspective of the hobby-horse riders, the interruption of words and things shows up as a lack, as unhappiness. However, this interruption might also be fortuitous, in so far as, were things not to be in tension with our making-sense of things, there could be no alternatives to singular happiness. The Shandies, like the inhabitants of the house of feasting, might become totally absorbed in their own framework, that is to say, they might become irretrievably alienated, and thereby become dispossessed of their 'sacred dwellings'.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Sermons*, p. 16.

## ‘OUR EXPECTATION OF HAPPINESS’: REASON AND IMAGINATION IN MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

On the 27th June 1795, Mary Wollstonecraft arrived in Gothenburg, Sweden on what was to be a three-month tour of Scandinavia. The express purpose of her trip was to locate a lost cargo ship, the *Maria and Margaretha*, belonging to the father of her child, Gilbert Imlay. Implicitly, however, the trip was also intended to serve another purpose. The relationship between Wollstonecraft and Imlay had soured and, desperately unhappy, Wollstonecraft had made an attempt on her own life. She was to make another upon her return to England. The trip was probably agreed upon as a means for Wollstonecraft to gain some tranquillity of mind amidst profound unhappiness. Wollstonecraft’s published account of her tour, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), depicts her questioning the foundations of happiness. ‘Considering the question of human happiness’, Wollstonecraft writes, ‘where, oh where does it reside?’<sup>1</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s desperate questioning reflects her political, as well as personal, disappointment. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft defends the French Revolution – and the pro-revolutionary, millenarian stance of the dissenting clergyman Richard Price – against Edmund Burke’s conservative critiques. For one, Burke argued that metaphysical, rational theories of society could not and should not replace the received wisdom of custom and tradition. He predicted that the French Revolution would end in violence and violation. In defending the revolution, Wollstonecraft confidently expresses her conviction that the God-given faculty of reason, if exercised to its full capacity, will be able to discern the moral and social laws of the universe and thereby provide a rational plan for the reconstruction of society. If society were to be reconstructed in accordance with the law of reason, Wollstonecraft argues, happiness and virtue will reign supreme. This conception of happiness, which will be termed Wollstonecraft’s rational reconstructivist happiness, is one of three modes of happiness that will be under discussion in this chapter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1989), VI, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of rational reconstruction with an emphasis upon its relationship to neo-stoic ethics see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 112–36.

In this mode, I read Wollstonecraft as the defender of a rationalistic and deistic-Christian enlightenment worldview. ‘Wollstonecraft’, writes Barbara Taylor, ‘regarded the political revolutions of the 1770s and 90s as harbingers of that “glorious future” of universal freedom and happiness foretold in scripture and realised through the liberating force of enlightened reason’.<sup>3</sup> Wollstonecraft’s millenarian emphasis on happiness echoes that of the revolutionaries. The authors of the Declaration of Independence wrote of ‘the pursuit of Happiness’ and Saint-Just noted that ‘happiness is a new idea in Europe’.<sup>4</sup> By 1795, however, the terror had cast a cloud over this revolutionary fervour and Wollstonecraft, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, was forced to come to terms with the fact that what appeared to be the political enactment of the Enlightenment’s promise of happiness for all had led to atrocity. Burke’s misgivings had been proved right.

In the wake of the rational millennium’s failure to manifest itself and in the wake of a failing relationship, Wollstonecraft’s writing takes a Romantic turn. In *Letters to Imlay* and *Short Residence* the centrality of reason is displaced by the new centrality of the imagination.<sup>5</sup> In both theorizing and exercising the power of, what will be termed, the synthetic imagination, Wollstonecraft seeks a simultaneous solution to historical and personal disappointment. The imagination, in Wollstonecraft’s view, enables a transformation of consciousness in a manner that undoes the distinction between natural history and human history and in a manner that enables the alienated individual to enter into sympathetic communion with the rest of humankind. In intense moments of imaginative contemplation, the realms of subject and object are synthesized and Wollstonecraft can imagine herself to inhabit a meaningful cosmos. Such moments are often accompanied by what Wollstonecraft describes as rapture or ecstasy. Operating both in the domains of theory and practice, the synthetic imagination gives Wollstonecraft reason for optimism regarding the progress of civilization. The progressive certainty provided by metaphysical reason in the *Rights of Men* is replaced by Wollstonecraft’s part-organic, part-anthropoc conception of progressive *cultivation*.

In *Rights of Men* and in *Short Residence*, as is the case with many of her major works, Wollstonecraft’s writing is highly dialogic in nature. It strongly assumes the presence of an interlocutor, in the first case Burke, in the second case Imlay (although in both cases also the

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 2–3.

<sup>4</sup> Saint-Just quoted in Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> For the alternative view that imagination and reason remain closely allied in Wollstonecraft’s work, see Martina Reuter, ‘Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wollstonecraft on the Imagination’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 25.6 (2017), 1138–60 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1334188>>.



reading public). In Burke, Wollstonecraft confronted the newly emergent ideology of conservatism. She confronts something that she ultimately views as much more dangerous in Imlay: commercialism. Commerce, in Wollstonecraft's view, renders human beings cold and calculating. It stops the current of sympathy and encourages the perpetuation of animal *sensuality* over and against the elated *sentiments* produced by the improving powers of the imagination. In other words, it prevents progressive cultivation, and instead encourages a sociality founded upon untransformed human activity. Just as the imagination seems to resolve both personal disappointments and historical malaise, commerce threatens to prevent the transformations of consciousness necessary for progress and, in colonizing Imlay, obstructs his capacity to support a reciprocal relationship with Wollstonecraft.

In *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft struggles with alienation. Her alienation takes the form of subject/object dualism and, relatedly, of individualism. In confronting alienation, Wollstonecraft's writing begins to express possibilities for dwelling. Wollstonecraft's dwelling involves: an awareness of phenomena as meaningful in themselves (not merely in so far as they are the recipients of an individual's mental projections); an awareness of the intersubjective, social being of persons; and an emphasis upon poetic language. Wollstonecraft does not attain settled dwelling, nor does she ever entirely ward off the threat of alienation. She only *resides* in Scandinavia and this residing is brief, as the notion of a 'short residence' makes clear. Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft discloses the possibility of dwelling in a manner that momentarily disperses the cloud of alienation. On the basis of this condition, Wollstonecraft comes to articulate a conception of happiness as *anticipation*, as awaiting the arrival of a good that is yet to materialize. As in the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft's conception of happiness remains futural. In contrast to the earlier work, however, Wollstonecraft imagines a more passive role for the person. By dwelling, a person *anticipates* happiness.

The articulation of dwelling is, for the most part, evident in her initial letters from Sweden. Although it would be a mistake to draw the line too clearly, roughly speaking, after her arrival in Norway, imaginative dwelling begins to give way to alienation once again. In eighteenth-century culture the imagination was multi-faced and capricious. It has this character in Wollstonecraft's autobiographical writing also. Although the synthetic imagination allows Wollstonecraft to feel that she belongs to the world in spite of alienation, the imagination is also the faculty that, as Wollstonecraft's depression worsens, facilitates her desire to escape from the world. There is a distinction to be drawn, in *Short Residence*, between the synthetic imagination and the fancy (although Wollstonecraft herself does not distinguish between the two systematically). If the synthetic imagination takes Wollstonecraft out of alienated self-enclosure

and into a shared current of life that flows through humanity and nature, the fancy takes Wollstonecraft-the-individual away from a world that she experiences as hostile to her. It protects her from pain, but only on the basis of a profound alienation that can be understood, biographically, to culminate in her second suicide attempt. This third conception of happiness, then, evident in Wollstonecraft's increasingly morbid reflections after her arrival in Norway, is the notion of *escapist happiness*.

## RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTIVIST HAPPINESS

In the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft argues that contemporary society is corrupt and that it should be reconstructed in accordance with reason in order to enable a future era of virtuous happiness. Reason, like imagination, can mean many different things. Although, there are other conceptions of reason in Wollstonecraft's work, it is a metaphysical conception that provides the basis for Wollstonecraft's rational reconstructivist happiness.

In Wollstonecraft's writing the words "happiness" or "happy", in line with contemporary usage, tend to refer to a positive condition of existence, such as includes the experience of pleasurable emotions. For Wollstonecraft, however, happiness is also strongly associated with virtue. True happiness, in Wollstonecraft's view, must include the exercise of ethical activity and the possession of good character. There is continuity and discontinuity between Wollstonecraft's thinking on happiness and that of Aristotle. Like Aristotle, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the importance of virtue to human flourishing. Unlike Aristotle, however, she is not content to view the life of excellence as the preserve of an elite few. Wollstonecraft, in the same spirit as her revolutionary contemporaries, seeks happiness for all.

The pursuit of happiness for all, alongside the recognition that, in the current state of society, the marriage between virtue and happiness is unlikely to materialize, leads Wollstonecraft, in the *Rights of Men*, to advocate for rational reconstruction. If society is arranged in such a way as to prevent the union of good action and good feeling, then society must be reconstructed in such a manner as will permit these two to coalesce. After the terror, Wollstonecraft's emphasis shifts dramatically. This shift, I would argue, is brought about by her loss of conviction in the human capacity to ascertain metaphysical laws through reason.

Virginia Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft's political thought has its foundations in a broadly humanistic conception of God (or Nature).<sup>6</sup> Wollstonecraft, Sapiro argues, understands the universe to be ordered according to God's principles, principles which tend towards the completion of God's benevolent plan. Human beings play an important role in the fulfilment of that plan, in so far as they are capable of unfolding their God-given gift of reason. Developing one's rational faculty requires strength and independence of mind as well as education. Social institutions and prejudices that prevent access to education or that hamper the strength and independence of the mind are aberrations and must be suitably corrected. The essence of her argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is that lack of education, prejudice, and faulted social institutions prevent women from developing reason and thereby prevent them from becoming virtuous. Wollstonecraft desires that all men and women should be able to contribute to the happiness of the republic.

Reason, Sapiro points out, is not, for Wollstonecraft, the negation of passion or sensibility. Sense and instincts, emotions and passions, pains and pleasures all have an important role in Wollstonecraft's political thought. Wollstonecraft takes the typical enlightenment view (expressed, for example, in Pope's distinction between self-love and reason) that rationality should balance and educate the passions but that it should not extinguish them. Bereft of passions, a purely rational human being would lack all motivation for action. She acknowledges, also, that human beings often act according to instinct and learned behaviour. Contra Burke, however, she stresses that the truly virtuous individual must rationally examine, and thereby either accept, alter, or suppress, these instincts. Unexamined feelings are, for Wollstonecraft, vessels for prejudice, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) being a key example. Sapiro also argues that, contrary to the popular stereotypes of enlightenment thought, reason, in Wollstonecraft, is not depicted as a free floating, calculating machine.<sup>7</sup> For Wollstonecraft, reason is, Sapiro argues, a process of thinking whereby individuals can observe, compare, contrast, and analyse different objects of experience.

Contra Sapiro, however, there does seem to be a version of reason that lays claim to more than this and that has something of the character of a free-floating machine. Sapiro's depiction of reason as a process of thinking seems true to much of what Wollstonecraft writes about reason. 'Reason is', to quote Wollstonecraft in the *Rights of Woman*, 'the simple power of improvement;

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<sup>6</sup> See, particularly, chapter two 'The Reasoned, Passionate Self' in Virginia Sapiro, *A Vindication of Political Virtue: The Political Theory of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth'.<sup>8</sup> The notion of reason as a power of improvement seems to correspond to the idea of reason as an open-ended process of deliberation. However, where Wollstonecraft writes of reason as the power to discern the truth, she alludes to a metaphysical conception of rationality.

This metaphysical conception of reason interacts with Wollstonecraft's understanding of virtue. In the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft argues that social institutions must be reconstructed in such a way so as to encourage men and women to cultivate virtue through the use of reason. If such conditions could be achieved, virtue would be largely synonymous with happiness. 'Who can deny,' she writes,

that has marked the slow progress of civilization, that men may become more virtuous and happy without any new discovery in morals? Who will venture to assert that virtue would not be promoted by the more extensive cultivation of reason? If nothing more is to be done, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die—and die for ever! Who will pretend to say, that there is as much happiness diffused on this globe as it is capable of affording? [...] if the voice of nature was allowed to speak audibly from the bottom of the heart, and the *native* unalienable rights of men were recognized in their full force.<sup>9</sup>

Wollstonecraft depicts history as the gradual progress of civilization, one which might attain its acme in a happy and virtuous society constructed in accordance with the universal moral laws uncovered by reason. In this respect, she challenges Burke's notion of an organic society rooted in the customs and traditions of the past, instead positing that the laws of nature are unveiled through the progress of reason. She argues that the 'the unalienable rights of men' have always been there, they are natural and universal, but hitherto lacked the support of the voice of reason. Wollstonecraft alludes to Isaiah 22:13: 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die-and die for ever!' Locke also alludes to this passage in his discussion of happiness in the *Essay Concerning Understanding*. There, Locke narrowly avoids an amoral and individualistic conception of happiness in asserting that God rewards those who act virtuously with great pleasure in the afterlife and therefore the rational course of action is to live one's life virtuously. His argument thus hinges upon the existence of the afterlife and upon the human capacity to render God's plan intelligible through reason.

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), V, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Wollstonecraft's happiness shares something of this Lockean argumentative logic. The intimate connection between reason, virtue and happiness is assured by their foundations in a divine, universal law. Wollstonecraft writes:

I fear that sublime power, whose motive for creating me must have been wise and good; and I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces from this view of my dependence on him. — It is not his power that I fear — it is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring *reason* I submit. — Submit — yes; I disregard the charge of arrogance, to the law that regulates his just resolves; and the happiness I pant after must be the same in kind, and produced by the same exertions as his — though unfeigned humility overwhelms every idea that would presume to compare the goodness which the most exalted created being could acquire, with the grand source of life and bliss.<sup>10</sup>

Wollstonecraft claims to stop short of proclaiming God's providential plan intelligible to human beings. Nevertheless, it is clearly implied that she understands her use of reason to be in accordance with divine rationality. The sublime, which for Burke describes an experience beyond the explanatory capacities of human reason, is for Wollstonecraft the sublime power of reason, a power which human beings are, in her view, increasingly capable of wielding. Wollstonecraft demystifies the power of the sublime, but in doing so reduces it and re-asserts the (potentially limitless) powers of human rational mastery.

To charge Wollstonecraft, in these statements, with dogmatism is not to gainsay the value of her analysis as to the effects of gender- and class-based educational, social, and institutional inequality. It is rather to recognize the extent to which, for Wollstonecraft, at least in the course of her argument with Burke, the rightness and righteousness of her social analysis rests upon a faith in a universal, providential law which she (along with other rational beings) is able to ascertain. Wollstonecraft's arguments in favour of progress are not merely based in making a positive case for the conditions that might better enable egalitarian democracy, they are also charged with millenarian energy. The reconstruction of society in accordance with reason, Wollstonecraft argues, is providentially sanctioned and will result in the spread of happiness and virtue across society.

Wollstonecraft's rational politics of virtuous happiness has some things in common with, but also differs from, Aristotelian eudaimonia. Wollstonecraft's Aristotelianism has been noted

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

by both Lena Halldenius and Sandrine Bergès.<sup>11</sup> Halldenius argues that, while there are reasons to depict Wollstonecraft as a liberal political thinker (as she often has been), in so far as one identifies liberalism with a ‘concept of negative freedom understood as a sphere of non-interference, then she is not a liberal’.<sup>12</sup> One defender of the view of Wollstonecraft as a liberal, Penny Weiss, acknowledges this fact about Wollstonecraft in describing her as a *communitarian* liberal.<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft’s view of freedom is not (in contrast to Tristram Shandy’s) a matter of people being free to do whatever they like as long as they do not harm others. Instead, Wollstonecraft advocates for a positive freedom, that is, the freedom to contribute to the life of the republic by cultivating one’s own virtue and thereby moving the human race closer towards their providentially ordained telos. Individuals do not pursue their own happiness, they rather seek to enable the flourishing of society, such as is seen to be simultaneous with their own flourishing. In this respect, she is Aristotelian.

However, Wollstonecraft differs from Aristotle in so far as she deems it possible that all members of a society, regardless of gender or social status, might attain happiness. For Aristotle, by contrast, this possibility was reserved for a select few male citizens, and even among them, few would be truly happy. Furthermore, Aristotle’s philosophy of happiness rests upon a shared (at least among the elite) sense of the way things *already are*. Wollstonecraft’s happiness, by contrast, is that which *will be* brought about if society can be reconstructed in accordance with the principles of reason. Charles Taylor describes a typical shift in emphasis, from the ancient to the modern, as being ‘from the notion of a form which tends to realize itself, but requires our collaboration, to that of a form imposed ab extra on our life by the power of will.’<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft’s happiness is thus a happiness of “will” both in the sense that it is futural (it will be) and in the sense that it is to be brought about by reconstruction (an exertion of the will in accordance with the divine will). Although Wollstonecraft’s social analysis is rooted within a particular Christian perspective, then, it is one which strongly emphasises human agency.

In her later work, Wollstonecraft will not exactly refute the stance she takes in her political writing. It becomes clear, however, that she has come to reconceive some of her most fundamental notions, most significantly, her commitment to wilful rational reconstruction. The

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<sup>11</sup> Lena Halldenius, ‘Feminist Republicanism’, in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*, ed. by Sandrine Bergès, Eileen Hunt Botting, and Alan Coffee (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 404–16 (p. 405); S. Bergès, *A Feminist Perspective on Virtue Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 86; see also Chris Jones, ‘Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindications* and Their Political Tradition’, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollstonecraft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 42–58 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521783437.004>>.

<sup>12</sup> Halldenius, p. 405.

<sup>13</sup> Penny Weiss, ‘Feminist Liberalism’, in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*, ed. by Sandrine Bergès, Eileen Hunt Botting, and Alan Coffee (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 391–403 (p. 401).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor, p. 130.

contrast between the Wollstonecraft of the *Vindications* and the Wollstonecraft of *Short Residence* can be further elucidated in considering Wollstonecraft's earlier positions on the imagination, on the relationship between truth and beauty, and on ecstasy and rapture. In direct contrast to her later work, in the *Rights of Men*, Wollstonecraft feels the need to defend herself against the charge of imaginativeness, writing: 'I am not, Sir, aware of your sneers, hailing a millennium, though a state of greater purity of morals may not be a mere poetic fiction; nor did my fancy ever create a heaven on earth, since reason threw off her swaddling clothes.'<sup>15</sup> The poetic and imaginative seem, here, to be somewhat opposed to Wollstonecraft's rational politics of happiness. They demarcate a shadowy, false realm that might trouble rational progress.

She writes also of the importance of guarding ourselves against 'enchanting illusions', concluding that 'raptures and ecstasies arise from error'.<sup>16</sup> She asserts that 'Truth is seldom arrayed by the Graces'. In confronting Burke's aesthetically based veneration of aristocratic pomp and splendour, Wollstonecraft recognizes the danger posed by fanciful enchantment to political progress. It is telling that, in a passage that ends with a critique of Burke's style, she alludes to Sterne:

in each individual there is a spring-tide when fancy should govern and amalgamate materials for the understanding; and a graver period, when those materials should be employed by the judgment. For example, I am inclined to have a better opinion of the heart of an old man, who speaks of Sterne as his favourite author, than of his understanding. [...] Judgment is sublime, wit beautiful; and, according to your own theory, they cannot exist together without impairing each other's power. The predominancy of the latter, in your endless Reflections, should lead hasty readers to suspect that it may, in a great degree, exclude the former.<sup>17</sup>

Wit, here, is not an entirely negative faculty for Wollstonecraft. The same is true of the imagination. Even in the *Rights of Men*, as Taylor points out, there is a tension between an 'invidious and emancipatory' imagination, between sick fancy and creative fire.<sup>18</sup> However, neither is wit, nor imagination comparable in their importance to judgement and reason. In the *Rights of Men*: reason is primary and the imagination subsidiary, the sublime is truth, truth is sober and unornamented, judgement ascertains the truth, and Burke's politics is a politics of wit.

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<sup>15</sup> *Works* V, p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Taylor., p. 68.

## IMAGINATIVE CULTIVATION

In the wake of the French terror and in the wake of numerous personal developments — among them the burgeoning and subsequent disintegration of a romantic relationship and becoming a mother — Wollstonecraft's worldview fundamentally changes. In some sense this change reflects the reappropriation of a pre-*Vindications* outlook.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's newfound emphasis upon the imagination also gives rise to a new direction for Wollstonecraft's thinking. In *Letters to Imlay* and *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft puts forward a new philosophical anthropology founded upon the imagination and upon the notion of cultivation.<sup>20</sup> This new anthropology might be read as the result of a set of dialogues carried out with three men: Rousseau, Burke and Imlay. Wollstonecraft dialogues with Rousseau in the *Rights of Woman*, with Burke in the *Rights of Men*, and with Imlay in *Short Residence* and in the *Letters to Imlay*. Wollstonecraft must attempt to steer a course through a threefold Scylla and Charybdis, in the form of the conservative, anti-theoretical and enchanted politics of Burke; the egocentric, leftist but also nostalgic Rousseau; the commercially-minded Imlay.

Alongside Rousseau, Wollstonecraft's philosophical anthropology is clearly influenced by her reading of the works of other conjectural historians, a retrospective label often applied to Rousseau, Baron de Montesquieu, Hume, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and others. Mark Salber Phillips has described how, for the conjectural historians, history was understood as a moral science, seeking to unearth the foundational principles of human nature.<sup>21</sup> It is for this reason that many conjectural historians prioritized travel writing over conventional historical accounts as evidence. In reading accounts of different societies, especially “primitive” ones, the

<sup>19</sup> Janet Todd argues that the personal style of *Short Residence* represents not so much a new discovery for Wollstonecraft, but a return to the sensibility of her youth; *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 241.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Bohls argues that *Short Residence* ‘articulates a vision of civilization centered in the imagination’. ‘Rather than following the repressive tendency of Enlightenment rationalism,’ Bohls argues that, in *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft ‘works towards a corporeally and politically situated mode of perception’. This situated mode of perception is what Bohls terms Wollstonecraft’s anti-aesthetics, for Wollstonecraft is not the conventional, disembodied and disinterested subject of aesthetic spectatorship, but rather an observer profoundly integrated in what she observes. Furthermore, in contrast to the improving powers of imaginative perception, Bohls also notes dystopic moments in *Short Residence*. ‘Wollstonecraft’, Bohls writes, ‘perceives a looming threat to the unfolding of humanity’s aesthetic capacities in the form of commerce’. Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716–1818*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 167, 142, 168 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511582646>>.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740–1820* (Princeton University Press, 2000); See, also, Aaron Garrett, ‘Anthropology: The “original” of Human Nature’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. by Alexander Broadie, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 79–93 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521802733>>.



conjecturalist might elucidate the fundamentals of human nature and of the human mind. Amidst a wide variety of concerns, Phillips argues, including the origins of property, language, government, arts, and religion, it was this attempt to build a science of the mind which held the conjecturalist project together.<sup>22</sup> Wollstonecraft, as Jane Rendall argues, was clearly aware of work by conjectural historians, as is demonstrated by her many references to them in the *Analytical Review*.<sup>23</sup>

In particular, Wollstonecraft's notion of cultivation is indebted to Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (1755). Rousseau argues that the key feature distinguishing human beings from animals is their perfectibility. This does not necessarily mean that humans have the capacity to attain perfection, but rather means that they do not merely live according to their natural instincts. They can develop tools, acquire new mental faculties, and pass such developments on through the generations. Rousseau argues that the faculty of the imagination (like a great many other human mental faculties) is an historical achievement, appearing shortly after humans cease to be solitary animals and gather together to form small communities. 'This period of the development of human faculties', Rousseau argues,

holding a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of egoism [*amour propre*], must have been the happiest and most durable epoch [...] nothing could have drawn him out of it but some fatal accident, which, for the common good, should never have happened.<sup>24</sup>

Rousseau describes man's transition from a state of nature into social life as one marked by happiness. The development of the mental faculties and the passions, he argues, should have perpetuated this happiness. However, after a period of time human beings strayed from this idyllic condition. They developed egoistic self-interest (*amour propre*) and the concept of property. When human beings decided that certain parcels of land could be owned by a particular individual or family, they set off a chain of events culminating in a fall from happiness. Although similarly suspicious of property, Wollstonecraft's optimistic futural orientation necessitates resistance to Rousseau's nostalgic vision. In the *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft deems Rousseau's nostalgia 'a false hypothesis' attributable to Rousseau's own beleaguered

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<sup>22</sup> Phillips, pp. 171–72, 176–77.

<sup>23</sup> Jane Rendall, "'The Grand Causes Which Combine to Carry Mankind Forward': Wollstonecraft, History and Revolution", *Women's Writing*, 4.2 (1997), 155–72 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699089700200016>>.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. by Susan Dunn and Gita May (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 119 <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=3420030>> [accessed 1 June 2020].

sensibility.<sup>25</sup> Had Rousseau been more perspicacious, Wollstonecraft argues, ‘his active mind would have darted forward to contemplate the perfection of man in the establishment of true civilization, instead of taking his ferocious flight back to the night of sensual ignorance.’<sup>26</sup>

We might read traces of Wollstonecraft’s aforementioned triangulated course between Rousseau, Burke, and Imlay in *Short Residence* and *Letters to Imlay*. ‘The more I see of the world’, she writes in *Short Residence*,

the more I am convinced that civilisation is a blessing not sufficiently estimated by those who have not traced its progress; for it not only refines our enjoyments, but produces a variety which enables us to retain the primitive delicacy of our sensations. Without the aid of the imagination all the pleasures of the senses must sink into grossness, unless continual novelty serve as a substitute for the imagination, which, being impossible, it was to this weariness, I suppose, that Solomon alluded when he declared that there was nothing new under the sun!—nothing for the common sensations excited by the senses. Yet who will deny that the imagination and understanding have made many, very many discoveries since those days, which only seem harbingers of others still more noble and beneficial? I never met with much imagination amongst people who had not acquired a habit of reflection; and in that state of society in which the judgment and taste are not called forth, and formed by the cultivation of the arts and sciences, little of that delicacy of feeling and thinking is to be found characterised by the word sentiment.<sup>27</sup>

Near the Rousseauvian axis, we find Wollstonecraft depicting the development of the human mind in cultural-evolutionary terms. Steering away from Rousseau, however, Wollstonecraft also asserts the imagination’s capacity to ensure the continued progress of human beings in the face of commercial consumption (here alluded to as ‘grossness’ and ‘novelty’). We should not, like Rousseau, lose ourselves in fantasies of a bygone golden age, Wollstonecraft implies. On the contrary, we can be assured of the benevolence of civilization due to the fact that it is civilization that brings the faculty of the imagination into being. Solomon’s wise claim, that there is nothing new under the sun, applies only to those who have not had their senses ameliorated by the imagination. As *Letters to Imlay* makes clear, one exemplar of unimproved sense, of a man lacking in sentiments, is Imlay himself.

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<sup>25</sup> *Works* V, p. 83.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 250–51.

In another *Short Residence* letter, Wollstonecraft details the part-organic and part-anthropropic nature of cultivation. ‘As the farmers cut away the wood’, she writes,

they clear the ground. [...] The destruction, or gradual reduction, of their forests will probably ameliorate the climate, and their manners will naturally improve in the same ratio as industry requires ingenuity. It is very fortunate that men are a long time but just above the brute creation [...] because it is the patient labour of men, who are only seeking for a subsistence, which produces whatever embellishes existence, affording leisure for the cultivation of the arts and sciences that lift man so far above his first state. [...] The world requires, I see, the hand of man to perfect it, and as this task naturally unfolds the faculties he exercises, it is physically impossible that he should have remained in Rousseau’s golden age of stupidity.<sup>28</sup>

Wollstonecraft depicts progress as the transformation of nature by means of human activity, a transformation which transforms human beings in turn. Observing the deforestation of the woodlands surrounding Tønsberg, Wollstonecraft articulates her theory that the ‘hand of man’ perfects nature in the pursuit of subsistence. The increasing efficiency of humanity’s capacity to meet their needs frees more and more of them for leisure. Wollstonecraft hopes that leisure (that was once made possible for elite Ancient Greek philosophers by the servitude of women and slaves) might now be possible for all people in society. For the Ancient Greeks, leisure brought with it opportunities for contemplation. For Wollstonecraft, likewise, the leisure afforded to human beings by their increased efficiency gives rise to the arts and sciences, to the imagination and to reason.

Writing from Paris in the *Letters to Imlay*, a year before the journey to Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft defines the imagination as

the great distinction of our nature, the only purifier of the passions —animals have a portion of reason, and equal, if not more exquisite, senses; but no trace of imagination [...] The impulse of the senses, passions, if you will, and the conclusions of reason, draw men together; but the imagination is the true fire, stolen from heaven, to animate this cold creature of clay, producing all those fine sympathies that lead to rapture, rendering

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

men social by expanding their hearts, instead of leaving them leisure to calculate how many comforts society affords.<sup>29</sup>

Wollstonecraft goes against the grain of western philosophy in defining the imagination, rather than reason, as the faculty that distinguishes human beings from animals. In doing so, we might identify echoes of Burke, who, as Fairclough discusses, seems to claim a privileged role for sense-experience, over and against reason, as the basis for human understanding.<sup>30</sup> Mary Fairclough notes that, in *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794), ‘Wollstonecraft’s claims for the rational improvement of individuals and social structures are muted, if not abandoned’.<sup>31</sup> Thus, in coming to prefer sense over reason, Fairclough also sees Wollstonecraft as moving closer to Burke. However, in a manner that moves her away from the Burkean axis, Wollstonecraft cannot place human understanding in a purely instinctive domain if she wishes to preserve a role for human agency in progress. Wollstonecraft’s solution, hinted at in the above passages, is to imply a distinction between two tiers of sociality. In the first tier, presumably historically prior to the second tier, human beings are drawn together on the basis of instinctive social feelings and also the conclusions of a kind of calculating, instrumental reason. One detects, here, the influence of Rousseauvian or Lockean social contract theory, in so far as Wollstonecraft seems to assume a primordial individualism, followed by an historical drawing together of individuals. This drawing together, she implies, occurs on the basis of a social instinct but also on the basis of instrumental reason, that is, the contractual recognition on behalf of each individual that they will benefit from this social arrangement. This first tier of social organization, Wollstonecraft implies, is to be replaced by a second tier. This second tier is based upon a divine gift that emerges as a late development of the human mind: the imagination. The imagination, once it has emerged in history, makes possible a form of sociality based upon ‘rapture’ and an expansion or openness of the heart. This must be contrasted to the bases of sociality in the first tier, in particular to instrumental reason and self-interest.

Additionally, in associating this higher form of sociality with ‘rapture’, Wollstonecraft can be seen to have reversed the position that she held in the *Rights of Men*. In the wake of her relationship with Imlay, Wollstonecraft has come to see herself as occupying a position analogous to that of Burke, with Imlay now playing the role of the cold, calculating reasoner. Again, however, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the existence of the two-tiers of sociality, in order to

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<sup>29</sup> *Works* VI., pp. 387–88.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Fairclough, ‘Edmund Burke’, in *The Wollstonecraftian Mind*, ed. by Sandrine Bergès, Eileen Hunt Botting, and Alan Coffee (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 183–97 (p. 184).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

articulate her criticism of Imlay without describing herself in the same terms with which she criticized Burke. 'I shall always consider it as one of the most serious misfortunes of my life,' Wollstonecraft writes,

that I did not meet you, before satiety had rendered your senses so fastidious, as almost to close up every tender avenue of sentiment and affection that leads to your sympathetic heart. [...] You have a heart, my friend, yet, hurried away by the impetuosity of inferior feelings, you have sought in vulgar excesses, for that gratification which only the heart can bestow. The common run of men, I know, with strong health and gross appetites, must have variety to banish ennui, because the imagination never lends its magic wand, to convert appetite into love, cemented by according reason. —Ah! my friend, you know not the ineffable delight, the exquisite pleasure, which arises from a unison of affection and desire, when the whole soul and senses are abandoned to a lively imagination, that renders every emotion delicate and rapturous.<sup>32</sup>

Imlay remains within the first tier of sociality and, as such, easily falls prey to the negative effects of commerce, for commerce operates on the basis of untransformed feeling. Wollstonecraft draws upon metaphors of openness and closedness and suggests a contrast between self-enclosure and openness to something beyond the self. In the previous passage, Wollstonecraft wrote of the expansion of the heart. Here she writes of being 'abandoned' to a lively imagination. Although the attainment of the second tier by means of the imagination is meant to counter Burkean conservatism, it is notable that, in her vocabulary of 'enchantment', of the imagination's 'magic wand', and of rapture, Wollstonecraft might again be understood to have moved closer to a position that she once associated with Burke.

Wollstonecraft maintains the distinction between transformed and untransformed tiers of feeling as she continues:

Yes; these are emotions, over which satiety has no power [...] but they do not exist without self-denial. These emotions, more or less strong, appear to me to be the distinctive characteristic of genius, the foundation of taste, and of that exquisite relish for the beauties of nature, of which the common herd of eaters and drinkers and child-begeters, certainly

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<sup>32</sup> *Works* VI., pp. 408-9.

have no idea. [...] I consider those minds as the most strong and original, whose imagination acts as the stimulus to their senses.

Emotions driven by the powers of the imagination, those that Wollstonecraft often terms 'sentiments', are less liable to satiety. Those who live purely through their senses, namely the 'common herd of eaters and drinkers and child-begeters', are driven to perceive the world through their appetites and, as a result, find themselves, never satisfied, perpetually pursuing new desires. A person who indulges in imaginative perception, however, will find their passions durably maintained.

The problem with a commercial-consumerist society, Wollstonecraft argues, is that it seeks to fill the space opened up by human ingenuity, opened up by the technological capability of human beings to meet their subsistence needs more efficiently, with the animalistic pursuit of pleasure and with the pursuit of wealth. In doing so, it prevents the transformations in human consciousness that contemplation pursued in leisure should enable. In *Short Residence*, in Germany, Wollstonecraft paints a bleak picture of human social being in a commercial society. 'An ostentatious display of wealth without elegance,' she writes,

and a greedy enjoyment of pleasure without sentiment, embrutes them till they term all virtue of an heroic cast, romantic attempts at something above our nature, and anxiety about the welfare of others, a search after misery in which we have no concern. But you will say that I am growing bitter, perhaps personal. Ah! shall I whisper to you, that you yourself are strangely altered since you have entered deeply into commerce —more than you are aware of; never allowing yourself to reflect, and keeping your mind, or rather passions, in a continual state of agitation?<sup>33</sup>

Increased leisure, enabled by human ingenuity, is being prevented from becoming the basis for the growth of the imagination and the transformation of sense into sentiment. Instead, the spaces opened up for leisure have been filled by pursuits that encourage the perpetuation and exacerbation of humankind's animal instincts. Sense has become sensuality, and sociality has remained within the orbit of self-interest. Wollstonecraft declaims upon what she sees as the commercial deflation of the self-transformative potential of the imagination. In doing so, she can be found once again in dialogue with one of her three primary interlocutors, in this case Imlay.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 340–41.

In summary, Wollstonecraft's philosophical anthropology sees human history as the process of the simultaneous cultivation of the land and of the mind. For human beings, survival requires the exercise of the body and of the mind in such a way as both transforms the environment and encourages the development of the mental faculties. With the improvement of the land and the invention of ever more ingenious methods of attaining subsistence, (some) human beings are able to gain increased leisure time. In leisure, freed from the demands of labour, human beings can devote themselves to higher activities, such as that of philosophical contemplation. This gives rise to the arts and the sciences, which in turn encourage the growth of the imaginative and rational faculties. Wollstonecraft hopes that the growth of these faculties will ultimately lead to widespread happiness and virtue. However, given the failure of the French Revolution and given the rise of commerce, the view that history is tending towards this end has been thrown into doubt. Commerce, along with luxury and entertainment, encourages the perpetuation of self-interested forms of human social relationships and more vulgar forms of human affectivity. The imagination counters self-interest by encouraging the expansion of sympathy and counters vulgar sensuality by transforming sense into sentiment. The imagination, then, is now the primary enabler of progress, is in so far as it is the imaginative faculty, rather than the faculty of reason, that is best equipped to counter the retrogressive evils of commerce. Wollstonecraft's new emphasis upon imaginative cultivation, an emphasis that emerges in tandem with the anthropology described above, represents a move away from a political ontology in which forms are imposed upon life *ab extra* by the will and a move towards one in which the forms tend to realize themselves but require a degree of human exertion.

## THE SYNTHETIC IMAGINATION AND THE FANCY

In *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft, beginning to sound much like a Romantic, articulates a vision of the good life founded upon the imagination. The achievement of virtuous happiness, formerly based upon rational reconstructivist convictions, is now understood to rely upon the more open ended and uncertain process of cultivation. This process, crucially, is seen to have given rise to the imagination and thus to the possibility of ameliorated forms of perception and sociality. Strongly associated with this theoretical capacity are lived moments of intense rapture or ecstasy. Roughly speaking, in Sweden, moments of ecstasy and rapture tend to affirm Wollstonecraft's sense of belonging to the world and of belonging to humanity. Increasingly, throughout the rest of her travels, however, moments that recall something like the ecstasy or rapture of her time in Sweden, tend to be based in a desire to escape from the world and from

others. This latter tendency can be understood to have its basis in alienation. In this mode, Wollstonecraft seems to feel both hostile towards and rejected by her interlocutor and by humanity in general. She speaks consistently of ‘poetical fictions’, of phantoms, of an ideal, disembodied realm. This sense of unreality, coupled with her feelings of hostility, are only exacerbated in the latter stages of her journey, in Denmark and Germany. She even begins to speak of death as a getting free, of a happy thoughtlessness. Autobiographically, then, this fanciful alienation can be taken as Wollstonecraft’s expression of her own suicidal thinking.

One of the most distinguishing facets of these two different tendencies in Wollstonecraft, is the different usage that each of them has for the imagination. In *Short Residence*, it is arguably possible to make a distinction between the imagination and the fancy. This distinction, however, should not be taken to be identical with Coleridge’s, nor should it be taken to be marked by any clear conceptual designation. Wollstonecraft tends to use the words ‘fancy’ and ‘imagination’ interchangeably. The distinction between the two, in Wollstonecraft, is arguably based in whether she considers her reflections to have their basis in a spiritual and moral reality or whether she understands them to be subjective and idiosyncratic, whether they are informed, in other words, by the zeitgeists of dwelling or of alienation. For Wollstonecraft, furthermore, there seems to be a strong association between the imagination and being-with-others, on the one hand, and the fancy and alienation on the other.

This chapter’s association of a synthetic imagination with the condition of dwelling draws upon conceptions of the Romantic imagination articulated by James Engell and by M.H. Abrams. Engell argues that the imagination was the quintessence of Romanticism. The modern idea of the imagination, Engell argues, was created by the Enlightenment, developed over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and became the ‘vortex’ around which Romanticism formed.<sup>34</sup> ‘The attracting and unifying force of the imagination’, writes Engell, ‘made Romanticism in the first place.’ M.H. Abrams, meanwhile, argued that a central goal for Romantic writers was the reconciliation of antitheses between mind and world, subject and object, self and other. Abrams argued that Coleridge’s goal was to combat humankind’s alienation by restoring a sense of the mind’s embeddedness in the world.<sup>35</sup> The philosophical method through which Coleridge proposed to do this was Romantic dialectic: thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Human beings, Coleridge argued, start with thesis. This is the primordial, “natural” way of knowing, preceding the gap between man and nature, knower and the known, instantiated by

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<sup>34</sup> James Engell, *The Creative Imagination, Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 3–4 <<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674333253>>.

<sup>35</sup> M H Abrams, *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (London: Norton & Company, 1984), pp. 76–108.



epistemological dualism (the antithesis). The goal, thereafter, is to come to a synthesis, in which the breach is repaired. This synthesis, Coleridge argued, can be accomplished through the power of what might be called the synthetic imagination.

The focus of Abrams and other mid-century critics on the visionary aspects of the Romantic imagination was critiqued, by Jerome McGann and others, for its failure to connect the imagination to the tangible historical realities of the period in which the Romantics wrote. For a long time, the visionary imagination was regarded as the offshoot of a politically quietist, escapist ideology. In the past decade, however, the Romantic imagination has enjoyed something of a critical rehabilitation. Alan Richardson, for instance, whose own research focuses upon the links between the imagination and Romantic science, suggests a pluralistic conception of the imagination's role in Romantic writing.<sup>36</sup> The imagination, he argues, is sufficiently multi-faceted that it can be read, variously, as visionary, as politically quietist, and (as he and Richard Sha argue) as pathological, and perhaps as all three at once.<sup>37</sup> This approach is appropriate to a reading of *Short Residence*, in so far as Wollstonecraft's imagination respectively serves the roles of synthesis, of escapism, and of enabling depressive fantasies.

#### i) 'Just Description': The Epistemological and the Ethico-Existential

Wollstonecraft's bold decision to publish an intensely personal autobiographical work is accompanied by a set of interesting tensions. In the 'Advertisement' and the 'Appendix', which respectively preface and postface her account of her travels, Wollstonecraft expresses a certain anxiety as to the justness of a literary style that frequently synthesises "inward" reflection with "external" observation. This anxiety is arguably also present in the letters themselves. During the first phase of her travels, poetic moments in Wollstonecraft's text tend to affirm the truth of her experience and to be assertively metaphorical. During the second phase of her travels, however, Wollstonecraft frequently describes these moments in the deflationary terms of subjectivism. What this oscillation suggests, I would argue, is an uncertainty, on Wollstonecraft's part, regarding how she should view her own poeticizing. To use a distinction made by Soni, Wollstonecraft might be said to fluctuate between an ethico-existential and epistemological conception of her writing.<sup>38</sup> The first assumes an encumbered conception of the self, whose

<sup>36</sup> Alan Richardson, 'Reimagining the Romantic Imagination', *European Romantic Review*, 24.4 (2013), 385–402 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2013.807965>>.

<sup>37</sup> Richard C. Sha, 'Romantic Physiology and the Work of Romantic Imagination: Hypothesis and Speculation in Science and Coleridge', *European Romantic Review*, 24.4 (2013), 403–19 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2013.807966>>.

<sup>38</sup> Soni, pp. 230–33.

relations with the world are always already rooted in a *sensus communis*, a shared moral sense and a shared understanding of being. The second assumes an unencumbered conception of the self, who comes to doubt all of this by viewing meaning as the projection of their own, singular mind onto the world. It is significant that this gap should appear in her writing, even more significant, however, is the fact that this gap between hermeneutic modes should show up as a problem for Wollstonecraft. Furthermore, for Wollstonecraft, the sceptical, epistemological, subjectivist perspective seems to be associated with a sense of alienation from others. As she herself suggests in the 'Advertisement', ethico-existential description seems to require that she be in sympathy with her interlocutors.

This second point relates to Wollstonecraft's intersubjective understanding of personhood.<sup>39</sup> Nancy Yousef argues that, while Romantic subjectivity is often associated with the autonomous self, a selfhood typified by Rousseau in the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, Wollstonecraft's Romantic subjectivity is grounded in an intersubjective context.<sup>40</sup> Wollstonecraft, Yousef argues, emphasizes vulnerability and the necessity of interpersonal trust as central co-ordinates of the self. One sees this clearly in the *Letters to Imlay*, for example, where Wollstonecraft can be found declaring: 'My own happiness wholly depends on you'.<sup>41</sup> 'One of Wollstonecraft's most important contributions to the philosophical debate of her own century', Yousef writes, 'is her complex melding of ethical and epistemological questions about forming and sustaining human relations, her ability to discover ethical challenges in the necessary epistemological limits to knowing and being known by others.'<sup>42</sup> Yousef also notes, as has been discussed in this chapter, that Wollstonecraft seems to interpret the 'breach between her and Imlay as a kind of philosophical crisis'.

In moving her emphasis from reason to the imagination, Wollstonecraft is not merely shifting the theoretical basis for her thought, but is also shifting her practice of writing. She moves from the rhetorically certain, self-assured style of the *Rights of Men* to the tremulous, intimate, and introspective style of *Short Residence*. Wollstonecraft foregrounds her consciousness of some possible ramifications of this style in the 'Advertisement', which prefaces the published letters. 'In writing these desultory letters,' Wollstonecraft asserts

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<sup>39</sup> For a summary of intersubjectivity within a theoretical, historical and literary contexts, see Christopher Tilmouth, 'Passions and Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Literature', in *Passions and Intersubjectivity in Early Modern Culture*, ed. by Freya Sierhuis and Brian Cummings (Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 13–31 <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=1389013>> [accessed 24 February 2021].

<sup>40</sup> Nancy Yousef, 'Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and the Revision of Romantic Subjectivity', *Studies in Romanticism*, 38.4 (1999), 537–57 (p. 537) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/25601415>>.

<sup>41</sup> *Works* VI., p. 379.

<sup>42</sup> Yousef, 'Revision of Romantic Subjectivity', p. 547.

I could not avoid being continually the first person — ‘the little hero of each tale’. I tried to correct the fault, if it be one, for they were designed for publication; but in proportion as I arranged my thoughts, my letter, I found, became stiff and affected: I, therefore, determined to let my remarks and reflections flow unrestrained, as I perceived I could not give a just description of what I saw, but by relating the effect different objects had produced on my mind and feelings, whilst the impression was still fresh. A person has a right, I have sometimes thought, when amused by a witty or interesting egotist, to talk of himself when he can win on our attention by acquiring our affection. Whether I deserve to rank amongst this privileged number, my readers alone can judge — and I give them leave to shut the book, if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me. My plan was simply to endeavour to give a just view of the present state of the countries I have passed through, as far as I could obtain information during so short a residence.<sup>43</sup>

Two important points for reflection emerge in this passage. Firstly, Wollstonecraft is aware of a tension between, on the one hand, reflections that blend “objective” observations with an account of “subjective” feelings and, on the other hand, purely objective observation. This is the tension between ethico-existential and epistemological hermeneutic modes. Secondly, Wollstonecraft offers a defence of the former on the basis of interpersonal sympathy. Turning to the first point, Wollstonecraft sets up a tension between a style of writing in which she becomes ‘the little hero of each tale’ and one in which she might fulfil the informative purposes of travel writing, that of obtaining ‘information’. On the one hand, Wollstonecraft assumes a role not unlike that of the Romantic genius, whose creative works emerge through the expression of inner feeling. On the other hand, she shows awareness that the expression of private feelings may be deemed inappropriate for publication and seems aware, also, that information and introspection might not be seen to sit well with each other.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Works* VI, p. 241.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example Nandini Das and Tim Youngs, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 1–16 (pp. 7, 12). Das and Youngs argue that, across history, travel writing has generally been an informative genre. In the 19th century, however, in particular due to the influence of Wordsworth and Byron, “subjective” forms of travel writing become more common. We might see Wollstonecraft as a precursor to Wordsworth and Byron in this respect. On this topic, see also; Carl Thompson, ‘Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing’, in *The Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, ed. by Nandini Das and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 108–24; James Buzzard, ‘The Grand Tour and After (1660–1850)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 37–52 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL052178140X>>.

Wollstonecraft again alludes to the tension between the subjective and objective in the ‘Appendix’, where she laments her ‘insensibility to present objects’ and that ‘Private business and cares have frequently so absorbed me, as to prevent my obtaining all the information, during this journey, which the novelty of the scenes would have afforded, had my attention been continually awake to inquiry’.<sup>45</sup> This tension is heightened by the notes that follow the appendix, which provide information regarding such things as taxation in Norway and include such facts as: ‘The copper mines at Rorraas yield about 4000 ship-pound a year; a ship pound is 320 pounds’.<sup>46</sup> This division between the autobiographical and the factual is one aspect of what critics have referred to as the hybridity of Wollstonecraft’s text.

The following sections explore the melding, but also the sundering, of ethics and epistemology in Wollstonecraft’s writing as a theme of the writing itself. In Wollstonecraft, it can almost seem as if her capacity to discern spiritual and moral truth in nature were dependent upon her intersubjective being-with-others. There is fusion, in this case, between ethos and episteme. In the absence of sympathy, however, what once appeared as a meaningful world now seems nothing but the projections of a deranged, isolated mind. The self-evidence of Wollstonecraft’s ethics, in this condition, is thrown into epistemological doubt.

This brings us back, finally, to the advertisement and to point two. Here, Wollstonecraft seems to state what will otherwise be implied throughout her letters: that the matter of whether her words have weight, of the justness of her description, can only be confirmed or denied by her interlocutors. ‘A person has a right,’ Wollstonecraft writes, ‘I have sometimes thought, when amused by a witty or interesting egotist, to talk of himself when he can win on our attention by acquiring our affection’. Prefacing *Short Residence*, notably, is Wollstonecraft’s explicit admission that the wit, examples of which include Burke and Sterne, once derided as inferior to the wielder of judgement, is now an exemplar practitioner of her literary style. Wollstonecraft implies that her writing, like that of the wit or egotist, might be deemed to be worthwhile in its intention to offer just description in an ethico-existential mode, in so far as her interlocutors, her readers, deem it to be so. There is a failsafe, in other words, that might prevent private feeling from contaminating the realities she seeks to describe and that failsafe is whether or not her work can be said to “speak to” her readers. Fellow feeling is here the basis of common sense, of an arational capacity to see eye-to-eye with someone on the basis of a mutual background of understanding. It is this empathy that must arbitrate the justness of Wollstonecraft’s synthesized utterances.

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<sup>45</sup> *Works* VI, p. 346.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

## ii) The Possibility of Dwelling

After spending eleven days on board ship, Wollstonecraft is relieved to find herself, along with her maid, Marguerite, and daughter Fanny, approaching the Swedish shoreline. As she nears land, Wollstonecraft describes her anxiety in awaiting the boat that will take her to shore:

My attention was particularly directed to the light-house and you can scarcely imagine with what anxiety I watched two long hours for a boat to emancipate me — still no one appeared. Every cloud that flitted on the horizon was hailed as a liberator, till approaching nearer, like most of the prospects sketched by hope, it dissolved under the eye into disappointment.<sup>47</sup>

Wollstonecraft's mode of description differs from a purely informative mode in several ways. Her use of the personal pronouns 'my', 'I', and 'me' is one example. Additionally, things are described as 'approaching nearer' or as far away 'on the horizon'. These are spatio-existential descriptions that require the reader to place themselves within the perspective of the narrator. More significantly, Wollstonecraft's description of things — the light-house, the flitting and dissolving clouds — is accompanied by descriptions of how she feels in confrontation with them and also by descriptions of her imagination working upon them. She details her 'anxiety', such as makes the hours feel 'long', and describes how clouds appear to her as boats. Her realization that this is false is accompanied by the feeling of 'disappointment'.

More significant still, is the manner in which Wollstonecraft goes on to synthesize this personal experience into a wider historical context. Her use of the words 'emancipate' and 'liberator' pre-empt her next comment:

Despotism, as is usually the case, I found had here cramped the industry of man. The pilots being paid by the king, and scantily, they will not run into any danger, or even quit their hovels, if they can possibly avoid it, only to fulfil what is termed their duty.

In this passage, Wollstonecraft depicts monarchical despotism to be so dispersed throughout society that it shapes the temperaments and activities of the despot's subjects. In the same

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<sup>47</sup> *Works* VI, p. 243.

manner, Wollstonecraft experiences anxiety in waiting for a boat to take her to land because the social structure of Sweden has created the conditions in which such experiences would be likely to occur. In this sense, the uses of the words ‘emancipate’ and ‘liberator’ are not merely figurative since, for Wollstonecraft, the specifics of her personal situation have a real bearing on politics. Wollstonecraft’s thoughts, feeling and imaginings, therefore, are aspects of the ‘just view’ on society which she aims to provide because the conditions of society also bear upon them.

Finding herself situated in a context in which she must experience anxiety, it is the imagination that allows Wollstonecraft to project herself out of the situation. Instead of accepting her present condition, Wollstonecraft awaits emancipation. The clouds are imaginatively transformed into liberators and therefore provide a focal point, in the absence of any flesh and blood liberator, for Wollstonecraft’s futural anticipation.

This imaginative capacity for projection, however, as Wollstonecraft reminds us, is one that is attained only by means of cultivation. It is not a given that people are able to anticipate liberation in this way. As several coastal shacks come into view, Wollstonecraft writes of her surprise that the inhabitants seem uninterested in the arrival of a foreigner. ‘I did not immediately recollect’, she writes,

that men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind, which entitle them to rank as lords of the creation. —Had they either, they could not contentedly remain rooted in the clods they so indolently cultivate.<sup>48</sup>

The imagination emerges as part of an historical process of cultivation. The rootedness of Swedish agriculturalists is an indication of the fact that society has not yet reached a stage where they might attain that higher mode of perception enabled by the imagination. Notably, Wollstonecraft associates this imaginative capacity with the status of human beings as ‘lords of the creation’. ‘Faint glimmerings of mind’, presumably like those that enable Wollstonecraft to momentarily recreate the clouds as liberators, are the true indicators of human nobility. Not only are Wollstonecraft’s imaginings relevant to her ethico-existential description of her experiences, but so too is the fact of her having the capacity to imagine in the first place. Just description must

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

include reference to those faint glimmerings of mind which distinguish cultivated from uncultivated perception.

Wollstonecraft's ethico-existential mode of description finds intensified expression in the first of a series of passages detailing moments of ecstatic experience. Having ascended to the top of a cliff, accompanied by a Swedish Lieutenant, Wollstonecraft writes:

Rocks were piled on rocks, forming a suitable bulwark to the ocean. Come no further, they emphatically said, turning their dark sides to the waves to augment the idle roar. [...] How silent and peaceful was the scene. I gazed around with rapture, and felt more of that spontaneous pleasure which gives credibility to our expectation of happiness, than I had for a long, long, time before. I forgot the horrors I had witnessed in France, which had cast a gloom over all nature, and suffering the enthusiasm of my character, too often, gracious God! damped by the tears of disappointed affection, to be lighted up afresh, care took wing while simple fellow feeling expanded my heart.<sup>49</sup>

Gazing down upon the prospect, Wollstonecraft positions herself as the Romantic overseer of landscape. Although we are to understand her description as the production of the creative imagination, the rocks do not *seem* to speak, they speak 'emphatically'. Wollstonecraft writes metaphorically but also with assertiveness, as if writing metaphorically and writing justly were synonymous. Furthermore, although she is gazing upon a 'scene', she can nevertheless experience a state of rapture in which the boundaries between scene and aesthetic spectator evaporate. Just as in her description of the clouds as liberators, the personification of nature and the infusion of feelings, memories, political events into the scene are not, here, hampered by a sense of 'subjectivism', by a sense that they might be instances of the projection of private concerns onto an indifferent physical world. Ethico-existential description presupposes a synthetic unity of the inward and the outward, of one person's affective experience with the experience of others, of history with nature. The passage above describes this synthesis but in a way that is intensified by rapturous ecstasy, by the feeling of standing outside of the self (*ekstasis*). Rapturous ecstasy disperses post-Revolutionary gloom (which itself marks an interpenetration of history and nature) and expands Wollstonecraft's heart so as to enable her to be receptive to the feelings of others.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 247.

The rapturous ecstasy of synthetic unity brings with it, not happiness, but ‘spontaneous pleasure’ such as makes ‘our expectation of happiness’ seem credible. As in the *Rights of Men*, happiness is a futural experience. However, the background on the basis of which Wollstonecraft understands happiness appears to have changed. In *Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft depicts happiness as something which people anticipate but do not experience. Wollstonecraft first and foremost seeks attunement with nature and with others. On this basis, Wollstonecraft is open to spontaneous pleasure. It is the experience of this pleasure, when it arises spontaneously, that brings hope to her waiting. Momentary ecstasy does not bring happiness, instead it affirms Wollstonecraft in her condition of anticipation, in her ‘expectation of happiness’. In the *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft *pursues* happiness, in *Short Residence* she anticipates it by seeking re-integration into nature and society.

One ecstatic moment gives way to another, as Wollstonecraft, still describing her first day in Sweden, recounts a night of restlessness. ‘My imagination still continued so busy,’ she writes,

that I sought for rest in vain. [...] I contemplated all nature at rest; the rocks, even grown darker in their appearance, looked as if they partook of the general repose, and reclined more heavily on their foundation. —What, I exclaimed, is this active principle which keeps me still awake?—Why fly my thoughts abroad, when every thing around me appears at home? My child was sleeping with equal calmness —innocent and sweet as the closing flowers. Some recollections, attached to the idea of home, mingled with reflections respecting the state of society I had been contemplating that evening, made a tear drop on the rosy cheek I had just kissed, and emotions that trembled on the brink of ecstasy and agony gave a poignancy to my sensations which made me feel more alive than usual.

What are these imperious sympathies? How frequently has melancholy and even misanthropy taken possession of me, when the world has disgusted me, and friends have proved unkind. I have then considered myself as a particle broken off from the grand mass of mankind; —I was alone, till some involuntary sympathetic emotion, like the attraction of adhesion, made me feel that I was still a part of a mighty whole, from which I could not sever myself —not, perhaps, for the reflection has been carried very far, by snapping the thread of an existence, which loses its charms in proportion as the cruel experience of life stops or poisons the current of the heart. Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness! I speak not of



philosophical contentment, though pain has afforded them the strongest conviction of it.<sup>50</sup>

Wollstonecraft characterizes her condition as one of alienation. In contrast to the rocks that seem 'at home' in nature, Wollstonecraft understands herself to be at odds with the world and with others. The problem she identifies is psychic, in so far as it is her that feels disgust at the world. Yet, in her own words, these things take 'possession' of her, she does not choose to view things in these ways. Nor does she choose to be kept awake by the 'active principle'. This principle seems to be either a synonym for the imagination — which, like the active principle, prevents Wollstonecraft from sleeping — or is perhaps Wollstonecraft's term for a more fundamental life force that drives the activity of the imagination. In either case, a strange connection exists between Wollstonecraft's capacity to imagine and her capacity to be alienated. Even though faint glimmerings of mind make Wollstonecraft a lord of creation, they also seem to make her restless, to prevent her from reposing, like a rock, at one with nature.

When Wollstonecraft orients herself towards the world in an alienated manner, she feels herself to be a solitary 'particle', an atomized individual floating free of any necessary social bonds. However, just as Wollstonecraft's preference for epistolary form might be said to disclose her awareness of human being's essential intersubjectivity, her presentation of the 'involuntary sympathetic emotion' suggests that she cannot ever truly be an atomized individual. Motherhood seems to have strengthened Wollstonecraft's feeling for intersubjectivity. Here, Wollstonecraft's daughter, Fanny, becomes the catalyst for a second ecstatic experience. Wollstonecraft is freed from alienated self-enclosure and is forced to acknowledge her belonging to something greater than herself. This something greater seems to be, at once, the world and humanity.

Wollstonecraft writes that she could not sever herself from this mighty whole even if she were to snap 'the thread' of her existence. Two rather different possibilities for interpretation emerge here. On the one hand, perhaps Wollstonecraft cannot sever herself from the 'mighty whole' because in death her active principle will survive and be at one with God/Nature. On the other hand, perhaps Wollstonecraft cannot sever herself from the mighty whole because her being depends on it. In dying Wollstonecraft could not leave humankind behind, because she, as a person, cannot be a solitary particle. Her being qua Mary Wollstonecraft is the creation of an intersubjective process that occurs in the world and only in the world.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 248–49.

In considering the negation of existence, Wollstonecraft alludes to a similarly negativized conception of happiness. The ‘expectation of happiness’, Wollstonecraft has earlier suggested, becomes credible in moments of ecstasy. However, in this later moment, Wollstonecraft, trembling ‘on the brink of ecstasy’, implies a more ambiguous mode of anticipation: ‘Futurity, what hast thou not to give to those who know that there is such a thing as happiness!’ The thoughts expressed in this sentence play at the boundary of sense-making. Perhaps futurity has everything to give to those who know that there is happiness, or perhaps it has to give them nothing. Futurity may not be required to give happiness to those who anticipate it or it may be that that which it has to give is nothing. Wollstonecraft’s conviction, in the *Rights of Men*, as to the certainty of progress, might here be giving way to a conviction as to the contingency of human existence.

On route to Norway, another restless night offers Wollstonecraft the chance to feel at home in the world:

The huge shadows of the rocks, fringed with firs, concentrating the views without darkening them, excited that tender melancholy which, sublimating the imagination, exalts rather than depresses the mind.

My companions fell asleep —fortunately they did not snore; and I contemplated, fearless of idle questions, a night such as I had never before seen or felt, to charm the senses, and calm the heart. The very air was balmy as it freshened into morn, producing the most voluptuous sensations. A vague pleasurable sentiment absorbed me, as I opened my bosom to the embraces of nature; and my soul rose to its Author, with the chirping of the solitary birds, which began to feel, rather than see, advancing day. I had leisure to mark its progress. The grey morn, streaked with silvery rays, ushered in the orient beams (how beautifully varying into purple!), yet I was sorry to lose the soft watery clouds which preceded them, exciting a kind of expectation that made me almost afraid to breathe, lest I should break the charm. I saw the sun —and sighed.<sup>51</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s description moves from the passive to the active. To begin with, the rocks sublimate the imagination, implying that it is nature that impinges upon Wollstonecraft’s feeling, rather than Wollstonecraft’s feeling that is projected onto nature. ‘A vague pleasurable sentiment’ — surely an equivalent of the ‘spontaneous pleasure’ that enveloped her on her first day in Sweden — inspires Wollstonecraft to hold herself open to ‘the embraces of nature’. Towards the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp. 267–68.

end of the passage, Wollstonecraft's description favours her own mental activity. She fears that it might be her that is producing the enchantment of nature and that, as such, it is within her power to break it. The last line is ambiguous: is it Wollstonecraft's dejected sigh that breaks her bond with nature, or is it the undoing of the spell of moonlight by the rising sun?

There may already be a turn towards the fancy in this moment. Wollstonecraft's predicament recalls the eighteenth-century pathological imagination. We might think, for example, of the Astronomer in Johnson's *Rasselas*, who, having spent too much time in his own company, begins to entertain the mad fantasy that it is he who controls the weather. It is, notably, the astronomer's madness that prevents Princess Nekayah from deeming him an exemplar of happiness, as was her original inclination. In a similar vein, we might also recall Thomas Reid's criticism of Hume's melancholy philosophy as 'like a hobby-horse.'<sup>52</sup> We might also think of the Shandies, pursuing hobby-horsical happiness on the basis of their idiosyncratic frameworks of intelligibility. In all of these cases it seems to be a lack of common sense, brought about in exile from the world, that gives rise to subjective fantasies.

### iii) Alienation

The fanciful aspect of the imagination begins to gain strength while Wollstonecraft is in Tønsberg, Norway. Biographically, Wollstonecraft's arrival in Tønsberg marks a period of temporary separation from her daughter, Fanny, and it is in Tønsberg that Wollstonecraft's last vestiges of hope regarding the possibility of a future with Imlay begin to unravel. In her first letter from Tønsberg, Wollstonecraft recounts how she was horrified to view a series of open coffins containing embalmed bodies in a local church. 'If this be not dissolution,' she writes,

it is something worse than natural decay — If is treason against humanity, thus to lift up the awful veil which would fain hide its weakness. The grandeur of the active principle is never more strongly felt than at such a sight; for nothing is so ugly as the human form wren deprived of life [...] Life, what art thou? Where goes this breath? this *I*, so much alive? In what element will it mix, giving or receiving fresh energy? — What will break the enchantment of animation? [...] I feel a conviction that we have some perfectible principle in our present vestment which will not be destroyed just as we begin to be sensible of

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<sup>52</sup> Reid, p. 36.

improvement [...] Thinking of death makes us tenderly cling to our affections – with more than usual tenderness, I therefore assure you that I am your's [...] <sup>53</sup>

In writing of life as 'the enchantment of animation', Wollstonecraft recalls her own capacity to momentarily re-enchant the world through an imaginative ethico-existential hermeneutic. Urgent questioning regarding the destination of the 'I' gives way to an assertive conviction, perhaps rather more in the spirit of the *Vindications*, that there must be a perfectible, improving principle inherent within us that connects us to a metaphysical, transcendent reality. This certainty in turn gives way to a more worldly assertion: 'I therefore assure you that I am your's'. The process of Wollstonecraft's thinking seems to be as follows: in confronting death in the form of human remains, Wollstonecraft is initially moved to question the afterlife of the I. She then responds to this questioning by asserting that the active principle (though not necessarily the I) must surely survive in some sense. She then again confronts the loss of the I, in response to which her thoughts turn to the you and to her desire that the I and the you not be separated.

At the beginning of the next letter, Wollstonecraft details another ecstatic experience. It is notable that, in all of the passages examined above, Wollstonecraft depicts herself as in the presence of other people. Even in her night-time carriage ride, she is accompanied by companions, albeit sleeping ones. On this occasion, however, Wollstonecraft depicts herself in solitude:

Here I have frequently strayed, sovereign of the waste, I seldom met any human creature; [...] Every thing seemed to harmonise into tranquillity [...] With what ineffable pleasure have I not gazed –and gazed again, losing my breath through my eyes –my very soul diffused itself in the scene - and, seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely-agitated waves, melted in the freshening breeze, or, taking its flight with fairy wing, to the misty mountain which bounded the prospect, fancy tripped over new lawns, more beautiful even than the lovely slopes on the winding shore before me. <sup>54</sup>

In her depiction of harmony, of her soul diffused into the scene, Wollstonecraft discloses an experience that goes beyond the aesthetic, that is anti-aesthetic. This is accomplished, for Wollstonecraft, on the basis of the synthetic imagination, the faculty that supports ethico-existential description. In the above passage, however, there seems to be a movement from

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<sup>53</sup> *Works IV.*, pp. 278–79.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 279–80.

synthesis to fanciful experience. Wollstonecraft harmonizes into the scene but then leaves it behind, imagining an ideal scene ‘more beautiful’ than that which is before her eyes. The movement is significant in so far as it typifies the transformation of rapture in the later stage of her journey. What was initially an experience of re-connection becomes an experience of being carried away.

Another aspect of this transformation, as aforementioned, is the growth of Wollstonecraft’s tendency to anxiously deflate moments of synthesis, re-describing them as subjective. Shortly after the above passage, Wollstonecraft writes:

Enough, you will say, of inanimate nature, and of brutes, to use the lordly phrase of man; let me hear something of the inhabitants. The gentleman with whom I had business, is the major of Tønsberg [...] I was sorry that his numerous occupations prevented my gaining as much information from him as I could have drawn forth, had we frequently conversed.<sup>55</sup>

In an earlier moment of ecstasy, Wollstonecraft was enraptured precisely by ‘observing *animated* nature’.<sup>56</sup> Now, having ceased to write about nature, Wollstonecraft refers to it as ‘inanimate’. In this, she imagines herself to be complying with the wishes of her interlocutor, who she believes is mainly interested in information and business. There is a hint of hostility on Wollstonecraft’s part, here. In assuming that her interlocutor does not see eye-to-eye with her regarding the animacy of nature, Wollstonecraft implies herself to be responsive to nature in a way that others are not. Perhaps she possesses imaginative power akin to the Romantic genius. However, in assuming that she is somewhat at odds with her interlocutor, in assuming that she is extraordinary while they are mundane, she also undercuts the synthetic imagination’s basis in fellow feeling.

Given that the imagination is the central faculty in cultivation, one would expect its degeneration into subjective fancy to damage Wollstonecraft’s optimism regarding progress. This would seem to be precisely what happens. The causation, however, appears to be circular. Wollstonecraft’s loss of faith in humanity drives the imagination towards fantasy and her drive towards fantasy alienates her from humanity. In the next letter, Wollstonecraft reviews her theory of cultivation in a passage quoted earlier. She cites the role of the human hand in ameliorating the landscape, enabling people to feed themselves more efficiently and thereby creating leisure

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

for the cultivation of the arts and the sciences. Wollstonecraft deflates her own anthropology, however, when at the end of the passage she writes:

The world requires, I see, the hand of man to perfect it, and as this task naturally unfolds the faculties he exercises, it is physically impossible that he should have remained in Rousseau's golden age of stupidity. And, considering the question of human happiness, where, oh! where does it reside? Has it taken up its abode with unconscious ignorance, or with the high-wrought mind? Is it the offspring of thoughtless animal spirits, or the elve of fancy continually flitting round the expected pleasure?<sup>57</sup>

Wollstonecraft may reject 'Rousseau's golden age of stupidity' in so far as she associates the primitive, that is 'thoughtless animal spirits', with the happiness of a commercial people, however, she posits the 'elve of fancy' as the only alternative to this. Wollstonecraft positions herself as caught between 'unconscious ignorance' on the one hand and the 'high-wrought mind' on the other, but the high-wrought mind is associated with subjective fantasy. Desperately inquiring as to the residence of human happiness, Wollstonecraft seems to see only two possibilities: either she pursues happiness in ignorant, animalistic pleasure like the rest of commercial society, or she pursues happiness through the operations of her own imagination, though this imagination now seems nothing but a childish dream.

This deflationary account of the imagination takes hold as Wollstonecraft's journey continues. In the same letter, Wollstonecraft describes a brief moment of imaginative synthesis, writing

I could scarcely conceive that they were without some consciousness of existence — without a calm enjoyment of the pleasure they diffused.

How often do my feelings produce ideas that remind me of the origin of many poetical fictions. In solitude, the imagination bodies forth its conceptions unrestrained, and stops enraptured to adore the beings of its own creation. These are moments of bliss; and the memory recalls them with delight.

But I have almost forgotten the matters of fact I meant to relate, respecting the counts.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

Wollstonecraft, by her own admission, cannot conceive that trees could be mere objects for a subject. They seem to have their own consciousness. However, in the next sentence, Wollstonecraft deflates this observation. The imagination produces its own ideas internally, projects them onto the world, and then contemplates them in bliss. This process, Wollstonecraft writes, occurs ‘in solitude’, in conditions where the presence of another person does not interrupt fantasy. Wollstonecraft’s ecstasy was an experience that disclosed her belonging in the world and to others, whereas this ‘bliss’ seems to be an entirely individualistic and virtual form of pleasure. In changing the topic in order to discuss (implicitly more important) ‘matters of fact’, Wollstonecraft further deflates the imagination by depicting her fanciful musings as a form of thoughtlessness.

In Laurvig, she writes of the cultivated mind’s creation of the imagination and its relation to the infinite. In the same manner as discussed earlier, this is followed by a double deflation. In the first place, Wollstonecraft suggests that these elated theories of the imagination are merely self-absorbed: ‘But I have rambled away again’.<sup>59</sup> In the second place, she redescribes her contemplation of the scene before her in terms of the fancy: ‘Dryden’s fable of the flower and the leaf was not a more poetical reverie’.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, in a letter written after her departure from Portoer, Wollstonecraft writes: ‘We had a French horn with us, and there was an enchanting wildness in the dying away of the reverberation that quickly transported me to Shakespeare’s magic island. Spirits unseen seemed to walk abroad, and flit from cliff to cliff to soothe my soul to peace.’<sup>61</sup> This reflection takes place amidst Wollstonecraft’s description of her visit to a Norwegian graveyard (‘here, indeed friendship extends beyond the grave’) and amidst Wollstonecraft’s recounting of her melancholic desire ‘to sleep in some caves of the rocks’. More and more, the enchanting powers of the fancy seem to take on a spectral, other-worldly character.

Significantly, the link between happiness and virtue, so essential to Wollstonecraft’s humanitarian faith, also becomes increasingly uncertain. Leaving Rusoer, Wollstonecraft writes ‘How illusive, perhaps the most so, are the plans of happiness founded on virtue and principle; what inlets of misery do they not open in a half-civilised society?’<sup>62</sup> While Wollstonecraft’s question demonstrates her dissatisfaction with the anticipation of happiness, here, she nevertheless maintains the position that it is the uncultivated nature of society that prevents the marriage of happiness and virtue. In the next letter, however, Wollstonecraft exclaims:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 298.

How much of the virtue which appears in the world is put on for the world? [...] Where is truth, or rather principle, to be found? These are, perhaps, the vapourings of a heart ill at ease—the effusions of a sensibility wounded almost to madness.<sup>63</sup>

Wollstonecraft here considers the possibility that virtue is mere performance, although she quickly dismisses this thought as a phantom, generated by her feelings of rejection. In the next letter, Wollstonecraft fantasizes about life in the Northern villages of Norway:

The description I received of them carried me back to the fables of the golden age: independence and virtue; affluence without vice; cultivation of mind, without depravity of heart [...] My imagination hurries me forward to seek an asylum in such a retreat from all the disappointments I am threatened with; but reason drags me back, whispering that the world is still the world [...] <sup>64</sup>

Wollstonecraft refuses to surrender her conviction as to the importance of societal improvement in favour of golden age nostalgia. Nevertheless, she recognizes that her own ill treatment at the hands of others has deeply affected her optimism regarding progressive cultivation and, at the same time, has made her more amenable to the nostalgic view. A tendency that is at work in these reflections, explicitly evident in the last passage, is for Wollstonecraft to connect nostalgia with the imagination.

Wollstonecraft does not in these moments proclaim, as a political conviction, that the goal of virtuous happiness is an illusion. The effect of alienation is rather an increased desire to leave the realities of politics behind, to leave behind the world that has cruelly rejected her, and to inhabit her own, self-enclosed world, where she might be protected from others. Happiness, correspondingly, begins to take on a character that is consistent with this desire. Happiness comes to be conceived of negatively, as a condition in which Wollstonecraft's I might be spared from having to endure being in the world and being with others.

Wollstonecraft tasks the fanciful imagination with the alleviation of her melancholy. 'Adieu!', she writes,

I must trip up the rocks. The rain is ever. Let me catch pleasure on the wing—I may be melancholy to-morrow. Now all my nerves keep time with the melody of nature. Ah! let

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 308.



me be happy whilst I can. The tear starts as I think of it. I must flee from thought, and find refuge from sorrow in a strong imagination—the only solace for a feeling heart. Phantoms of bliss! ideal forms of excellence! again enclose me in your magic circle, and wipe clear from my remembrance the disappointments that render the sympathy painful which experience rather increases than damps, by giving the indulgence of feeling the sanction of reason.<sup>65</sup>

Wollstonecraft's synthetic engagement with nature was sometimes referred to as an attunement to nature. Here, her nerves are tuned to the 'melody of nature'. Yet again, however, there is a deflationary move: the imagination is not, here, a contemplative faculty, it is rather one that opposes thought. In addition, whereas in her first letter Wollstonecraft directly related her two ecstatic experiences to her reader (in both cases the effect was to bring her back into communion with humanity) in this later passage, imaginative pleasure is only implied to occur after her 'Adieu'. Wollstonecraft must 'trip up the rocks', away from everyone else, before she can experience the imagination's spontaneous pleasure. She invokes both the fanciful and the transcendent in her exhortations to both 'phantoms of bliss' and to 'ideal forms of excellence'. Perhaps it now matters little to her whether the imagination produces phantoms or whether it connects her to an ideal, she simply desires that the imagination 'wipe clear from [her] remembrance the disappointments that render [...] sympathy painful'. Here, misanthropy is no longer a mistaken orientation towards the world, but rather one that has been given the 'sanction of reason'.

In later letters, Wollstonecraft's fantasies become increasingly morbid. Her reflections upon suicide become less-veiled. In letter XV she writes:

The grey cobweb-like appearance of the aged pines is a much finer image of decay; the fibres whitening as they lose their moisture, imprisoned life seems to be stealing away. I cannot tell why — but death, under every form, appears to me like something getting free — to expand in I know not what element; nay, I feel that this conscious being must be as unfettered, have the wings of thought, before it can be happy. [...] I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

Nature has now taken on the appearance of death. Even so, Wollstonecraft couches her observations in notions of seeming. The aged pines are only an ‘image’ of decay, life only ‘seems to be stealing away’, death ‘appears’ as a getting free. How things appear to her phenomenologically is constantly qualified by references to subjectivity. Wollstonecraft’s conviction is not in what she sees but in her belief that human beings ‘must be unfettered [...] before [they] can be happy’. Increasingly morbid, Wollstonecraft confounds desires born of alienated melancholy with happiness.

In Copenhagen, Wollstonecraft finds herself bereft of any opportunities for ecstasy in nature. Her tendency to feel imprisoned within her own subjectivity is exacerbated by the fact that in Copenhagen, surrounded by a ‘perfect plain’ and without ‘decorations’, Wollstonecraft recounts an absence of ‘any object, produced by nature or art, [that] took me out of myself’.<sup>67</sup> In visiting the deserted castle of Rosenborg, Wollstonecraft feels herself to be surrounded by the dead:

It seemed a vast tomb, full of the shadowy phantoms of those who had played or toiled their hour out, and sunk behind the tapestry, which celebrated the conquests of love or war. Could they be no more—to whom my imagination thus gave life? Could the thoughts, of which there remained so many vestiges, have vanished quite away? And these beings, composed of such noble materials of thinking and feeling, have they only melted into the elements to keep in motion the grand mass of life? It cannot be! [...] But avaunt! ye waking dreams! —yet I cannot describe the curiosities to you.<sup>68</sup>

Feeling the presence of deceased persons surrounding her, Wollstonecraft credits the imagination with bringing them to life once again. The phantasmic power of the imagination seems to animate spaces, so that the dead who once inhabited them can appear. Wollstonecraft implies that the dead are not there in reality, but that her mind creates the impression of their presence to her. Nevertheless, she continues to wonder whether there are not vestiges of persons that remain after their death. In the last line, Wollstonecraft again doubly deflates her imaginative musings. The presences of deceased persons are just ‘waking dreams’, poetical fictions. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft’s final clause assumes a gap between her and her interlocutor. Perhaps the interlocutor is uninterested but, more likely, Wollstonecraft assumes that they are unable to understand her.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 319.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 329.

Leaving Denmark for Germany, Wollstonecraft, by this point having been reunited with her daughter and with her maid, Marguerite, reflects upon how the latter seems enviably contended with small trifles. ‘Happy thoughtlessness!’, Wollstonecraft exclaims, ‘aye, and enviable harmless vanity, which thus produced a *gaité du coeur* worth all my philosophy!’<sup>69</sup> Later she asks, ‘Innocent and credulous as a child, why have I not the same happy thoughtlessness?’<sup>70</sup> Wollstonecraft here seems to envy the possibilities for happiness available to those who accept the contemporary, inegalitarian, commercial world for what it is. She observes this, too, in the Danes, who exhibit what she terms ‘negative happiness’, a happiness based upon self-applause and upon the false belief that liberty stems from the benevolence of the King.<sup>71</sup> ‘I never saw any so satisfied with their own situation’, she writes.<sup>72</sup>

In Germany, Wollstonecraft re-iterates her critiques of commercial society. ‘Men are strange machines’, she writes,

and their whole system of morality is in general held together by one grand principle which loses its force the moment they allow themselves to break with impunity over the bounds which secured their self-respect. A man ceases to love humanity, and then individuals, as he advances in the chase after wealth; as one clashes with his interest, the other with his pleasures: to business, as it is termed, everything must give way; nay, is sacrificed, and all the endearing charities of citizen, husband, father, brother, become empty names.<sup>73</sup>

Where self-interest is assumed as the principle for human endeavour and where this self-interest shapes the practices of a given people (i.e. business and the pursuit of wealth) all the understandings which formerly gave meaning to human life become empty, in so far as these understandings no longer make sense within commercial logic. Old words lose their meanings. The self throws off the intersubjective commitments that were once central to its identity and instead comes to engage with others through instrumental reason.

Her criticisms of feudalism notwithstanding, Wollstonecraft now begins to see contemporary historical developments as regress rather than progress. ‘The sword has been merciful,’ she writes,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

compared with the depredations made on human life by contractors, and by the swarm of locusts who have battened on the pestilence they spread abroad. These men, like the owners of negro ships, never smell on their money the blood by which it has been gained, but sleep quietly in their beds, terming such occupations *lawful callings* [...]<sup>74</sup>

Another problem with commerce, in Wollstonecraft's view, is that the sanction of law and contract, alongside the distance from cruelty that commerce engenders, means that suffering is always concealed from those responsible for its infliction. A warrior aristocracy is preferable to this because the cruelty that they inflicted upon others was plainly visible.

An important source of motivation for Wollstonecraft's anti-commercial critique is her sense of alienation. She can no longer access the current of fellow feeling because that current has been stopped by cold self-interested and mathematical calculation, but it is also true to say that people seem cold to her because she is alienated. All that is left to her, in this condition, is fanciful escape:

In fancy I return to a favourite spot, where I seemed to have retired from man and wretchedness; but the din of trade drags me back to all the care I left behind, when lost in sublime emotions. Rocks aspiring towards the heavens, and, as it were, shutting out sorrow, surrounded me, whilst peace appeared to steal along the lake to calm my bosom, modulating the wind that agitated the neighbouring poplars. Now I hear only an account of the tricks of trade, or listen to the distressful tale of some victim of ambition.<sup>75</sup>

Eventually, even these escapist fantasies desert her. She draws her account to a close with a final letter, written from Dover:

Adieu! My spirit of observation seems to be fled — and I have been wandering round this dirty place, literally speaking, to kill time; though the thoughts, I would fain fly from, lie too close to my heart to be easily shook off, or even beguiled, by any employment, except that of preparing for my journey to London.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 343.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

Wollstonecraft has withdrawn from the world to such an extent that she cannot observe anything beyond her own unhappy subjectivity. There is no longer futural anticipation, only killing time. Given the biographical circumstances of Wollstonecraft's return, her allusion to a final resolve cannot but sound ominous. Wollstonecraft arrived back in London in September 1795 and attempted suicide for a second time.

## **'THE LANGUAGE OF TRUTH AND NATURE': WOLLSTONECRAFT'S 'ON POETRY'**

In October 1795, a few weeks after her return from Scandinavia, Wollstonecraft attempted to commit suicide by jumping into the Thames from Putney bridge. Her unconscious body was fished out of the river by strangers who subsequently revived her. She had survived the attempt, but her long cherished hopes of a shared life with Imlay were over. What her experience had given her, however, was a new way of understanding the imagination's role in progressive cultivation and, more broadly, in the transformation of human consciousness. The next two years of Wollstonecraft's life brought marriage with William Godwin and the birth of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, later Mary Shelley. However, their familial contentment was to be brief. Wollstonecraft died of post-natal septicaemia in 1797. Between the publication of *Short Residence* and her untimely death, Wollstonecraft produced two further notable works, one of which was an unfinished novel, intended as a response to the *Rights of Women*, entitled *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman*.<sup>77</sup> The second was a work of aesthetic theory and literary criticism, first published as 'On Artificial Taste' in the *Monthly Magazine* in April 1797. It was later republished by William Godwin as 'On Poetry'.<sup>78</sup>

In this essay, Wollstonecraft's thinking about the imagination crystallizes into a theory of poetry. A poem, she argues, is the record of a moment of synthesis between subjective feeling and objective observation. This synthesis produces rapture, such as encapsulates both love of humankind and the love of God/Nature. In such moments, poetic images arise naturally. The antithesis to true poetry is artificial taste, the copying of images from books and the mechanical reproduction of them in verses. In the distinction between artificial taste and true poetry,

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<sup>77</sup> For a reading of *Maria* that engages questions of pleasure, enjoyment and happiness see Rowan Boyson, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 88–92 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139151009>>.

<sup>78</sup> Harriet Jump Devine argues that 'On Poetry' was edited by Godwin with the effect of decreasing the importance of the imagination; "'A Kind of Witchcraft': Mary Wollstonecraft and the Poetic Imagination", *Women's Writing*, 4.2 (1997), 235–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699089700200013>>.

Wollstonecraft argues, we can better understand why luxury has made headway in contemporary society and why an imaginative engagement with nature is crucial to overcoming it.

Wollstonecraft's essay shares certain similarities with Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), a work that Wollstonecraft read and referred to frequently. For one, Burke's definition of taste (in the 'Essay on Taste') as the joint production of sense, imagination and judgement is close to the definition of taste that Wollstonecraft proposes. What will concern us, here, however, are Burke's theories of language and poetry. Burke takes a Lockean, empiricist line on perception. We have ideas in the mind and they are accurate depictions of the world outside. Burke differentiates himself from Locke, however, in proposing an alternative theory of language. The primary function of words, in Locke's theory, is to designate particular ideas. Language emerges from common people, who use it to provide names for the objects of experience. Sometimes they use this language erroneously. For example, they see a whale and term it a fish. It is then the job of natural philosophers to clarify these mistakes based upon scientific knowledge. Locke's language theory is also bound up with his theory of wit and judgement, in which wit delightfully combines images which have no connection in nature, whereas the judgement separates them in order to make them clear and distinct. Natural philosophers thus use their judgement to counter the primitive or female tendency to fall for the 'agreeableness of the picture, and the gayety of fancy'.<sup>79</sup> Language, therefore, primarily aims at clarity, so as to pave the way for the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

Burke, however, in direct contrast to Locke, argues that language is non-representational. Burke argues that when we read, or hear, or speak language images do not emerge in our minds. Words work in a manner which is altogether different than as the mimetic designators of objects in the world. Burke outlines his theory of language in Part V of his *Enquiry*. He gives hints of his non-pictorial understanding of language earlier, however, in his discussion of the sublimity of Milton's poetry. He quotes the description of Satan in book 1 of *Paradise Lost*:

Here is a very noble picture; and in what does this poetical picture consist? in images of a tower, an archangel, the sun rising through mists, or in an eclipse, the ruin of monarchs, and the revolutions of kingdoms. The mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused. For separate them, and you lose much of the greatness, and join them, and you infallibly lose the

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<sup>79</sup> John Locke, p. 157.

clearness. The images raised by poetry are always of this obscure kind; though in general the effects of poetry, are by no means to be attributed to the images it raises; which point we shall examine more at large hereafter.<sup>80</sup>

Locke attacks wit on account of the superficial, muddled images upon which it works. The point of language is knowledge and therefore words which clearly refer to discrete ideas are preferred. For Burke, however, there is an inherent value in poetic language that gains its power through obscurity. The obscure, Burke argues, is a quality of the sublime, the clear of the beautiful. Burke's curious description of the effects of reading sublime poetry, of a mind 'hurried out of itself', recalls Wollstonecraft's descriptions of ecstasy. The sublime effect of poetry, therefore, is sourced largely in the obscurity of that from which it is constructed: words.

Burke directs the reader forwards to his subsequent discussion of language in book V. Although he uses the words 'picture' and 'images' in order to describe the effect of Milton's verse upon the reader, he comments that, in general, the power of poetic language is not derived from mental images. Burke describes the effects of words as threefold. There is a sound, a picture, and an '*affection* of the soul'.<sup>81</sup> Burke argues that although pictures may form in the mind as a result of conversation or reading, this is not a fundament of language. Instead, many words function by recalling the effects in which they were used on previous occasions. This is particularly true of what Burke terms 'compound abstract words', words like virtue, honour, persuasion and magistrate. These do not designate simple ideas in nature — aggregate words like man, horse, tree — nor do they name simple properties of things — (abstract words) like red, blue, round, square.<sup>82</sup> A compound abstract word like evil, for instance, originates either from the personal experience of pain caused by malevolence or from sympathizing with another person who has been negatively affected. Evil is a mere sound that becomes attached to such situations through custom. Eventually, upon hearing the sound 'evil' applied in multiple situations, one comes to see it as a general proposition and thereby loses the sense of the word as connected to a particular situation. Burke confesses that he has not been able to convince many people of his theory that language only incidentally produces mental images. 'It seems to be an odd subject of dispute with any man', Burke says, 'whether he has ideas in his mind or not'.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>80</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste; and Several Other Additions*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 62 <<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107360495>>>.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Burke's argument in book V attempts to persuade his readers that language does not function in this way. Instead, words operate through their relationship to sympathy and affect.

This theory gains its central importance to Burke's *Enquiry* in discussion of the effects of poetic language. Poetry, Burke argues, does not primarily function by mimesis. If it did it would always be an inferior art to painting, which produces more accurate copies of visual experience. This is certainly not the case, however. 'We take an extraordinary part in the passions of others', Burke says, and 'are easily affected and brought into sympathy by any tokens which are shewn of them; and there are no tokens which can express all the circumstances of most passions so fully as words'.<sup>84</sup> Poetic language is neither mimetic, nor inferior to visual art, because it is the true medium of passion. Entertaining the possibility that language does function by producing images in the mind, Burke states that description nevertheless gives rise only to insufficient and unsubstantial images of the object being described. Words in poetry are powerful, not primarily because they designate things in the world, but because they express the feelings of an individual while observing or acting or being acted upon by these things. The word, then, is already something of a synthesis of the subjective and the objective, for it is a crystallization of a collective human experience in a given environment. In this conception of the word (or at least of certain types of words) lies the makings of a theory of poetry.

Burke concludes by reflecting upon the role which language plays in observation. In doing so he implicitly recalls Locke's own epistemological discussion of words. 'Uncultivated people', Burke suggests, 'are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but for this reason they admire more and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner'.<sup>85</sup> Burke hereby reverses the emphasis upon, though he does not necessarily disagree with, Locke's distinction between wit and judgement. There is a value to the ordinary observation of things, which is to say an observation that is passionate. Uncultivated people are more vulnerable to being affected by the world and, therefore, speak about it in more passionate language. Cultivated people, by contrast, are skilled in observing the world in a critical manner. Judgement and knowledge are the products of un-affectual observation and of distinguishing and separating individual objects from their wider significance. For Locke, this is something to which language should aspire. A truly scientific language would have words which each designate a specific entity. For Burke, however, to aim at this is to miss the point of what language does: words communicate passions via the mechanism of sympathy. Language functions, therefore, not only and perhaps not primarily, in describing

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 176.



entities in the world. Many of the words we speak are initially the expressions of impassioned human beings responding to a particular situation.

A similar understanding of language is, arguably, latent in *Short Residence*. Burke resists the notion that words are only representational images. He prefers to see them as expressions of passion within a social context. He also emphasises the ecstatic nature of sublime poetry, writing of the mind's being hurried out of itself. These aspects of Burke's theory seem to recall Wollstonecraft's own emphases upon the socially defined justness of ethico-existential description and upon rapturous ecstasy. In 'On Poetry', these emphases crystallize into a theory of language and poetic composition. 'I was led to endeavour,' Wollstonecraft writes,

in one of my solitary rambles, to trace the cause, and likewise to enquire why the poetry written in the infancy of society, is most natural: which, strictly speaking (for *natural* is a very indefinite expression) is merely to say, that it is the transcript of immediate sensations, in all their native wildness and simplicity, when fancy, awakened by the sight of interesting objects, was most actively at work. At such moments, sensibility quickly furnishes similes, and the sublimated spirits combine images, which rising spontaneously, it is not necessary coldly to ransack the understanding or memory, till the laborious efforts of judgment exclude present sensations, and damp the fire of enthusiasm.<sup>86</sup>

Wollstonecraft argues that the primitive poet wrote naturally. The poetic images he deployed arose instinctively from the imaginative synthesis of 'immediate sensations' and the 'sight of interesting objects'. The image, in this account, is a poetic crystallization of an object and an emotion excited upon the viewing of it. Wollstonecraft contrasts this form of composition to, what she will later reveal to be, the modern habit of composition, whereby images are not derived from this synthesis, but from other sources.

It is perhaps notable that, in describing primitive poetry in this manner, Wollstonecraft attributes the primitive man with imagination, a faculty which she had formerly described as a late development of humankind. For all the seeming primitivism of this approach, Wollstonecraft emphasises the importance of education for modern poets. Wollstonecraft writes:

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<sup>86</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft: On Poetry, Contributions to the Analytical Review 1788-1797*, ed. by Janet Todd, Marilyn Butler, and Emma Rees-Mogg (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 7 <<https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.4324/9780429349362>>.

The effusions of a vigorous mind, will ever tell us how far the understanding has been enlarged by thought, and stored with knowledge. The richness of the soil even appears on the surface; and the result of profound thinking, often mixing, with playful grace, in the reveries of the poet, smoothly incorporates with the ebullitions of animal spirits, when the finely fashioned nerve vibrates acutely with rapture.

Although the naturalness of composition is important, Wollstonecraft argues, a great poem is nevertheless the result of a substantial enlargement of the mental faculties, such as can only be achieved through education. In making this argument, Wollstonecraft re-affirms the interwoven nature of cultivation: part-natural and part-anthropic. Wollstonecraft further confirms that 'profound thinking' is necessary for the experience of rapture. Rapture, here, as in *Short Residence*, is figured in terms of attunement to nature, an attunement that is at once embodied and intellectual.

Following this clarification, Wollstonecraft offers an account of the modern poet. Her account recalls her own poeticizing in Sweden. 'The poet, the man of strong feelings,' Wollstonecraft writes,

only gives us an image of his mind when he was actually alone, conversing with himself, and marking the impression which nature made on his own heart. If, at this sacred moment, the idea of some departed friend, some tender recollection when the soul was most alive to tenderness, intruded unawares into his thoughts, the sorrow which it produced is artlessly, yet poetically expressed — and who can avoid sympathizing?

Love to man leads to devotion — grand and sublime images strike the imagination — God is seen in every floating cloud, and comes from the misty mountain to receive the noblest homage of an intelligent creature — praise. How solemn is the moment, when all affections and remembrances fade before the sublime admiration which the wisdom and goodness of God inspires, when he is worshipped in *a temple not made with hands*, and the world seems to contain only the mind that formed, and the mind that contemplates it! These are not the weak responses of ceremonial devotion; nor, to express them, would the poet need another poet's aid: his heart burns within him, and he speaks the language of truth and nature with resistless energy.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

In a strikingly Wordsworthian formulation, Wollstonecraft describes the poet as a 'man of strong feelings'. The first stage of poetic composition involves a dialogue with oneself while impressed upon by nature. This dialogue may be marked by private business and cares, by thoughts and memories specific to the autobiography of the poet. However, where such sorrows are expressed 'artlessly', the reader will have no difficulty in understanding what the poet means. In great poetry, worries like those of Wollstonecraft regarding the subjectivism of her own writing, would not emerge. The poem might contain subjective elements, memories of deceased loved ones, for instance, but its significance is to be found in its revelatory nature.

The poet, in Wollstonecraft's description, resembles the mystic. God appears to him through nature. However, as she hints in her phrase 'love to man leads to devotion', in some sense the poet's capacity to perceive God in nature has its basis in interpersonal sympathy. Unless the poet exists within a current of fellow feeling the contemplation of God in nature is little more than the projection of the poet's own fancy. In so far as the poet writes from within this current, however, 'grand and sublime images strike the imagination': poetic images will naturally emerge as the result of inspiration. The poem's images, therefore, are not to be understood as the poet's own contrivance. The poet 'speaks the language of truth and nature'. Poetry is truth in so far as it is the result of synthesis between inner feeling and outward objects and a synthesis between culture and nature.

Although Wollstonecraft affirms a mystical and religious conception of poetic inspiration in the above, what she writes next creates ambiguity. 'The imagery of the ancients', she writes,

seems naturally to have been borrowed from surrounding objects and their mythology. When a hero is to be transported from one place to another, across pathless wastes, is any vehicle so natural, as one of the fleecy clouds on which the poet has often gazed, scarcely conscious that he wished to make it his chariot? Again, when nature seems to present obstacles to his progress at almost every step, when the tangled forest and steep mountain stand as barriers, to pass over which the mind longs for supernatural aid; an interposing deity, who walks on the waves, and rules the storm, severely felt in the first attempts to cultivate a country, will receive from the impassioned fancy "a local habitation and a name".

In imaginatively placing herself in the position of the primitive poet, Wollstonecraft seems to explain the emergence of polytheistic religion in terms of cultivation. Human beings create the supernatural, Wollstonecraft implies, on the basis of their futural ambitions. Surrounded by

‘pathless wastes’, the ancient poet looked at the mobility of the clouds and imagined that a race of divine superhumans road the clouds as chariots. On the basis of their desire to master nature, human beings imaginatively created a set of beings that could control nature, and then called upon them for ‘supernatural aid’. The chariot god is notably Greco-Roman. The ‘interposing deity [...] who walks on the waves’ could be Christ. In which case, the question emerges as to whether Wollstonecraft now views all supernaturalism, including that of Christianity, as the creation of the imagination. Moreover, if she does, are we to understand the imagination as a faculty which ascertains a spiritual reality or is the imagination purely a creative capacity of the human mind? The faculty continues to be haunted by ambiguity.

What is clear, however, is that the imaginative productions of the true poet are understood, by Wollstonecraft, as necessary correctives to the evils of commercial society. ‘Gross minds’, Wollstonecraft writes,

are only to be moved by forcible representations. To rouse the thoughtless, objects must be presented, calculated to produce tumultuous emotions; the unsubstantial, picturesque forms which a contemplative man gazes on, and often follows with ardour till he is mocked by a glimpse of unattainable excellence, appear to them the light vapours of a dreaming enthusiast, who gives up the substance for the shadow. It is not within that they seek amusement; their eyes are seldom turned on themselves; consequently their emotions, though sometimes fervid, are always transient, and the nicer perceptions which distinguish the man of genuine taste, are not felt, or make such a slight impression as scarcely to excite any pleasurable sensations. [...] These hints will assist the reader to trace some of the causes why the beauties of nature are not forcibly felt, when civilization, or rather luxury, has made considerable advances — those calm sensations are not sufficiently lively to serve as a relaxation to the voluptuary, or even to the moderate pursuer of artificial pleasures. In the present state of society, the understanding must bring back the feelings to nature [...]<sup>88</sup>

Wollstonecraft’s worries seem to be centred upon the problem of ‘amusement’. Ordinary people, Wollstonecraft suggests, tend to value artificial works that ‘produce tumultuous emotions’. What is lost is contemplation, the capacity to orient oneself towards ‘unattainable excellence’, to practice, in other words, the anticipation of happiness. For the voluptuary, the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp. 10–11.

imagination's capacity to glimpse a transcendent good is without substance. Such glimmerings are nothing to the fervid experience of 'pleasurable sensations'. Luxury poisons the possibilities of cultivation in the present state of society. The goal, for Wollstonecraft, is to 'bring back the feelings to nature'.

In closing her essay, Wollstonecraft turns, implicitly, to more autobiographical reflections. 'That the most valuable things are liable to the greatest perversion', Wollstonecraft writes,

Is however as trite as true:— for the same sensibility, or quickness of senses, which makes a man relish the tranquil scenes of nature, when sensation, rather than reason, imparts delight, frequently makes a libertine of him, by leading him to prefer the sensual tumult of love a little refined by sentiment, to the calm pleasures of affectionate friendship, in whose sober satisfactions, reason, mixing her tranquillizing convictions, whispers, that content, not happiness, is the reward of virtue in this world.<sup>89</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, the faculties and aptitudes that comprise human beings are not, in themselves, good or evil. Sensibility, although the basis of a person's capacity to relish nature, can also be corrupted when it does not gain the sanction of reason. The 'libertine' to whom Wollstonecraft refers is strongly implied to be Imlay. In her marriage to Godwin, by contrast, Wollstonecraft appears to have returned to an earlier emphasis upon 'affectionate friendship' as the foundation for romantic relationships. On this basis, Wollstonecraft affirms the reasonableness of contentment as opposed to happiness and, in doing so, places uncharacteristic emphasis upon the importance of contentment with the present state of the world. Simultaneously, she wistfully hints at the continuance of her aspiration to affect the marriage of happiness and virtue.

In aspiring to this marriage, Wollstonecraft hoped that a civilization might emerge in which an individual's existential condition, their being happy or unhappy, might perfectly equate to their treatment of others. The metaphor of marriage is appropriate, then, because at stake in this political vision is the relationship of self and other. Being with others is a commitment that remains forefront in Wollstonecraft's thought. In 'On Poetry', this commitment finds expression in a conception of the poet as a figure whose words have the power to transform public consciousness, bringing the people into communion with each other and into communion with nature. It is poetry, then, that is to enable the possibility of dwelling.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

## ‘FROM THIS BELOVED PRESENCE’: WORDSWORTH’S DWELLING

In the Petrarchan sonnet ‘The world is too much with us’ (l.1), Wordsworth describes the condition of modern alienation.<sup>90</sup> ‘Getting and spending’, he writes,

we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in nature that is ours  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!’ (l.2-4).

Wordsworth describes how a process resembling trade has led to our becoming alienated. We have exchanged our hearts for power and by means of that power we lay waste to nature. Our contemporary condition is one in which human agency prevents attunement to the natural world: ‘for this, for every thing, we are out of tune’ (l.8). On the volta, Wordsworth briefly evokes a monotheistic deity – ‘Great God!’ – before moving backwards in history to imagine a time in which human beings were attuned to nature: ‘I’d rather be | A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn’ (l.9-10). The volta represents a turn away from alienated modernity, invoking a Christian epoch, before settling upon pre-Christian paganism as a dwelling place for the human spirit. The pagan understands nature to be infused with divine energy, he sees ‘Proteus coming from the sea’ and hears ‘old Triton blow his wreathed horn’ (l.13-14). The sea is the sea but it also presences something else – a god. However, the sea presences to the pagan in a manner that it cannot for Wordsworth, for the poet acknowledges that paganism is a ‘creed outworn’ (l.10). In spite of his imaginative power, the poet is unable to recreate the pagan world. He cannot return because this world has gone and because his own world is too much with him.

The chapter explores alienation and dwelling as central terms in a Wordsworthian myth. This myth describes a condition of “primitive” or childish presence in nature and its interruption by the growth of the *mind’s power*. The equation between Wordsworth’s poetry and the Heideggerian notion of dwelling has been made by many critics. John Kerrigan, for example,

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<sup>90</sup> William Wordsworth, *Poems of William Wordsworth, Volume 1: Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Penrith, UK: Humanities-Ebooks, LLP, 2009) <<https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=3306086&query=the+poems+of+william+wordsworth>> [accessed 23 September 2020].

argues that dwelling was the most pervasive concern in Wordsworth's poetic life.<sup>91</sup> What makes the poetry of the great decade great, Kerrigan argues, is that Wordsworth is forever seeking a home, yet at the same time is troubled by his recognition of the destruction of homes and dwelling places.<sup>92</sup> 'The Ruined Cottage' offers a key example of this recognition. In the later poetry by contrast, from around the time of *The Excursion* onwards, this question has been settled by Wordsworth: 'his proper home is in heaven'.<sup>93</sup> This does not mean, I would argue, that the early Wordsworth, concerned with dwelling, writes in opposition to the notion of a transhuman presence. Rather, as is indicated in 'The world is too much with us', he is uncertain as to whether this presence is that of the divine or of divinities. He is uncertain, additionally, as to whether this presence might not merely be the human spirit, a spirit which only seems transhuman because it cannot be contained or understood by any particular person. My sense, also, is that during this period of life Wordsworth may not have believed in the afterlife.

Central to Wordsworth's dwelling is *nature's presence*. This phrase should be taken to refer, in part, to the re-enchantment of the world as affected by Wordsworth, in accordance with the project that crystallized around the Romantic symbol.<sup>94</sup> For Wordsworth, one direction for this project was a poetic rethinking of representation in terms of poiesis, the ancient Greek word for making. I use this word to invoke Heidegger's notion of poetic dwelling and also as a contrast to his description of ancient Greek *techne*, a form of knowledge closely related to poiesis. Heidegger translates *techne* in terms of bringing forth or producing.<sup>95</sup> For the Ancient Greeks, he argues, this can mean "a letting-appear". However, after the culmination of the metaphysical tradition in Western modernity, it will gain its modern sense as technological en-framing. To en-frame is to attempt to create a stable blueprint of being that is universal and unchanging throughout time. Poiesis is also a mode of bringing forth but one which, I will argue, is of a different kind than that of technical production. In Wordsworth, the growth of mind's power is not entirely synonymous with *techne*, however, both are related to metaphysics in so far as they seek to ground the fluctuations of meaningful phenomena in terms of an order of universal representations. The tension between mind's power and nature's presence will be operative

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<sup>91</sup> John Kerrigan, 'Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking', *Essays in Criticism*, 35.1 (1985), 45-75 (p. 51) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/XXXV.1.45>>.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71; As William A. Ulmer summarizes, another common variation on this theme is to see the early Wordsworth as a pantheist, who celebrates an immanent spirit in nature, and the later Wordsworth as 'looking beyond nature for spiritual consolation'. 'Wordsworth, the One Life, and "The Ruined Cottage"', *Studies in Philology*, 93.3 (1996), 304-31 (p. 331).

<sup>94</sup> See Nicholas Halmi, *The Genealogy of the Romantic Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>95</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (London: HarperCollins, 1971), p. 157.

throughout Wordsworth's great-decade poetry. What is more, each of them can be associated with a different Wordsworthian understanding of happiness. Stoical ataraxia relates to mind's power, whereas, in the mode of nature's presence, happiness is blessedness. In using the term blessedness, I mean to invoke Wordsworth's sense of himself as having been chosen for happiness by nature. I mean also to evoke a sense of porousness to a world that Wordsworth views to be filled with spiritual agencies. As I will argue, however, blessedness also requires a relinquishment of agency, such as one might associate with Charles Taylor's notion of the porous self. The porous self cannot disengage as easily as the buffered self and, for that reason, is less able to fashion its circumstances in accordance with its will. It is for this reason that Wordsworth, who values the power of the will, which is equivalent to mind's power, cannot fully give himself up to blessedness or to dwelling. Like Wollstonecraft, he continues, albeit in a muted way, to aspire to the summum bonum, to a happiness untouched by vulnerability.

## ACTIVE PASSIVITY AND BLESSEDNESS

Wordsworth's 'Home at Grasmere' opens with the description of a childhood memory. The poet recalls that when he first encountered Grasmere he was overcome 'with a sudden influx' (l.4).<sup>96</sup> A sensation passed from the outside to the inside. This gave rise to the thought:

"What happy fortune were it here to live!  
And if I thought of dying, if a thought  
Of mortal separation could come in  
With paradise before me, here to die." (l.9-12)

The child imagines Grasmere to be an Edenic paradise, though different from Eden in that mortality is already present. A sense of human finitude is present, too, in the invocation of 'happy fortune'. This child is a finite and vulnerable being, who cannot expect to realize his dream on his own. He can only hope that the world might happily conspire on his behalf. Blessed by such fortune, even death — which threatens to separate Wordsworth from his hoped-for dwelling place — has a place in the child's vision of paradise.

Continuing, Wordsworth describes the scene of his remembrance in greater detail. He further emphasises the passivity of his childhood self before the striking appearance of Grasmere.

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<sup>96</sup> All quotations from 'Home at Grasmere' taken from *Poems I*.



He describes himself mainly in terms of negations or with verbs depicting states of inactivity: 'I forgot my haste' (l.6-7); 'I was no Prophet, nor had even a hope' (l.13); 'Long did I halt' (l.20); 'I sate, and stirred in Spirit as I looked' (l.33). In the last example, Wordsworth's verbal actions of sitting and looking seem less resonant than the past participle phrase 'stirred in Spirit', which makes Wordsworth's spirit the object of an action carried out by an unnamed agent. Relatedly, Wordsworth attributes agency to natural phenomena, writing

Who could look  
And not feel motions there?<sup>9</sup> I thought of clouds  
That sail on winds; of breezes that delight  
To play on water' (l.24-27).

Significantly, in both sentences the agencies of nature – their motions, their sailing and their delighting – appear through the perspective of a subject. The motions are felt by a hypothetical observer and the playing breezes are the thoughts of the child. On this aspect of Wordsworth's poetics, Adam Potkay comments: 'Wordsworth's style allows for maximal possibilities of the interconnection with minimal clarification of who or what is acting or being acted on'.<sup>97</sup> This is what will be termed Wordsworth's *active passivity*.

This confusion between who or what is acting or being acted on is again invoked where Wordsworth writes:

I seemed to feel such liberty was mine  
Such power and joy; but only for this end:  
To flit from field to rock, from rock to field,  
[...] yet still  
Within the bounds of this huge Concave; here  
Should be my home, this Valley be my World' (l.35-43).

The liberty described invokes a freedom from “unnatural” restraint, in that no dominating will is present. However, that freedom also involves the binding of Wordsworth’s spirit to the locality of Grasmere, to such an extent that his behaviour would mimic that of a bird, flitting from field to rock. Wordsworth would be living, then, under the law of nature. He would be free,

<sup>97</sup> *Wordsworth's Ethics*, (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp. 80–81  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=3318619> [accessed 29 January 2021].

nonetheless, because that nature would be his nature, ‘this end’ would be his end. To die in Grasmere would represent the fulfilment of the purpose of a particular life, the dream of which the influx brought in.

Two hundred lines later, Wordsworth again invokes this sense of active passivity. Christopher Ricks writes of Wordsworth’s use of enjambment, focusing on the manner in which Wordsworth’s line endings syntactically create ambiguous possibilities for meaning.<sup>98</sup> On this occasion, it is enjambment that creates the uncertainty as to who or what is acting or being acted upon. Arriving in Grasmere as adults, Wordsworth describes Grasmere’s reception of him and Dorothy (throughout the poem referred to as Emma):

The naked trees,  
The icy brooks, as on we passed, appeared  
To question us. “Whence come ye? To what end?”  
They seemed to say. “What would ye?” said the shower,  
“Wild Wanderers, whither through my dark domain?”  
The Sunbeam said, “Be happy.” They were moved,  
All things were moved; they round us as we went,  
We in the midst of them. (l.229-36)

Trees, brooks, showers, and sunbeams are depicted as animate, questioning the purpose of the Wordsworth siblings. On the second line of the passage, however, the enjambment which leaves the last word of the line as ‘appeared’ creates ambiguity as to how the reader should understand this animacy. One can read the line as follows: ‘The icy brooks, as on we passed, appeared to question us’. In this case, Wordsworth is saying that the brooks only *seemed* to question them. To appear, in this case, is a synonym of to seem. If one reads the line as an independent unit, however, the sense is different: ‘The icy brooks, as on we passed, appeared’. In this case, Wordsworth is saying that the trees and brooks showed-up, they appear like an apparition appears. If one reads the entire sentence with this meaning of ‘appeared’, then the sense is that the trees and brooks show-up in order to question William and Dorothy. In the first case, the questioning can be understood to take place in the minds of William and Dorothy. From their perspective the brooks *seem* to question them but, in reality, do not. In the second case, the trees and brooks are animate, questioning agencies.

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<sup>98</sup> *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)  
<<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=4964415>> [accessed 28 January 2021].

These two possibilities, one in which the mind projects animacy onto the world and the other in which the world is animate, are further complicated by the closing lines of the passage. The word ‘moved’, like the word ‘appeared’, possesses a double sense. The fact that all things were moved can be taken to mean that they possess human like qualities, namely emotions; the brooks and trees are moved emotionally. Alternatively, ‘moved’ can mean that they seemed to move as the perspective of William and Dorothy changes as they walk. Indeed, this also brings further possible meaning to the word ‘appeared’, because it now seems possible that the apparition of these things is actually an effect of the movement of William and Dorothy. The trees and brooks appear over the horizon as the two siblings move through the world. The ambiguity is as to whether things are moving and appearing or whether the minds of human beings are active in making them move and appear.<sup>99</sup>

Active passivity is the basis for the particular kind of happiness that belongs to Wordsworth after his reunion with Grasmere. This happiness can be termed blessedness. Blessedness is a gift received by a person who is receptive to nature’s presence. Wordsworth is blessed because he has become attuned to things. The language that the poet uses to describe his blessedness emphasises the reciprocity between the inward and the outward. For example, Wordsworth writes:

The unappropriated bliss hath found  
An owner, and that owner I am he.  
The Lord of this enjoyment is on Earth  
And in my breast (l.85-88).

In the first two lines, Wordsworth implies that his bliss formerly existed independently of him, inhabiting a place. Thus, when Wordsworth himself comes to inhabit the place he appropriates the bliss that is already there. The metaphor is one of ownership, which would seem to refer, most obviously, to Wordsworth’s proprietorship of Dove Cottage. However, it also might refer to his coming-into-his-own. Moving to Grasmere involves, not only ownership, but also ownness. In the second two lines, Wordsworth offers a new metaphor. His enjoyment is associated, symbolically, with a personified lord who inhabits breast and earth simultaneously. If Wordsworth has appropriated a good feeling then that good feeling nevertheless maintains an

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<sup>99</sup> Seamus Perry notes how, in Wordsworth, the world ‘thing’, embodies a tension not dissimilar from a tension that I describe in this chapter, a tension between thing as ‘numinous’ as well as ‘stubbornly material’. ‘Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Other Things’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 29.1 (1998), 31–41 (p. 31).

independent existence within him. Both of these metaphors derange any clear distinction between the realm of feelings and the realm of nature. The inner space is coterminous with the outer space. They have the same terminus, the same end.

This sense of coterminous-ness is invoked a few lines later, with Wordsworth writing:

The one sensation that is here; 'tis here,  
 Here as it found its way into my heart  
 In childhood, here as it abides by day,  
 By night, here only; or in chosen minds  
 That take it with them hence, where'er they go.  
 'Tis (but I cannot name it), 'tis the sense  
 Of majesty and beauty and repose,  
 A blended holiness of earth and sky,  
 Something that makes this individual Spot,  
 This small abiding-place of many men,  
 A termination and a last retreat,  
 A Centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,  
 A Whole without dependence or defect,  
 Made for itself and happy in itself,  
 Perfect Contentment, Unity entire (l.156-170).

To begin with, Wordsworth seems to deviate from the ordinary meaning of 'sensation' as an experience pertaining to the sensory apparatus of living beings. The sensation, like the bliss, inhabits Grasmere, awaiting the arrival of the mind that will appropriate it. Wordsworth insists that the sensation is 'here', but to what does here-ness refer? If we take the poet to be standing in Grasmere as he writes, then the 'here' refers to a physical location. It is only 'here' because it happens to be near-at-hand to the poet at the time of writing. If the poet was writing, not from Grasmere, but from London, instead of 'here' he would write "there" or "in Grasmere". In this sense, we are understanding 'here' to denote a physical location in space that is unvarying whether or not a human being is present. However, 'here' might not refer to a physical location at all. It might refer to whatever is near-at-hand to the consciousness that announces its presence. This is the here of "here I am". In this second sense, here-ness refers to the primordial condition of consciousness. Thus, to be here means to be open to sensations.

In this passage, as in others, Wordsworth's aim is not to force a decision regarding which of the two possibilities is true and which one is false, for both of them are true. Both are expressions of a unity that cannot ever be properly expressed: 'but I cannot name it', Wordsworth writes. The two are united, furthermore, in so far as Wordsworth's blessedness arises on the basis of a simultaneous psychical and physical homecoming. Both meanings of 'here' terminate at home. Where Wordsworth writes of Grasmere as 'a termination and a last retreat' he would certainly seem to be invoking mortality, especially since the child's dream involved a premonition of his own death. However, Wordsworth's homecoming is terminal, not only in so far as it refers to the end of life, but also in its reference to life's end, that is to say, life's *telos*. Wordsworth's path, alongside those of the valley's other inhabitants, terminates in Grasmere because it is 'a centre' to which all paths lead. To arrive at that centre is to participate in Grasmere's 'Perfect contentment' and 'Unity entire'. Here, he fulfils his inner potential. However, in a manner appropriate to a blessedness that is based upon the ambiguities of here-ness, this inner potential is not the essence of a self that is independent from the world. It is, instead, a potentiality gifted to Wordsworth by the world during his childhood. The source of Wordsworth's self is, in this sense, external rather than internal to him. It was in-spirited in him by an influx.

## ALIENATION AND DWELLING: A MYTH FOR MODERNITY

'Home at Grasmere' is a poem about dwelling. That should not be taken to mean that it is a poem about a particular dwelling place, although it certainly is that also. The adult Wordsworth rejoices in the fulfilment of the childish dream writing: 'dear Vale, | One of thy lowly dwellings is my home!' (l.52-53). More fundamentally, however, it is a poem about the condition of dwelling. This condition, as Wordsworth describes it, is one in which 'They who are dwellers in this holy place | Must needs themselves be hallowed' (l.366-67), in which they are 'The Dwellers of the Dwelling' (l.858). The most fundamental aspect of dwelling is that of the continuity between inside and outside, mind and world. As Wordsworth writes of the inhabitants of Grasmere: 'A like majestic frame of mind in those | Who here abide, the persons like the place' (l.403-04). This should not be taken merely as a reflection upon the impact of the environment on human psychology, though such reflections do feature in Wordsworth's poetic project. Dwelling is rather a radical challenge to the subject/object world picture and thus to the notion of mind as the container of meanings. Wordsworth depicts his utterances as driven by a voice that is not his own:

the voice,  
Which is as a presiding Spirit here  
Would lead me (l.363-65).

It is the spirit of Grasmere that leads him to proclaim the holiness of habitat and inhabitant, not the voice of personal agency. In the condition of dwelling, meaningfulness is not merely internal to human re-presentation, but also pertains to primordial presentation, to presence.

For Heidegger, dwelling is a response to modernity. ‘Mortals dwell’, Heidegger writes, ‘in that they save the earth – taking the word in the old sense still known to Lessing. Saving does not only snatch something from danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing.’<sup>100</sup> For Heidegger, saving (elsewhere described as a ‘letting’ or a ‘letting be’) refers to a condition of active passivity. Without mortals’ dwelling there is no presencing of things. That does not mean, however, that the presence of things is purely dependent upon human beings. Presencing only occurs with the co-presence of things and mortals, through what Heidegger describes in the ‘Origin of the Work of Art’ as the ‘strife’ of earth and world.<sup>101</sup> For Heidegger there is not a subjective realm of meanings and values on the one hand and a realm of material objects on the other hand. There is only, at the most primordial level, a co-presence. Mortals are the preservers of the spatio-temporal clearing, without which there couldn’t “be” anything, but nor could there be a clearing without the appearance of things within it. To dwell is to preserve the illumination of the clearing and in doing so *to let be* the phenomena that are always already in it.

In Wordsworth’s poetry, alienation and dwelling form part of a mythical narrative. Wordsworth’s myth tells of humankind’s increasing alienation from nature and contains the prophesy that, one day, we might once again dwell in nature. For Wordsworth, alienation describes the spiritual and material conditions of modern life, including urbanisation, industrialisation, commodification, disenchantment, instrumentalization. Due partly to the influence of Coleridge, Wordsworth’s verse embodies a Romantic reaction against Cartesianism, comparable to that of Heidegger. Kenneth Johnston writes of Wordsworth as part of a ‘tiny philosophical avant-garde’ who set themselves

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<sup>100</sup> ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, p. 148.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

against the alienating implications of Descartes's new philosophy: a dead earth inhabited by powerful but groundless ghosts. Cartesian materialist assumptions have continued to be the predominant mold of our modern world, a process which began first and most strongly in the British Industrial Revolution.<sup>102</sup>

Wordsworth's poetry, Johnston continues, emerges in response to 'man's increasingly tangible ability to divorce himself destructively from the given universe'. In objectifying the universe and subjectivizing meanings, human beings gain great power over nature, for nature is no longer taken to be meaningful in itself. This great power comes at a great cost, however, for human beings now understand themselves to be aliens on the earth.

In confronting alienation, Wordsworth does not reject objective science per se. Indeed, Wordsworth frequently celebrates the achievements of modern science, listing Newton as one of his great influences in Book III of *The Prelude*.<sup>103</sup> What he rejects is the view that objects are the foundations of a material universe. In reference to the first, Wordsworth invokes Coleridge:

to thee  
Science appears but, what in truth she is,  
Not as our glory and our absolute boast,  
But as a succedaneum, and a prop  
To our infirmity. Thou art no slave  
Of that false secondary power, by which,  
In weakness, we create distinctions, then  
Deem that our puny boundaries are things  
Which we perceive, and not which we have made.  
To thee, unblinded by these outward shows  
The unity of all has been reveal'd [...] (*Prelude* Book II, l.216-26).

At its foundations, reality is a unity rather than a duality. For Wordsworth and Coleridge analytical distinctions, like that of subject and object, should be understood as pragmatic tools. We should not, however, conflate human-made techniques and methodologies of knowing with

<sup>102</sup> Kenneth R. Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 17-18.

<sup>103</sup> See lines 260-275 in *Poems of William Wordsworth, Volume 2: Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth*, ed. by Jared Curtis (Penrith, United Kingdom: Humanities-Ebooks, LLP, 2009) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=3306075>> [accessed 15 June 2020]. All quotations from 1805 *Prelude* taken from this volume.

reality. The foundations of the universe are that of a mysterious unity between mind and matter, a unity which must be 'reveal'd' to us rather than discovered by us.

The understanding of nature as a collection of objects has an ethical counterpart in the objectification of people and things. This is the second aspect of alienation that Wordsworth attempts to counter. An abiding concern of Wordsworth's is that urban life, which he associates with industrialisation and commodification, destroys the fabric of human sociality. In a passage in 'Home at Grasmere', this familiar Wordsworthian critique of urban life is curiously brought into conversation with the life of a hermit. 'He truly is alone,' Wordsworth writes,

He of the multitude, whose eyes are doomed  
To hold a vacant commerce day by day  
With that which he can neither know nor love—  
Dead things, to him thrice dead—or worse than this,  
With swarms of life, and worse than all, of men,  
His fellow men, that are to him no more  
Than to the Forest Hermit are the leaves  
That hang aloft in myriads (l.808-16).

He who lives amidst the urban multitude is doomed to relate to things and people only as commodities. His eyes hold 'vacant commerce' with 'dead things' because he lives in a world of objects, bereft of any inherent spiritual value. His relationships all have the character of commercial exchange because he, in his loneliness, only seeks personal gain. The forest hermit, although undoubtedly a more sympathetic character than the alienated urbanite, has also rejected the world in favour of an inward prosperity. If the myriad leaves seem to mean nothing to the hermit, it is because he orients himself towards the transcendent universal at the expense of the particular presence of things. A similar (sympathetic) critique of the hermetic life is found in 'Lines left upon a seat in a Yew-tree'.<sup>104</sup>

Wordsworth makes a related critique of alienation in moral discourse in the fragmentary 'Essay on Morals'. In the essay, Wordsworth attacks the systematic and utility-based moral philosophies of William Godwin and William Paley. Wordsworth's overarching point is that they fail to recognize habitude (both in the sense of habit and habitat) as the true basis for morality. 'These moralists', Wordsworth writes,

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<sup>104</sup> All quotations from the *Lyrical Ballads* taken from *Poems 1*.



attempt to strip the mind of all its old clothing when their object ought to be to furnish it with new. All this is the consequence of an undue value upon that faculty which we call reason. The whole secret of this juggler's trick [...] lies (not in fitting words to things (which would be a noble employment) but) in fitting things to words [...] They contain no picture of human life; they *describe* nothing.<sup>105</sup>

Wordsworth sets himself against the colonization of moral discourse by modes of systematic and calculating reason. The rejection of the particular prejudices of a particular individual, upon which such moral philosophies are based, are thoroughly wrong-footed because morality is, in fact, found precisely in these prejudices. There is a Burkean tendency to Wordsworth's thinking, here. This does not mean, however, that prejudices could not be enlightened prejudices, nor does it mean that they cannot be reformed. In a manner that connects up to the poetic project announced in the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth is interested in the way that *images* might have the power to change habits in a way that propositions about morality cannot. Presumably, images, and not systems, have the power 'to incorporate [themselves] with the blood & vital juices of our minds'. This is because images are not "about" things in the same way as propositions. Propositions are things fitted to words, whereas images are words fitted to things. At the heart of this distinction lies two fundamentally different conceptions of moral discourse. For Godwin and Paley (at least in Wordsworth's understanding), logical propositions, which is to say human-made representations, are the loci of moral truth. For Wordsworth, by contrast, the truth is already embodied in human life, the challenge is finding the right words to express it. The contrast, then, is between a faith in representation, in the first place, and a faith in presence, in the second.

In a variety of different ways, Wordsworth sees modern life as characterized by an alienated absorption in succedanea, rather than an absorption in nature itself. We live, like the Shandies, in a world of our own theoretical representations and constructed models, all the while ignoring the mysteriousness of the appearance of phenomena. However, this picture of reality that we inhabit is very difficult to escape. This is because the modern subject is powerfully implicated in that picture. Indeed, only on the basis of there being this picture does the modern subject emerge. It is, in part, an emphasis upon representation that permits the separation of the

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<sup>105</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. 1*, ed. by W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 103 <10.1093/actrade/9780198719748.book.1> [accessed 16 October 2020].

subject from the phenomenal integrity of the thing and thereby allows them to become the self-authoring individual and the meaningless object respectively. Thus, Wordsworth's myth of a decline into alienation and of a prophesised recovery of dwelling, must attempt to recapture an image of human life before the advent of modern subjectivity. This image Wordsworth finds in childhood.

If, for Kant, the Enlightenment was best characterized as the achievement of maturity, Wordsworth's Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment involves, as Johnston argues, a 'redefinition of maturity [...]: not the world's definitions of adult behaviour, *but* the special one that he has discovered.'<sup>106</sup> Thus Wordsworth's homecoming in 'Home at Grasmere' is simultaneously the achievement of dwelling and the recovery of childish/primitive enchantment for the adult. Finding his childhood dream fulfilled, Wordsworth attacks the mature notion of life as a 'conquest'. 'Shame that this was ever so', writes Wordsworth, 'Not to the Boy or Youth, but shame to thee, | Sage Man' (l.67-69). In Wordsworth's redefinition, the child's way of being in the world – his feelings of wonder, his tendency to attribute agency to beings that adults know are inanimate – is imaginative, but that does not mean (as it tends to mean today) that it is unreal. Instead, the imagination refers (as it did for Wollstonecraft) to a faculty that can grasp truths in a way that the dividing powers of reason cannot. Wordsworth must stay true to the child's apprehension of nature's presence because that presence is the source of meaning in his life.

As with Wollstonecraft, however, this is not the only function of the imagination in Wordsworth. In *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814*, Geoffrey Hartman offers an account of Wordsworth's myth. At the heart of Wordsworth poetry, Hartman argues, lies a development pattern. The pattern is an autobiographical account of the poet's transition from childhood to adulthood, but it is also an account of humankind's transition from primitive to civilized. The poet moves from an immature, unselfconscious immersion in nature to a self-consciousness which appears to constitute a separation from nature and a violation of it, he then finally binds himself to nature as an ethical act. While Wordsworth's work recognizes and celebrates the independence and power of self-conscious human beings separated from nature, he nevertheless fears the potentially apocalyptic power of the imagination. He thus advocates for the importance of an ethical reunion between the mind and nature. This reunion, however, is not a return to the childish or primitive. It is rather a new mode of existence which represents the synthesis of the childish/primitive with contemporary historical conditions.

Re-iterating this developmental pattern in different terms, Hartman writes:

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<sup>106</sup> Johnston, p. 61.

Haunted by the idea of a secret or sacred “spot” on which nature seemed to converge, [Wordsworth] rediscovered the religious (and romance) motif of numinous places. [...] Poetic genius, in Wordsworth, never quite freed itself of the genius loci, and in attempting to respect these nature-involved epiphanies, he re-lived on the very ground of his senses the religious struggle between Hellenic (fixed and definite) and Hebraic (indefinite, anti-anthropomorphic) representations of the divine.<sup>107</sup>

To translate this into the notions of alienation and dwelling, it might be said that Wordsworth’s poetry articulates a primordial presence. This presence is the meaningful “enchantment” of the world, such as Wordsworth experienced as a child and such as characterizes the pagan experience of the divine as manifest in nature (‘I’d rather be a pagan | suckled in a creed outworn’). As the child grows into self-consciousness (a development analogous to the emergence of modern subjectivity) he comes to understand himself as separate from nature. This recognition is the basis for the mind’s creative power, for things no longer impinge meaningfully upon the mind, and the mind is free to order an objective world in accordance with the will. However, this is also the basis of alienation. The challenge at the heart of Wordsworth’s poetry, then, is to affect the marriage of mind and nature after the event of their divorce. Wordsworth seeks to transform alienation into dwelling, a transformation which would involve a turn away from the metaphysical and towards the particular. However, Wordsworth remains conflicted in that he cannot at all times wholeheartedly wish away the agency and power of the liberated mind.

There is, then, a dialectical tension in Wordsworth’s poetry between mind’s power and nature’s presence. Comparable versions of this tension have been expressed in different ways by a number of different critics. This tension has been summed up by James Castell as an oscillation between a ‘rootedness or embeddedness in things’ and ‘an abstraction that might be figured as the [...] transcendence of things’.<sup>108</sup> There is, first and foremost, Hartman’s tension between self-consciousness and unselfconsciousness. There is also James Engell’s argument regarding a tension between Wordsworth’s uses of the words ‘earth’ and ‘nature’. In Wordsworth, Engell writes, ‘we are mortal creatures *of* the earth in its elemental rhythms of life and death as *natura naturata*. We and the human mind, the soul, are enduring spirits *with* Nature in its perpetuity as

<sup>107</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. xii <[https://web-a-ebscohost-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzkzMzExMV9fQU41?sid=cd6da8f0-3f9b-4571-85af-70300fabf3cb@sessionmgr4006&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp\\_1&rid=0](https://web-a-ebscohost-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzkzMzExMV9fQU41?sid=cd6da8f0-3f9b-4571-85af-70300fabf3cb@sessionmgr4006&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_1&rid=0)>.

<sup>108</sup> James Castell, ‘Wordsworth and the “Life of Things”’, *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 741 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199662128.013.0045>>.

*natura naturans*. We are both.’<sup>109</sup> Also significant for this thesis is Mark Offord’s sense of a meandering tension between “pictures” of human beings in their cultural, historical, local particularity and a global system into which these pictures might be incorporated and thereby add up to a philosophical anthropology ‘On Man, on Nature, and on human Life’ (‘Grasmere’ l.959).<sup>110</sup> Offord’s tension is meandering, not only because it continues over the course of the poetic career, but also because, in Wordsworth, nature itself seems less a stable geological foundation and more a temporally shifting river; water into which one never steps twice. What keeps the poetry from ontology, Offord argues, is that ‘there is no first principle in Wordsworth, not even “nature”’.<sup>111</sup> This aspect of Wordsworth’s poetry is also recognized by Charles Taylor, who argues that Wordsworth’s poetry is characterized by ‘ontological indeterminacy’.<sup>112</sup> If, therefore, we can identify in Wordsworth a tension between an abstract mental power and a particularized natural presence, we must also recognize that nature’s presence lacks a determinate foundation. Of the shifting presence (or presences) in Wordsworth’s poetry, a reader might ask (as perhaps Wordsworth himself asked): is it God? the spirits of places? Or ‘the still, sad music of humanity’ (l.92)?<sup>113</sup>

## MIND’S POWER, NATURE’S PRESENCE

The tension between mind’s power and nature’s presence finds perhaps its most resonant expression in the two-part and thirteen-book variants of the *Prelude*. In the two-part *Prelude* (1798-99), Wordsworth depicts his childhood self as a being incorporated in nature. ‘Was it for this’, Wordsworth writes, ‘That one, the fairest of all Rivers, loved | To blend his murmurs with my Nurse’s song | [...] its steady cadence tempering | Our human waywardness’ (l.1-11).<sup>114</sup> Derwent’s murmurs, evocative of the steady cadence of poetic metre, are the earthly foundations on the basis of which the nurse sings. Like poetic metre, these earthly murmurs are simultaneously non-signifying (in so far as they do not become intelligible by means of representation) and highly meaningful. There is resonance in the murmuring, as if the river wished to express something, but at the same time to keep that something a secret for itself. The

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<sup>109</sup> James Engell, ‘Wordsworth’s Earth, Nature, Strength’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 50.2 (2019), 166-79 (p. 167) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/703777>>.

<sup>110</sup> Mark Offord, *Wordsworth and the Art of Philosophical Travel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 2-7 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316659021>>.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>112</sup> Charles Taylor, p. 404.

<sup>113</sup> ‘Tintern Abbey’ in *Poems I*.

<sup>114</sup> All quotes from two-part *Prelude* taken from *Poems I*.

non-signifying meaningfulness of things is presence. Even here, however, ‘human waywardness’ is a possibility, albeit one that has been tempered by the noise of water. Any song is necessarily based in the cadences of the earth. However, a song need not be as blended as that of Wordsworth’s nurse. A singer can never truly free herself from earthly rhythms, but she can forget her songs origins in the earth’s murmuring. Poiesis, as will be described later, offers a mode of representation that does not forget this rootedness. Techne, by contrast, encourages a forgetful absorption in representation.

Although there is already the inchoate possibility of human waywardness, the first part of the two-part *Prelude* generally describes an existence lived unselfconsciously under the law of nature. That the narrative is not merely autobiographical, but also has a mythical dimension, is hinted at where Wordsworth describes himself as ‘A naked Savage in the thunder shower’ (l.26). Wordsworth depicts his childhood self as violent and primitive. He energetically hunts, traps and kills small creatures. ‘I was a fell destroyer’ (l.35), he writes. It is not long, however, before these animalistic pursuits are interrupted: ‘Gentle powers!’, Wordsworth writes, ‘Who give us happiness and call it peace!’ (l.35-36). Happiness, again, is given rather than pursued. This interjection comes in the middle of Wordsworth’s account of his bird trapping and mirrors the manner in which nature tends to interrupt Wordsworth’s savage exploits. When Wordsworth steals birds from the traps of others, for example, he subsequently hears ‘among the solitary hills | Low breathings coming after me’ (l.47-48). The dawning of moral consciousness comes in the form of an original prohibition against violence and against stealing. This prohibition *seems*, to Wordsworth, to be the voice of nature speaking to him. This seeming has its basis in active passivity: the breathings could simply be the wind, but the child, who perhaps already has a sense that what he is doing is wrong, recognizes them as the source of moral instruction.

Wordsworth describes this dynamic more explicitly in the stolen boat episode that follows. ‘I believe | That there are spirits’, Wordsworth proclaims,

which, when they would form  
A favored being, from his very dawn  
Of infancy do open out the clouds’ (l.68-71).

These spirits, although ultimately benevolent, are not averse to ‘severer interventions’ (l.79). They guide Wordsworth to Patterdale, to the site of what will be a traumatic childhood experience. There, at night-time, Wordsworth steals a boat and rows across the lake. As he rows, moving himself through the water, his perspective gradually alters until he perceives a cliff

emerging from beyond the horizon of his vision. Describing the experience from the point of view of his childhood self, however, Wordsworth understands the cliff to be a living being, moving towards him. ‘As if with voluntary power instinct,’ Wordsworth writes, the cliff ‘upreared its head’ (l.108-10). In perceiving the movement of this animate being the child is terrified. The result is a newfound awareness of ‘unknown modes of being’, of ‘huge and mighty forms, that do not live | Like living men’ (l. 122, 127-28). Again, this passage encapsulates the dynamic of active passivity. On the one hand, it seems that the child’s movement only occasions the appearance of animacy. The child’s fear can therefore be understood as an emotional expression of inner guilt at having committed an act he already knew was wrong. On the other hand, it seems as if the cliff is a living being, who *moved* Wordsworth in order to instruct him.

In the thirteen-book *Prelude*, Wordsworth alters the framing of the stolen boat episode, with the effect of its sounding less paganistic. He replaces the affirmation of his belief in spirits with:

I believe  
That nature, oftentimes, when she would frame  
A favor’d Being’ (Book I. l.363-65).

Likewise, whereas in the two-part *Prelude* the conclusion of the episode is followed by an invocation to

ye Beings of the hills!  
And ye that walk the woods and open heaths  
By moon or star-light’ (l.130-132),

in the thirteen-book variant Wordsworth writes: ‘Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe! | Thou Soul that art the Eternity of Thought!’ (I. l.429-30). One might suspect the hand of Coleridge in these amendments. Wordsworth’s ‘Beings of the hills’ are precisely, in the words of Kenneth Johnston, ‘the “Godkins” and “Goddesslings” that Coleridge [scoffed] at’.<sup>115</sup> There may be some truth in the notion that, at the behest of Coleridge, the thirteen-book *Prelude* is more monotheistic than the earlier version. Certainly, this is true of the fourteen-book variant, in which the episode is framed by the lines ‘Dust as we are, the immoral Spirit grows | Like harmony in

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<sup>115</sup> Johnston, p. 56.



The spot is simultaneously a locus for the nourishment of the imagination and resistant to expression in the imagination's productions. For Wordsworth, poesis tends to have a mystical source which can never fully be captured in language.

The same sense of ineffable significance is present in the third spot, in which Wordsworth recalls waiting for the horses that would take him home to what will turn out to be his father's deathbed. For the poet as a child, the event seemed to be one more occasion for nature's moral instruction. The law of nature may ultimately tend towards benevolence, but the judgement it exacts upon human beings can sometimes be harsh and incomprehensible. The child believes that the death of his father is a punishment for the 'anxiety of hope' (l.357) in which he waited for the horses to take him home. The poet describes how he 'bowed low | To God, who thus corrected my desires' (l.359-60). 'Ere I had been ten days | A dweller in my Father's house,' Wordsworth writes,

he died  
And I and my two Brothers, orphans then,  
Followed his body to the grave' (l.350-53).

Wordsworth will not dwell at home again until he arrives in Grasmere.

Wordsworth is, nevertheless, in some sense recompensed for his bereavement and for his subsequent homelessness. In light of his personal tragedy, the things that were beside him on that day come to possess a mysterious resonance:

The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,  
And the bleak music of that old stone wall,  
The noise of wood and water  
[...]  
All these were spectacles and sounds to which  
I often would repair, and thence would drink  
As at a fountain, and I do not doubt  
[...]  
When I am in the woods, unknown to me  
The workings of my spirit thence are brought (l.363-74).



The spot is a memory, but in Wordsworth's defamiliarizing description, it becomes a spatio-temporal locus of presence, a locus which abides *in the present*, even with the passing of ordinary (non-spot based) time. Wordsworth is accompanied by the spots of time, even as the passage of life takes him further and further away from the temporal event of their occurrence. Even though, in a certain sense, Wordsworth has been made homeless by his father's death, the spots proffer psychic dwelling. Like the influx that will eventually lead Wordsworth home to Grasmere, these moments of intensified presence become sources of meaning to which Wordsworth frequently returns. They are highly meaningful but, at the same time, seem not to signify anything in particular. They are spots of non-signifying meaningfulness.

In the second part of the two-part *Prelude*, Wordsworth turns his attention to the dawning of the child's self-consciousness, such as is correspondent with 'the growth of mental power' (l.257). Wordsworth hints at a distinction between his adult and childhood self, when he writes of his adult self as 'Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself | And of some other being' (II. l.29-30). The capacity to relate to himself *as a self* is not unrelated from Wordsworth's capacity to understand the mind as separate from the world. This is related, in turn, to the burgeoning of the creative imagination:

A Plastic power  
 Abode with me, a forming hand, at times  
 Rebellious, acting in a devious mood,  
 [...]  
 but for the most  
 Subservient strictly to the external things  
 With which it communed. An auxiliar light  
 Came from my mind which on the setting sun  
 Bestowed new splendour (l.411-19).

The self is taken to act independently of 'external things'. Where Wordsworth invokes presence, by contrast, actions are performed as the fulfilment of a natural order within which the self is necessarily enfolded. To be human is to follow nature, which is also human nature. It is to find oneself already embedded within a narrative, one which has its own way of unfolding itself. This narrative is not autobiographical in so far as it is not self-authored. To act in contradiction to this narrative, which is the same as acting in contradiction to nature, is to break the law and await punishment. Hence Wordsworth's punishment under the mountain's gaze and in the death of

this father. Under the sway of presence, “I found” and “I was led to find” are synonyms. Under the domain of mind’s power, by contrast, the first describes agential power whereas the second describes manipulation by an external power. In the above passage, Wordsworth is careful to note that he was still ‘subservient’ to ‘external things’. Nevertheless, the fact that he now believes he can divide between the light of the setting sun and an extra-natural mental light already speaks to the diminishment of presence and the aggrandizement of ‘Plastic power’.

The oscillation between nature’s presence and the burgeoning of mental power is a continuous feature of Wordsworth’s adolescence. This same tension features in a famous passage, which, while for the most part evocative of nature’s presence, hints at mind’s power:

I was only then  
 Contented when with bliss ineffable  
 I felt the sentiment of being spread  
 O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,  
 O’er all that, lost beyond the reach of thought  
 And human knowledge, to the human eye  
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,  
 [...]  
 for in all things  
 I saw one life and felt that it was joy (l.448-60).

The one life is not accompanied by joy, it is the joy. They are two expressions of the same source. The one life is an image perceived intellectually by Wordsworth. The joy is a feeling, with which Wordsworth haptically makes contact. A similar multi-faceted-ness pertains to the phrase ‘sentiment of being’, where sentiment means both an idea and a feeling. Such ambiguities are befitting of a ‘bliss ineffable’ that is ‘beyond the reach’ of ‘human knowledge’. That invisible source that the one life and the joy represent is not known, but ‘liveth’. Thinking and feeling are practical activities, both of which respond to the same givenness of things in different ways. Through them Wordsworth seeks to express that which has been made present to him but which is ineffable.

However, the passage is framed by Wordsworth’s uncertainty as to whether he received ‘the power of truth | Coming in revelation’ (l.441-42) or as to whether ‘To unorganic nature I transferred | My own enjoyments’ (l.440-41). Wordsworth’s sense of there being a distinction between revelation and agential creativity, and of there being, in the latter case, a division between

those meaningful projections that pertain to him and the real properties of nature, discloses a further possibility for the oneness of the one life: perhaps the oneness is a metaphysical oneness. In this case, the one life is no longer a poetic image that expresses an ineffable presence but is rather the metaphysical source of all that is present. It is no longer “the one life” but is the one life. In the first instance, one attempts to represent an ineffable phenomenon, while remaining aware of the insufficiency of representation. In the second instance, one has become so absorbed in a representation that one takes that to be more real than the original phenomenon.

The two-part *Prelude* draws to a close in a manner that emphasises nature’s presence in Wordsworth’s life. Wordsworth apostrophises to the ‘mists and winds | that dwell among the hills where I was born’ (l.471-72), thanking them for his blessedness: ‘This gift is yours’ (l.478), he writes. In the thirteen-book *Prelude*, by contrast, Wordsworth’s preoccupation with mind’s power goes further. The eventual subtitle of *The Prelude*, ‘Growth of a Poet’s Mind’, emphasises this trajectory. In Wordsworth’s case, the space of mental power is generated by a series of momentary redirections of the mind’s intentionality away from nature and towards Nature. In the two-part *Prelude*, for example, he tells of

How nature, intervenient till this time  
And secondary, now at length was sought  
For her own sake (II. l.240-42).

As this quote demonstrates, Wordsworth’s own use of uncapitalized and capitalized forms “nature” and “Nature” are inconsistent. Nevertheless, we might henceforth use nature to refer to the entanglement of mind and world in presence, and Nature to refer to the metaphysical pole towards which mind’s power is oriented, and from which it derives its justification for the reconstruction of nature.

The first two sections of the *Prelude* already hint at the development of mind’s power and its intentional orientation towards metaphysical Nature. However, according to Wordsworth in the thirteen-book *Prelude*, it was during his time as a student at Cambridge that he first truly began to search for Nature. ‘This first absence’, Wordsworth writes,

from those shapes sublime  
Wherewith I had been conversant, my mind  
Seem’d busier in itself than heretofore;  
At least, I more directly recognised

My powers and habits; let me dare to speak  
 A higher language, say that now I felt  
 The strength and consolation which were mine.  
 As if awaken'd, summon'd, rous'd, constrain'd,  
 I look'd for universal things (III. l.102-10).

For the child, the spirit or spirits that were his teachers were bound to place. Separated from the lakes, however, the adolescent Wordsworth comes more fully to the recognition that the mind might be the true source of that wisdom. Wordsworth now begins to direct his attention towards a new set of intentional objects, to 'universal things'. His comment regarding the possession of 'a higher language', moreover, might hint at a burgeoning faith in the possibility of achieving a mode of expression that could make effable the ineffability of joy.

The occasions upon which Wordsworth describes a complete break with the particular in favour of the universal are few. In Cambridge as in Lakeland, Wordsworth writes that everything 'respired with inward meaning' (III. l.129). 'Thus much for the one Presence, and the Life | Of the great whole' (l.130-131), he continues. This could easily be a statement motivated by what this chapter has termed nature's presence. However, like the 'one life', Wordsworth's 'one Presence' might also imply the existence of a metaphysical world that exists separate from the physical world. The alienating potential of this orientation is emphasised a few lines later when Wordsworth writes:

I had a world about me; 'twas my own,  
 I made it: for it only liv'd to me,  
 And to the God who look'd into my mind.  
 Such sympathies would sometimes shew themselves  
 By outward gestures and by visible looks.  
 Some call'd it madness such, indeed, it was,  
 If child-like fruitfulness in passing joy,  
 If steady moods of thoughtfulness, matur'd  
 To inspiration, sort with such a name;  
 If prophesy be madness; if things view'd  
 By Poets of old time, and higher up  
 By the first men, earth's first inhabitants (l.141-153).

The capacity to inhabit and create a world of one's own, a world independent of common sense, is appropriately likened to madness. In the opening lines, Wordsworth seems to describe a condition of alienation from the world and from others. The poet is surrounded by his own mental world, a virtual world created by the imagination. However, in the following six lines, the equation of this passage with mind's power is problematized by Wordsworth's reference to childish and primitive modes of inhabiting the world. Here, Wordsworth seems to be making a connection between the world he has about him and spirits of places that educated the unselfconscious child.

As the above passage demonstrates, at the heart of mind's power lies something like a Cartesian *cogito* or a Kantian transcendental subject. It is this subject that communes with Nature. 'Points have we all of us within our souls', Wordsworth writes, 'Where all stand single' (l.186-87). However, Wordsworth is too conscious of the alienated man, holding 'vacant commerce' with 'dead things', to ever neglect the meaningfulness of the external world for long. A few lines later he writes: 'I must quit this theme, | I am not heartless' (l.190-91). This tendency to affirm the disengaged and universal but then to draw away from it is a central aspect of the dynamic identified by Hartman. '*The Prelude*,' Hartman writes, 'as history of a poet's mind, foresees the time when the "Characters of the great Apocalypse" will be intuited without the medium of nature.'<sup>118</sup> In book VI, Wordsworth writes:

Imagination! lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my Song  
 [...]  
   in such strength  
 Of usurpation, in such visitings  
 Of awful promise, when the light of sense  
 Goes out in flashes that have shewn to us  
 The invisible world, doth Greatness make abode,  
 There harbours whether we be young or old.  
 Our destiny, our nature, and our home  
 Is with infinitude, and only there;  
 With hope it is, hope that can never die (l.525-540).

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<sup>118</sup> Hartman, p. 65.



Wordsworth celebrates the ‘silence’ of the valley, asking whether he should not thank God for it. The question seems to be rhetorical and without an answer. However, if one reads the following sentence as a response to the question, then William seems to be suggesting that he owes his gratitude, not to God, but to Dorothy. William describes how, throughout his life, the presence of Dorothy sustained him ‘like a hidden Bird that sang’ or ‘a flash of light’ (l.110, 111). In this case, the ‘silence’ takes on further significance. Perhaps William’s dwelling is dependent, not upon God, but upon the silence of God. After all, Grasmere is a strangely imminent Eden given its finitude and its mortal character.

The ontological indeterminacy of presence leaves room for the possibility that what appears to be divine is, in truth, merely a trace left upon things by the human spirit; by ‘The still sad music of humanity’, as Wordsworth has it in ‘Tintern Abbey’. The human spirit only seems transhuman when discovered in things because that spirit is not reducible to culture or to mental projections onto things. We might think, here, of Heidegger’s depiction of “world” as something nearly synonymous with the being of Dasein, who is being-in-the-world, but at the same time not completely reducible to Dasein.<sup>119</sup> Human beings are thrown into a meaningful world that is not of their own making and, as a result, they must always encounter things as always having meanings that they did not give them. These meanings may be the traces left behind by others, but how, and why, and what traces are left remains beyond the reach of the understanding.

One might find, in the *Prelude*, a theory as to how each separate person comes to be a vessel for this shared human spirit, for world, in Heidegger’s sense. Like Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth (sometimes) views personhood, at its most primordial level, to be intersubjective. In a passage that remains unchanged between the two-part and thirteen book *Prelude*, Wordsworth offers a theory of child development. ‘Bless’d the infant Babe’, he writes,

(For with my best conjectures I would trace  
The progress of our being) blest the Babe,  
Nurs’d in his Mother’s arms, the Babe who sleeps  
Upon his Mother’s breast, who, when his soul

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<sup>119</sup> For Heidegger’s account of world, see, in particular, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1962), pp. 63–168; See, also, William McNeill, who writes: ‘if world is not something human, but a phenomenon that, in its happening, always precedes and exceeds the human, then we do not and cannot control the destiny of the world through any human planning or calculation’; ‘Tracing *Technē*: Heidegger, Aristotle, and the Legacy of Philosophy’, in *Heidegger’s Question of Being*, ed. by Holger Zaborowski (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), pp. 71–89 (p. 89)  
<<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=5109042>> [accessed 22 December 2021].

Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,  
 Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!  
 Such feelings pass into his torpid life  
 Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind  
 Even [in the first trial of its powers]  
 Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine  
 In one appearance, all the elements  
 And parts of the same object, else detach'd  
 And loth to coalesce. Thus, day by day,  
 Subjected to the discipline of love,  
 His organs and recipient faculties  
 Are quicken'd, are more vigorous, his mind spreads,  
 Tenacious of the forms which it receives.  
 In one beloved presence, nay and more,  
 In that most apprehensive habitude  
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd  
 From this beloved Presence, there exists  
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts  
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.  
 No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd:  
 Along his infant veins are interfus'd  
 The gravitation and the filial bond  
 Of nature, that connect him with the world (thirteen-book *Prelude*, II. l.238-64).

In Wordsworth's description there is a primal foundation on the basis of which what is perceived is made intelligible. That foundation pertains to the interrelationship of mother and the baby. Without the transfer of passion between them, Wordsworth implies, the child would gather *percepts* of the different parts of an object but would not come to see them as different faces of a unified whole. There is a difference, in other words, between a series of jumbled percepts (e.g. flat surface, brown colour, a corner, something hard, four legs) and the structural-functional organization that makes a thing what it is (e.g. a table). This is not only true for things in their physical aspect, however, but also true for their psychical aspect. By means of this same process, 'a virtue [...] irradiates' all things, which means a 'filial bond' is included in their unity (e.g. the table as an affordance for the ritual of communal dining). The intersubjective formation of the



mind is such that when human beings relate to things in the world they do so, not only perceptually, but also ethically.

In this passage, Wordsworth seems to be playing with the meanings of the word ‘sense’. William Empson was perhaps the first critic to remark that the ‘apparently flat little word *sense* has [...] a more curious part to play [in Wordsworth’s poetry].’<sup>120</sup> Empson notes that the word ‘comes into practically all the great passages of *Tintern Abbey* and *The Prelude* on the mind’s relation to Nature.’ Empson points out numerous other meanings of sense throughout Wordsworth’s poetry, including the senses, “a sense of (...)”, and common sense. In the above passage, these different meanings seem to come together. *Sensations* (as in those of the five senses) are brought into a unity which enables the child to *make sense of* the world around him. This making-sense includes both the basic capacity to recognize things and also to recognize the (ethical) meanings that they accrue in their association with people. In this respect, perceiving and making-intelligible go hand-in-hand. What is more, the capacity to make sense of things is founded upon common sense, that is to say, upon the ‘discipline of love’ that binds mother and child. As a language animal, the human being always derives meaning from this shared spirit, not from some atomistic mind contained within a brain. On this basis, the spirits of nature could be understood as emanations of the human spirit. The infant babe is ‘bless’d’ because he is metaphorically baptized by his mother, from which point onwards he can partake in the spirit of common sense.

If sense-making originates, as Wordsworth puts it, ‘in one beloved Presence’, this could have major implications for poetry. Such implications will be the focus of the next section. For the time being, it will be sufficient to note the following: if one considers the origins of the word “poetry” in *poiesis*, then poetry might be defined as the bringing forth of meaning from the non-signifying meaningfulness of presence. Wordsworth implies something to this effect by developing his theory of child development into a theory of the origins of poetic genius (or of the genii that inspire, which is to say in-spirit, the poet). In doing so, however, he invokes the tension between mind’s power and nature’s presence. Of the ‘infant babe’, he writes

From nature largely he receives; nor so  
Is satisfied, but largely gives again,  
For feeling has to him imparted strength,  
[...]

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<sup>120</sup> William Empson, ‘Sense in the Prelude’, *The Kenyon Review*, 13.2 (1951), 285–302 (p. 285).

his mind,  
 Even as an agent of the one great mind,  
 Creates, creator and receiver both,  
 Working but in alliance with the works  
 Which it beholds.—Such, verily, is the first  
 Poetic spirit of our human life;  
 By uniform controul of after years  
 In most abated and suppress'd, in some,  
 Through every change of growth or of decay,  
 Pre-eminent till death (l.267-79).

In writing of the 'one great mind', Wordsworth appears to invoke Nature, that is, a supernatural being that created nature but is independent of it. For now, the child's 'poetic spirit' works in 'alliance' with nature, it's dynamic of creating and receiving reminiscent of active passivity. However, Wordsworth's implication is that this creative power, if sustained, might someday free itself from nature.

Returning to 'Home at Grasmere', Wordsworth implies that Grasmere's joyful presencing might be the effect of its long history as a place of human habitation. A place, like a location or a spot, is never simply nature, but is always in some sense inhabited by human beings. It is the centre of some past or present human activity. For something to take place, for something to happen, it must be observed by human beings in some fashion. As a place, Grasmere resonates with the traces of human doings. Wordsworth tells of a grove of trees, planted by a husband and wife, 'now flourishing while they | No longer flourish' (l.640-41). The grove speaks of their joint activity, even though such activity has now ceased. 'No, we are not alone' (l.646), Wordsworth continues:

We shall not scatter through the plains and rocks  
 Of this fair Vale and o'er its spacious heights  
 Unprofitable kindliness, bestowed  
 On Objects unaccustomed to the gifts  
 Of feeling, that were cheerless and forlorn  
 But few weeks past, and would be so again  
 If we were not. We do not tend a lamp  
 Whose lustre we alone participate,

Which is dependent upon us alone,  
 Mortal though bright, a dying, dying flame.  
 Look where we will, some human heart has been  
 Before us with its offering [...]  
 Joy spreads and sorrow spreads; and this whole Vale,  
 Home of untutored Shepherds as it is,  
 Swarms with sensations [...] (l.649-666).

In Grasmere, things resonate by virtue of their having felt the touch of human hands. A similar experience is invoked by Jonathan Bate, who, in a reading of Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, writes 'Those who truly dwell in the place are never lonely because they are attuned to collective memory'.<sup>121</sup> The character Fitzpiers, an outsider, is bored in the Hintock woodlands 'because the place has no *presence* to him'. In appropriating Grasmere as their home, William and Dorothy have become the preservers of a 'lamp' that pre-exists them. Wordsworth again invokes the notion of mind-independent 'sensations', suggesting that they are not the emanations of spirits, but rather that of the human beings who have transformed a nowhere into a place.

Wordsworth speaks from a condition of blessedness, however, preceding this passage are a series of reflections upon the negative potentialities of earthly existence. In describing the blessed condition of life for the inhabitants of Grasmere, the 'happy Man' who 'is Master of the field' (l.463), Wordsworth is clear that he is not trying to evoke an Arcadian fantasy. Just as mortality is a feature of this Eden, so too is unhappiness. Wordsworth will later avow:

That Nature to this favourite Spot of ours  
 Yields no exemption, but her awful rights.  
 Enforces to the utmost and exacts  
 Her tribute of inevitable pain,  
 And that the sting is added, man himself  
 For ever busy to afflict himself (l.838-43).

The middle section of 'Home at Grasmere' explores pain and the loss of loved ones. Such reflections are precipitated by William imagining a possible separation from Dorothy, such as

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<sup>121</sup> Bate, p. 18.

had also perhaps inspired the Lucy poems.<sup>122</sup> William and Dorothy see a reflection of their companionship in a pair of swans. The swans disappear and Wordsworth imagines that one of them might have been killed by a shepherd. 'Or haply both are gone,' he writes, 'One death, and that were mercy given to both' (l.356-357). With the same sense of melancholy dramaticism as pervades the Lucy poems, Wordsworth hints that he would no longer wish to live if his 'flash of light' were no longer present.

There are, perhaps, further autobiographical allusions in another passage. Gesturing towards one of the valley's dwellings, Wordsworth writes 'Yon Cottage, would that it could tell a part | Of its own story' (l.469-70). Again, the cottage has a meaningfulness that is non-signifying, in so far as it cannot tell its own story but requires the voice of the poet. Wordsworth narrates the life of the family who formerly inhabited that cottage. Though possessing no great faults, the husband's 'placid mind' (l.481) began to disintegrate in the wake of financial pressure. This brought with it 'distress of mind' (l.500) and the man, 'Poor now in tranquil pleasure' (l.504) was unable to resist his urge to pursue troubled gratification. The husband seduces a young servant girl, an action which results in his dissolution. After the seduction, the husband

was stung,  
 Stung by inward thoughts, and by the smiles  
 Of Wife and children stung to agony  
 [...]  
 [He] Was his own world, without a resting-place.  
 [...]  
 His flock he slighted; his paternal fields  
 Were as a clog to him, whose Spirit wished  
 To fly, but whither? And yon gracious Church,  
 That has a look so full of peace and hope  
 And love—benignant Mother of the Vale,  
 How fair amid her brood of Cottages !—  
 She was to him a sickness and reproach (l.509-27).

Wordsworth tells the story as if he had access to the husband's perspective. As such, one might suspect that Wordsworth had in mind his own relationship with Annette Vallon and his own

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<sup>122</sup> See, for example, Richard E. Matlak, 'Wordsworth's Lucy Poems in Psychobiographical Context', *PMLA*, 93.1 (1978), 46-65 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/461819>>.

feelings of guilt regarding the affair. The narration invokes a kind of negative presence. The husband is stung by the faces of his wife and children because their smiles no longer bespeak a shared familial happiness but instead bespeak his own guilt. The husband becomes 'his own world'. It is not merely the community that punishes the husband but, principally, the things with which the community has dealings. The husband does not encounter his paternal fields or the village church as objects, but as vessels for the spirit of the community. As such, the husband is not blessed but cursed by these things.

Given that the husband is 'without a resting place' one might assume that he no longer dwells. However, in the philosophical sense of the word, the husband's abject condition does not necessitate the cessation of dwelling. If dwelling is the letting be of things presencing, then one can dwell in cursedness just the same as one dwells in blessedness. As a child, Wordsworth felt himself to be cursed when the mountain remonstrated with him, or when he understood his father's death as a punishment inflicted upon him. Active passivity, letting be, means that a person receives blessings with gratitude and curses with dismay. Throughout his poetry, Wordsworth returns again and again to the dismal condition of cursedness, in what is often referred to as his poetry of encounter. The lesson of many of these poems would seem to be that, to some unfortunate people, evil simply happens. Dwelling, then, is not a condition of existence in which perfect happiness can be assured but is characterized by hap.

The encounter poems have been seen as central instantiations of Wordsworth's ethical vision.<sup>123</sup> Adam Potkay argues that, in poems such as 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', 'The Discharged Soldier', and in many of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth resembles Emmanuel Levinas in the way that 'both authors ground ethics in the face-to-face encounter with an other that cannot be fully comprehended'.<sup>124</sup> Potkay argues that 'ethics, for Wordsworth, is about concrete relations, not about abstract theories or principles such as justice'.<sup>125</sup> One finds an example of this in Wordsworth's aforementioned criticism of Godwin and Paley. Wordsworth's ethics, I would argue, is not founded upon system but upon a non-signifying meaningful presence that cannot be fully explained. The face of the other is not a concept, a moral system, or a representation, it is the presence of a being with innate value such as demands our care.<sup>126</sup> It

<sup>123</sup> Nancy Yousef, for example, sees the poetry of encounter as a form of response to the perceived limitations of an ethic of sympathy and moral sentiments, typified by Shaftesbury and Hume. 'Wordsworth, Sentimentalism, and the Defiance of Sympathy', *European Romantic Review*, 17.2 (2006), 205-13 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10509580600688044>>.

<sup>124</sup> *Wordsworth's Ethics*, p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>126</sup> On this point, see *Wordsworth's Ethics*, p. 40.

follows that, for Wordsworth, the appropriate response to witnessing suffering is the disintegration of joy.

Although not all of Wordsworth's poems of encounter have the same intensity of ethical import as those discussed by Potkay, many of them are similarly focused upon a negative presence, a presence, moreover, to which the only response is a kind of blank unhappiness. In this, they can be seen to derive influence from the ballad tradition. 'The Thorn', for example, takes its inspiration from a ballad first published in the 1680s, usually referred to as 'The Cruel Mother'. The ballad tells the story of a mother who, often without any explicit explanation as to why, murders her newly born baby (in some versions twins) with a pen-knife. After this she is haunted by their presence wherever she goes. Tim Fulford quotes a version collected in eighteenth-century Scotland that ends with the babes' cursing of their mother:

"O mother dear, when we were thine,  
We neither wore the silks nor the sabelline.

But out ye took a little pen-knife,  
And ye parted us and our sweet life.

But now we're in the heavens hie,  
And ye' ve the pains o hell to drie."<sup>127</sup>

In other versions, the mother sometimes has to spend seven years as a bird in the wood, seven years as a fish in the flood before she is condemned to hell. There is a curious significance to these punishments, one which defies final explanation. The Cruel Mother and the husband of 'Home at Grasmere' both break the moral law, both of them for reasons that are never fully explained. They are punished by cursed presence, in the mother's case the appearance of her murdered children. After having received their punishment, their stories simply end. There is no promise of redemption.

When Wordsworth incorporates the narrative of the 'The Cruel Mother' into 'The Thorn', he retains this sense of cursed irredeemableness. However, he alters the framing of the ballad so as to make the presence of the murdered child the central theme. This frame is provided by the 'loquacious narrator'. In 'The Thorn', Fulford comments, 'the narrator's

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<sup>127</sup> Child Ballad 20 (D) quoted in Tim Fulford, 'Fallen Ladies and Cruel Mothers: Ballad Singers and Ballad Heroines in the Eighteenth Century', *The Eighteenth Century*, 47.2/3 (2006), 309-29 (pp. 324-25).

confusion grounds events among modern, incredulous attitudes rather than medieval superstitions.<sup>128</sup> In 'The Thorn', the narrator writes:

Some say, if to the pond you go,  
And fix on it a steady view,  
The shadow of a babe you trace,  
A baby and a baby's face,  
And that it looks at you;  
Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain  
The baby looks at you again (l.225-231).<sup>129</sup>

The pond where the Cruel Mother (or Martha Ray as she is here called) is believed to have murdered her child appears to be haunted (or, rather, the child *appears* in order to haunt it). Wordsworth invokes a sense of active passivity, in so far as it is not possible to clearly attribute the presence of the child in the thorn to the mind of the mother or to a spectral visitation. All that is clear is that a substantial significance has arisen in the thorn. What once was merely "foliage" or part of the mountain has been transformed into a place, the location of a happening. Rather than affirming any spectral explanation, the narrator writes 'some say'. The experience of the apparition is something experienced by others, not necessarily by the narrator, who must remain credible for his readers, as Fulford comments.<sup>130</sup> However, it is clear that the narrator has been deeply affected by his encounter with Martha Ray and, in the closing stanza, he remains transfixed upon the mysterious thorn:

But plain it is the Thorn is bound  
With heavy tufts of moss that strive  
To drag it to the ground. (l.244-46)

It is possible that the cursed presence of the child is an effect of the mother's madness, brought on by unassuageable guilt. At the same time, her madness is not taken as delusion by the community. They collectively reinforce the truth of what she sees. Perhaps things, like the thorn, presence because they are always already irradiated by this communal human spirit.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>129</sup> *Poems I*.

<sup>130</sup> Fulford, p. 325.

Many of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* feature strangely immanent and corporeal presences. For Paul H. Fry, many of them demonstrate Wordsworth's thematic concern with the nonhuman in the human. Fry writes that, for Wordsworth, 'poetry discloses the unity constituted by and as the being, apart from meaning and apart from difference, of all human and nonhuman things'.<sup>131</sup> In 'We are Seven', for instance, Wordsworth stages an encounter between a young girl and a dogmatic (and therefore unethical) narrator. Of her deceased siblings, the little girl says:

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,  
My sister and my brother;  
And, in the church-yard cottage, I  
Dwell near them with my mother!" (l.20-24).

Despite the narrator's insistence "But they are dead; those two are dead! | Their spirits are in heaven!" (l.65-66), the little girl remains resolute in counting the dead amongst the living: "Nay, we are seven!" (l.69). In dwelling near to her siblings, the little girl understands them, not to be in heaven, but to be present in the church yard. The same sense of earthly presence is invoked in the Lucy poems, in which the poets departed lover 'dwelt among the untrodden ways' (l.1). When she dies her condition of existence seems hardly changed:

She lived unknown, and few could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and, oh,  
The difference to me! (l.9-12).

As Lucy's strangely absent life gives way to her strangely present death, the only response is an expression of dismay. Lucy died and so the speaker is left grieving. There is also the leech gatherer of 'Resolution and Independence', who seems neither 'all alive nor dead' (l.70).<sup>132</sup> As the leech gatherer addresses the speaker, he seems to become absorbed by the earth: 'But now his voice to me was like a stream | Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide' (l.114-15). Afterwards, in his mind's eye, the speaker frequently returns to the old man's stony presence. He has learnt a lesson from him, but what this lesson is and why he learned it from the old man's stony speech remains mysterious. In all of these examples, nature's presence remains, to some

<sup>131</sup> Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> All quotations from *Poems in Two Volumes* taken from *Poems 1*.



extent, indescribable. However, unlike blessedness these cursed examples seem to come to final, albeit unresolved, endings. They terminate, not in the ineffable joy of an orientation towards telos, but simply because there is nothing more to be said.

This silence is ethical because, in some sense, an observer who attempted to explain the other's suffering would simply be attempting to disperse their own anxiety in coming face-to-face with hap. To explain human suffering, from this point of view, is to explain it away. Explanation becomes a scapegoat, intended to sublimate the painful anxiety that lies in the observer's recognition that no blessedness is impervious to hap. Human beings are not the masters of the dance, not necessarily in the sense that there is a divine master, but, here, in the sense that they are not masters of the human spirit, of what Heidegger calls world.

## STOICISM AND 'THE RUINED COTTAGE'

The mysteriousness of the human spirit and its irradiation of things are central themes in 'The Ruined Cottage' (1798).<sup>133</sup> The titular cottage, with its 'four clay walls | that stared upon each other' (l.30-31), impresses a sense of its significance upon the poem's speaker: 'Twas a spot!' (l.31), he writes. A few lines later he describes it as a 'cheerless spot' (l.122). Even before the Pedlar/Wanderer figure relates the story of Margaret to the speaker, the cottage has unhappy presence to him. An aura seems to pervade the things that were once Margaret's. This, indeed, is the Wanderer's theme. "I see around me [            ] | Things which you cannot see" (l.129-30), he announces,

"We die, my Friend,  
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good is no memorial left.  
The waters of that spring if they could feel  
Might mourn. They are not as they were; the bond  
Of brotherhood is broken [...]" (l.129-37).

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<sup>133</sup> *Poems I.*

The ruined-ness of the ruined cottage, the Wanderer implies, comes from its having once been irradiated by human love but then, upon the death of its inhabitants, having that love withdrawn. What that love seems to amount to is the careful bringing forth of things and places from out of their original insignificance. With the death of Margaret, the cottage has begun the process of decay, such as will eventually result in the spot becoming a nowhere once again. ‘Weeds’ (l.162) and ‘spear-grass’ are already filling the space which had been cleared by human activity. However, for the time being, the spot still speaks of Margaret and of what happened to her. Likewise, Margaret is changed in death, for she is now absent from life, but she is not yet so absent that she is not missed. Indeed, she is still only in the process of decay: ‘The worm is on her cheek’ (l.158), the Wanderer says.

The Wanderer brings forth the presence of Margaret from the cottage by relating her tale. That this is an act of poiesis is indicated by the speaker’s description of the wanderer’s ‘eye | flashing with poetic fire’ (l.70-71). Of the Wanderer, the speaker writes,

He had rehearsed  
Her homely tale with such familiar power,  
With such a countenance of love, an eye  
So busy, that the things of which he spake  
Seemed present, and, attention now relaxed,  
There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins (l.266-71).

The speaker already recognized an inchoate cheerlessness in the spot, but after hearing what the wanderer has to say this cheerlessness is sharpened into a ‘heartfelt chillness’. Like the husband’s cottage in ‘Home at Grasmere’, which ‘would that it could tell a part | Of its own story’ (l.469-70), and like the waters, which ‘if they could feel | might mourn’, the ruined cottage has a story to tell but requires the poietic co-presence of the poet in order to tell it. The invocation of Margaret’s presence in the co-presence of ruined cottage and poetic eye hints at the possibility of an immanent Wordsworthian ontology: perhaps the spirits of places are not divinities, nor the divine, but are instead the persistent presence in place and memory of loved ones who have died.

The tale that the Wanderer tells is one of hap. Margaret seemed a woman possessed of all the necessary prerequisites for happiness. ‘Many a passenger’, the Wanderer recalls, ‘has blessed poor Margaret for her gentle looks’ (l.152-153). She and her husband had ‘two pretty babes’ (l.183). Their happiness is destroyed when war and famine contribute to the husband’s mental dissolution, such as leaves him unable to play his familial role. When he abandons them,

Margaret begins to take leave of her senses. She seems no longer to care for her cottage, nor for her children. She begins roaming the area, fruitlessly searching for her husband. The Wanderer notes that, even after the husband's disappearance,

his Sunday garments hung  
Upon the self-same nail — his very staff  
Stood undisturbed behind the door' (l.471-73).

Whereas Margaret's presence to the Wanderer enables her memorialization, Margaret's incapacity to mourn the memory of her husband leads to her ruin: "In sickness she remained, and here she died, | Last human tenant of these ruined walls" (l.527-8). The first version of 'The Ruined Cottage' ends with these lines, invoking the silence that is responsive to human suffering.

The revised ending of 1799 seems to represent a subtle overcoming of the conditions of hap. Wordsworth writes of the

secret spirit of humanity  
Which, 'mid the calm oblivious tendencies  
[...] still survived. (l.539-42).

The Wanderer counsels the speaker to 'Be wise and chearful, and no longer read | The forms of things with an unworthy eye' (l.855-56). The forms of things convey to him 'an image of tranquillity' (l.862) and grief, born of 'the passing shews of being' (l.867), seems but 'an idle dream that could not live | Where meditation was' (l.868-69). Drawing upon Plato's notion of universal forms, the Wanderer implies that an awareness of the metaphysical reality that is the grounds of all phenomena, that an awareness of the Nature to which nature is subordinate, can allow us to attain a higher mode of happiness, one which is invulnerable to the apparent painfulness of human existence. The Wanderer closes his account: 'I turned away | And walked along my road in happiness' (l.869-70). The Wanderer's happiness in the face of hap is enabled by his orientation towards forms and images, an orientation enabled by the eye's poetic fire, that is to say, by the imagination.

In Wollstonecraft the imagination enabled ecstasy. This ecstasy referred, on the one hand, to ekstasis, to a standing-outside-of-oneself in order to transcend alienated subjectivity and thereby dwell in the world. It referred, on the other hand, to a rapturous-being-carried-away-from-the-world. Something similar might be said of Wordsworth's joy. On the one hand, joy can

be a near synonym of what has here been termed blessedness. Historically the meaning of joy has often included, as Adam Potkay argues, a sense of passivity, a sense of giftedness, and a strong sense of reunion with something from which one had formerly been separated.<sup>134</sup>

On the other hand, Wordsworth's joy can sometimes be seen as an effect of mind's power. His joy can also be seen as a descendent of Stoicism's *gaudium*. This possibility has been explored by Bruce Graver, who argues the case for a strong Stoic influence in Wordsworth's poetry.<sup>135</sup> Graver quotes Jane Worthington: 'Wordsworth and the Stoics both believed that the ultimate reality was a unity embracing everything that is. Both conceived this unity as possessing an active principle, which may be identified with God'.<sup>136</sup> For the ancient Stoic sage, the universe was ordered according to rational principles. Perfect happiness, which for the Stoics is strongly associated with *ataraxia* (tranquillity), could be achieved by bringing oneself into line with this rational order. To do so required the withholding of assent (*epoche*) from impressions (*phantasiai*). It is noteworthy, here, that "phantasiai" is the source of the word "fancy", and that it could also be translated as "representations" or "images".

The ancient Stoics are a long way from advocating the disengaged agency of the world picture. Nevertheless, in the hands of Descartes, the *epoche* is transformed into a scepticism that makes the thinking-thing (the I) the most certain thing in existence and in which the whole world outside of the I comes to be seen as mediated by impressions (alternatively, ideas/representations/images). Descartes' Stoic-influenced philosophy provides one possible intellectual basis for modern happiness, a happiness rooted, on the one hand, in subjectivism and, on the other hand, in the faith that a rational order can be imposed upon human life so as to maximize good feeling. The Stoic conception of happiness as *ataraxia* is thus opposed to happiness as blessedness. Blessedness requires engagement rather than disengagement and, furthermore, is founded upon a sense of hap, that is, upon a sense that nature is not Nature and is, therefore, not a rational order that can be fully known.

In the Wanderer, as Bruce Graver comments, 'Wordsworth constructs one of his clearest representations of the Stoic sage'.<sup>137</sup> The Wanderer will eventually become arguably *the* central figure in *The Excursion*, a poem which Kerrigan associates with Wordsworth's turn away from

<sup>134</sup> Adam Potkay, *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> Bruce Graver, 'Wordsworth and the Stoics', in *Romans and Romantics*, ed. by Timothy Saunders, Charles Martindale, and Ralph Pite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) <<http://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199588541.001.0001/acprof-9780199588541-chapter-8>> [accessed 16 October 2020].

<sup>136</sup> Worthington, *Wordsworth's Reading of Roman Prose* qtd in Graver, p. 146.

<sup>137</sup> Graver, p. 149.

dwelling and towards metaphysical certainty regarding the existence of the afterlife. Although the revised ending of 'The Ruined Cottage' certainly emphasises a Stoic ethical vision, that is not to say that, without it, the poem would lack any reference to Stoicism. Indeed, the Wanderer's invocation to 'no longer read | the forms of things with an unworthy eye', seems a fitting response to Margaret's unhappiness. In both versions of the poem, Margaret's eye is depicted 'busy in the distance, shaping things | Which made her heart beat quick' (l.491-92). The imagination, or the fancy, is here associated with madness. The imagination is associated with madness, also, in the 'I had a world about me' passage from the third book of the *Prelude*, which was quoted above. In 'The Ruined Cottage', these same lines are attached to the speaker's description of the Wanderer:

To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,  
 Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
 He gave a moral life; he saw them feel  
 Or linked them to some feeling. In all shapes  
 He found a secret and mysterious soul,  
 A fragrance and a spirit of strange meaning.  
 Though poor in outward shew, he was most rich;  
 He had a world about him—'twas his own,  
 He made it—for it only lived to him  
 And to the God who looked into his mind (l.80-89).

Here, the Wanderer is ambivalently poised between mind's power and nature's presence. He gives to things 'a moral life', he links 'them to some feeling', suggesting the active agency of the mind, but then he also sees 'them feel', such as suggests his receptivity to a process that is occurring independently of him. He discovers a soul in all shapes, such as would seem to suggest that he is able to ascertain the metaphysical 'forms of things', but then that soul is 'secret and mysterious' and its meaning 'is strange'. The final three lines, however, forcefully invoke mind's power. Like Wordsworth, the Wanderer is able to shape his reality through the imagination and he does so in conversation with a hypothetical metaphysical reality, that of 'the God'.

Margaret, the Wanderer, and Wordsworth parallel each other in so far as they all see things that others do not see. Only the latter two, however, are able to exert control over these phantasies. Like Margaret after the departure of her husband, Wordsworth and the Wanderer

find themselves homeless. For Wordsworth, this is a temporary condition, but for the Wanderer it is a way of life. Margaret succumbs to the vicissitudes of hap because she remains engaged in the ruins of her former life. Wordsworth and the Wanderer, by contrast, are able to disengage and thereby to withdraw themselves from their co-presence with phenomena. This gives them the mental power to select or reject images so as to retain tranquillity of mind in the face of unhappiness. They have this power because they have shifted their attention from the manifestness of phenomena to representations, the latter being interior to the mind. The Wanderer is a highly sympathetic figure in Wordsworth's poetry, even, in *The Excursion*, an exemplary figure. In this, he represents the continued appeal of mind's power.

## POIESIS

Throughout this thesis alienation has described, among other things, a condition of disengagement, which enables modes of order and control that might minimize hap. Dwelling is the inverse of this. However, it is not enough simply to dwell by turning a blind eye to the knowledge that has been produced by alienation. There must also be a mode of knowing, or of wisdom, that has its basis in dwelling. Wordsworth's poetry grapples with this problem and seeks a new language for a new mode of knowing. However, he writes after the event of a break with the medieval culture of the sign and, correspondingly, cannot draw upon its shared symbolic-cosmic language. Wordsworth writes from within a semiotic understanding in which, as Offord argues, there is a language of the ancient earth 'whose reference has been withheld from us, that may not even exist.'<sup>138</sup> What is more, throughout the poems of the great decade, the question of whether Wordsworth should write from the vantage point of the universe or whether he should write from within a dwelling place remains unresolved.

This tension manifests throughout the writings that were intended to form part of the Recluse project. 'The Recluse' took shape on the basis of a wilful desire, shared by Wordsworth and Coleridge, to provide an answer to Godwin.<sup>139</sup> It was to be written in order to combat Godwin's atheism, neo-Stoicism, and utilitarian rationalism.<sup>140</sup> Godwin's account of morality aims to fix particularity in accordance with a set of abstract laws and propositions. The aim of 'The Recluse' would be to show how, in fact, the particular is the basis for morality and, following that,

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<sup>138</sup> Offord, p. 18.

<sup>139</sup> See Nicola Trott, 'The Coleridge Circle and the "Answer to Godwin"', *The Review of English Studies*, XLI.162 (1990), 212-29 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/res/XLI.162.212>>.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 216-17.

how the particular could, by chains of association, be joined to the universal, which in this case means both universal benevolence and oneness with God.<sup>141</sup> The problem with this is, firstly, that the particular and the universal prove very difficult to reconcile in the wake of the conditions fostered by modernity. What is more, as Offord argues, even if Wordsworth sought to discover a universal system, the strength of his work is in its responsiveness to the changing faces of nature.<sup>142</sup> There may not be a primordial poetic language, merely an ever-developing language that is responsive to nature's ever-shifting presences. Wordsworth sets himself against disenchanted atheism, neo-Stoicism, and instrumental rationality, at the same time, he seems to recognize that a response to them based upon the mind's power to create new metaphysical systems would, in truth, be the manifestation of a kind of alienation.

The second problem with the Recluse project is that the formulation of this ambition would seem to make poetic composition less an inspired activity and more a means to an end. If poetry is the bringing forth of the genius loci, then the poet must passively await influxes and inspiration. He or she cannot know beforehand what the poem will express. However, knowing-beforehand is precisely what Wordsworth attempts to do in the Recluse project. Wordsworth must pro-ject himself, throw himself forward, in order to write it. This might partly explain why Wordsworth failed to complete 'The Recluse' and why, in the glad and sad preamble to the thirteen-book *Prelude*, he writes of poetic composition as the opposite of joyful presence. At one point Wordsworth depicts himself as deciding against writing, proclaiming that it would be an injury "to this day | To think of any thing but present joy" (l. 1.108-10).

The oscillation between alienation and dwelling has been identified as a *thematic* concern of Wordsworth's poetry. In concluding this chapter, I will briefly explore how their interaction relates to Wordsworth's thinking of poetry itself. My view is that, for Wordsworth, Poetry (capitalized) involves bringing forth new concepts in response to the non-signifying meaningfulness of presence.<sup>143</sup> All good poetry does this, but great Poetry brings forth a language that is adequate to new forms of knowing.<sup>144</sup> Poetry does not necessarily mean verses, then, but rather designates a practice of attentiveness to the metaphorical origins of language. However, although the ideal of poetic language is responsiveness to presence, in rendering non-signifying meaningfulness in terms of signifiers there is always a partial break with presence. There is, then, a fine distinction to be made between the knowing that arises from metaphysical and from poetic

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., pp. 224-25.

<sup>142</sup> Offord, p. 6.

<sup>143</sup> The distinction between Poetry and poetry should not be taken to equate to the Nature/nature distinction.

<sup>144</sup> Offord sees Wordsworth as searching for archai, that is to say, the first principles that are the focus of metaphysics, p. 10.

representation. The distinction I would like to draw, here, is between *techne* and *poiesis*. *Poiesis* and *techne* are both modes of bringing forth by means of representation. *Techne*, however, aims to supplant presence in favour of circumscribed representations. In so doing it can create systems characterized by order and regularity, usefulness and control. *Poietic* language, by contrast, remains responsive to nature's shifting presencing. *Poietic* representations bear the traces of human craftsmanship and thus of ephemerality. *Poiesis*, therefore, brings forth a knowing that is conscious of knowledge's inadequacy to describe nature's presence. Under *poiesis*, knowing is not a science but a devotional art.

On the side of *poiesis*, one might think of the candle as a source of light. A person lights the candle themselves. The flame flickers, casting light and shadow in accordance with its oscillations, gives off smoke, and eventually goes out. It has accrued rich symbolic meanings throughout its long history and has been at the centre of countless collective rituals. On the side of *techne*, one might think of the consistency and regularity of electric lighting. The power that enables this consistency is not near-at-hand but rather contained in some distant regulatory centre. The constructed nature of the electric light is, unlike the candle, almost invisible. One lives with electric lighting and hardly ever considers that it is there. On the side of *poiesis*, one might also think of a woodland path that has been made by the continual imprint of human feet. The path is surrounded by trees and bushes and, during periods of rain, the trail will be hard going. On the side of *techne*, however, there are urban centres, in which tarmac and pavement cover over all the ground and the few trees that there are grow in straight lines. A person walking along the pavement in a city is completely surrounded by a regular urban design, their direction is chosen for them on the basis of urban planning. Without the presence of people, the path might be overgrown in a few years. The city, on the other hand, communicates a sense of permanence (though, in truth, it too is liable to decay). Its vastness and regularity disguise the temporality and vulnerability of the ordering systems that it embodies.

In the 'Preface', Wordsworth draws a series of distinctions between neoclassical poetry and the Poetry of nature. The former is a poetry of 'arbitrary and capricious habits of expression' (l.100-01), is 'food for fickle tastes', and is characterized by 'triviality and meanness, both of thought and language' (l.104-05).<sup>145</sup> Underlying this critique is the belief that language originally emerges from nature. A Poetry of nature would be written in the 'plainer and more emphatic language' (l.83-84) of ordinary men. This language is rooted in their dwelling in the countryside and, as such, these 'men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of

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<sup>145</sup> *Prose I*. All quotes from the 'Preface' taken from this 1850 version in this volume.



language is originally derived' (l.92-94). The importance of sustained communication with the things described is again invoked when Wordsworth writes: 'I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject (l.189-90). Language that springs from the prolonged co-presence of humankind and nature is, therefore, 'a far more philosophical language' (l.98). For Wordsworth, as Jonathan Lamb argues, the poetic language of ordinary men is philosophical not because it is 'reflective or capable of fine distinctions' but because it is 'immediately responsive to the rhythms and exigencies of that situation.'<sup>146</sup> As such, this language, as Wordsworth later states, is 'alive with metaphors and figures' (l.271). Neoclassical verse, by contrast, uses a set of stock images and phrases such as 'smiling mornings' and 'amorous descant' (l.229, 231). It is also littered with merely conventional personifications like 'reddening Phoebus'. The 'Preface', therefore, encourages us to draw a distinction between poetry and Poetry. In the first place, there are mere works of verse and, in the second place, there are works which, given Wordsworth's argument that the language of good Poetry 'does not differ from that of prose' (l.204), may not even be in verse, but which remain true to the spirit of Poetry.

Wordsworth understands the spirit of Poetry to be in opposition to various features of modernity which he opposes. Centrally, he criticizes the way in which, in urban settings, 'the uniformity of occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies' (l.151-52) and in which people exhibit a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation' (l.157-58). For Wordsworth, like Wollstonecraft, the selfish pursuit of pleasure is not primarily caused by vices inherent to human nature such as might be tamed by disciplinary social mechanisms. Instead, it is precisely mechanism (that of economic incentives and repetitive, robotic forms of labour) which brings about the great need for stimulation. His criticism of industrial forms of labour even resembles aspects of Marx's concept of alienation.

In opposition to these forms of alienation, Wordsworth defends the moral purpose of poetry. At the same time, however, he is careful not to suggest that this purpose could in any sense be likened to the means-ends reasoning of utility. Each of the poems, Wordsworth argues,

has a worthy purpose. Not that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formerly conceived; but habits of meditation have, I trust, so prompted and regulated my feelings, that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry

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<sup>146</sup> Lamb argues that this conception of language is derived from David Hartley's associationism, 'Hartley and Wordsworth: Philosophical Language and Figures of the Sublime', *MLN*, 97.5 (1982), 1064-85 (pp. 1065-66) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2905977>>.

along with them a purpose. If this opinion be erroneous, I can have little right to the name of a Poet. For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings (l.112-23).

Wordsworth's poems have a purpose, but that does not mean that they are brought forth in accordance with an end that one calculates beforehand. Their purpose is not projected. Instead, Wordsworth describes a process by which thoughts and feelings become so entangled with each other that the resulting description naturally has a purpose. We might recall, at this point, Wollstonecraft's synthesized ethico-existential description and her depiction of the poet in these terms. Wordsworth does not know the purpose of his writing, at least not in a conceptual and therefore representational sense of knowledge, for that purpose is rooted in the primordial synthesis from which his thoughts emerge. This primordial synthesis is what Wordsworth calls 'past feelings', but might equally be termed presence.<sup>147</sup> Feeling, in this sense, does not denote something internal to a subject, but a haptic and embodied co-presence. This is feeling in the same sense that Wordsworth *felt* the joy that is associated with the one life.

Poetical philosophy differs from the philosophy of Godwin, therefore, not only because it instantiates a different mode of purposiveness, but also because it seeks to fit words to things rather than to fit things to words. Godwin falls into the same trap as neoclassical poets, in so far as he attempts to make nature subordinate to artificial systems of representation. For Wordsworth artificial verses and the conditions of urban life are merely instantiations of a much larger historical development. He argues that 'the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself' (l.42-43) are determined, to some extent, by the 'manner [in which] language and the human mind act and re-act on each other' (l.41-42). The exposition of this theme, Wordsworth acknowledges, is beyond the scope of a 'Preface' to a volume of poems. It would not, however, be beyond the scope of Poetry, for Poetry is defined as 'the first and last of all knowledge' (l.410-11). It is notable that, for Aristotle, whom Wordsworth mentions, first philosophy was not Poetry but metaphysics. What, then, we might ask is the distinction between Poetry and metaphysics when both are taken to provide the fundamentals of human knowledge?

Wordsworth's criticism of neoclassical poetry as merely a mode of slavishly re-ordering old images is comparable to Heidegger's criticism of technicity in science. 'Scientific thinking',

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<sup>147</sup> Adela Pinch argues that feelings, for Wordsworth, are often strange, in the sense that they can seem foreign or alien. Wordsworth is unsure, Pinch suggests, whether feelings originate from within or from without a person. *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 107-8.

Heidegger argues, is ‘just a derivative and rigidified form of philosophical thinking’.<sup>148</sup> Heidegger argues that ‘any thinking that simply follows the laws of thought of an established logic is intrinsically incapable of even beginning to understand the question about beings’, that is, incapable of understanding the temporally shifting presencing of nature.<sup>149</sup> For Heidegger, like Wordsworth, the only kinds of thinking that can be responsive to this question are philosophy and Poetry.<sup>150</sup>

True philosophy, after the model of Socrates, is based in awareness of human ignorance: “wisest is he who knows that he knows nothing”. Relatedly, Andrew Bennett identifies a preoccupation in Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’ with poetic ignorance. Poetry is described as ‘the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science’ (l.399-400). Bennett notes that the metaphors of ‘breath’ and ‘spirit’, reminiscent of classical or religious notions of inspiration, work to suggest a tension between poetry and knowledge. Breath and spirit are not knowledge but opaque figurations of a mysterious, poetic foundation that precedes knowledge. A link might be drawn, here, to what was said above about the relationship between “the one life” and the one life, where the former is merely a poetic image for something ineffable and the latter is the name of a knowable entity. To engage with the one life in this latter way, we need to forget that it is a mere representation. Wordsworth, Bennett argues, defines poetry as ‘a form of nescience: poetry allows one to not know, allows one to accept not knowing’.<sup>151</sup> Poetry furnishes thought with images derived from its responsive to nature and yet implicit in this activity is the awareness that such images are provisional.

Elsewhere, Bennett argues that Wordsworth’s writing exhibits a tension between a conception of composition as linked to the idea of inspiration and spontaneity on the one hand, and the idea of composition as a technique of production that disturbs the self-presencing effects of spontaneity, on the other hand.<sup>152</sup> One might see this tension between different notions of poetic composition enshrined in the phrase ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (l.585), where ‘emotion’ carries the sense of responsive presence and ‘tranquillity’ a sense of distance from that presence. Relatedly, Bennett notes that many of Wordsworth’s poems seem to work against

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<sup>148</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 28.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>151</sup> Andrew Bennett, ‘Wordsworth’s Poetic Ignorance’, in *Wordsworth’s Poetic Theory: Knowledge, Language, Experience*, ed. by Stefan H. Uhlig and Alexander Regier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 19–35 (p. 27).

<sup>152</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Wordsworth Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 11–12.

communication.<sup>153</sup> One might think, here, of the silence that follows the encounter poems, or of Wordsworth's famed propensity for anticlimactic endings. In the 'Poems on the Naming of Places' series in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), for instance, the naming act which ends each poem seems strangely arbitrary. Emma's dell and Joanna's rock seem insufficiently resonant labels to encapsulate the places that the poem has hitherto described. The effect is almost one of bathos. Bennett draws a distinction between these kinds of poems and 'The Recluse', for the latter 'is supposed to present what the poet knows [,] many of the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, by contrast, are concerned with what the poet doesn't, what he cannot know'.<sup>154</sup>

Poetry, for Wordsworth, brings forth the images, or first principles, that are required for thought. In doing so, however, it breaks with presence. Techne also breaks with presence, but is unphilosophical because, in doing so, it seeks to enframe human beings within its own axioms. It attempts to ensure the perpetual functioning of the systems that it creates. Poiesis is philosophical because it breaks with nature's presence but at the same time artfully displays this break.

This artful display is partially based in poetry's attentiveness to the gap between presence and representation in the form of the gap between the signifying and material qualities of language. Peter de Bolla asks whether, for Wordsworth, '*poesis* is a transformative operation, taking base materials and turning them into the thrill of poetic pleasure' or whether he imagines 'that the building blocks of poetry — let us call them poetic materials — are out there in the world needing only due diligence for discovery'.<sup>155</sup> 'This distinction', de Bolla continues, 'is broken across the issue of how one builds the dwelling place of poetry, and therefore for Wordsworth of being'. Noting that much of the discussion of poetry in the 'Preface' is concerned with meter, de Bolla argues that an exploration of the 'thingliness' of words, 'their weight, texture, contour, and shape', as well as 'the repetition and modulation of sounds within and across words', proffer a way to think through the distinction between poetry's transformative and accumulative functions.<sup>156</sup> What is at stake, here, de Bolla argues, is not epistemology as an 'abstraction, as a theory or systematic account of knowledge but as a form of experience, a felt knowing that seems internal to the thing that is this language'.<sup>157</sup> Poetry represents but it also presences language. I would argue that, in this regard, one might think, not just of the materiality of words, but also the

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>154</sup> 'Poetic Ignorance', p. 33.

<sup>155</sup> 'What Is a Lyrical Ballad? Wordsworth's Experimental Epistemologies', in *Wordsworth's Poetic Theory: Knowledge, Language, Experience*, ed. by Stefan H. Uhlig and Alexander Regier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 43–60 (p. 44).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp. 47, 49.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

way in which this materiality always already seems to be giving itself to meaning. The rhythm of words, like the cadence of the river Derwent, is the locus of non-signifying meaningfulness. Poetic rhythm and the sounds of words, like the rivers murmur, presences something meaningful, but resists any attempt to express that meaning in signs. In doing so, the poem makes us aware that our representations, such as are the bases for our knowledge, are also reliant upon the non-signifying meaningfulness of “material” presence.

When, towards the end of ‘Home at Grasmere’, Wordsworth reflects upon his poetic vocation he does so with an awareness of Poetry’s basis in presence. ‘Why shine they round me thus, who thus I love? | Why do they teach me, whom I thus revere?’ (l.890-91). Wordsworth can write only because he is already surrounded by a mysterious meaningfulness. He dwells in blessedness with his family in Grasmere. However, this soon gives way to a proclamation in the mode of mind’s power, regarding Wordsworth’s ambition to write a poem ‘On Man, on Nature, and on human Life’ (l.959). Such a poem, Wordsworth argues, must surpass hell, heaven, even Jehovah ‘and the quire | Of shouting angels’ (l.982), so as to look ‘Into our minds, into the mind of Man, | My haunt and the main region of my song’ (l.988-90). It will be a poem about

the individual mind that keeps its own  
Inviolat retirement, and consists  
With being limitless the one great Life (l.969-71).

In the same passage, Wordsworth alludes to Milton, to ‘the Bard, | Holiest of Men (l.973-74). There may be an allusion to Milton in the lines that describe the mind of man, also. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan refers to himself as

A mind not to be chang’d by Place or Time.  
The mind is its own place, and in it self  
Can make a Heav’n of hell, a Hell of Heav’n’ (l.253-55).<sup>158</sup>

Satan believes that the mind can make hell into heaven because it is ‘its own place’ and on this basis can exercise a will that is independent of things. In this, he almost resembles the Stoic.

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<sup>158</sup> John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton, Vol. 1: Paradise Lost*, ed. by Helen Darbishire, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)  
<<http://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198118190.book.1/actrade-9780198118190-book-1>> [accessed 10 November 2020].

True to form, however, Wordsworth soon shies away from the apocalyptic power of a mind freed from place. 'Beauty', he writes,

whose living home is the green earth,  
 Surpassing the most fair ideal Forms  
 The craft of delicate spirits hath composed  
 From earth's materials, waits upon my steps' (l.991-94).

The earth is more beautiful, Wordsworth argues, than anything the artist might make. Poiesis must therefore be a devotional practice, always subordinate to that which it represents. Wordsworth continues:

Paradise and groves

Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old  
 In the deep ocean—wherefore should they be  
 A History, or but a dream, when minds  
 Once wedded to this outward frame of things  
 In love, find these the growth of common day?  
 I, long before the blessed hour arrives,  
 Would sing in solitude the spousal verse  
 Of this great consummation, would proclaim—  
 Speaking of nothing more than what we are—  
 How exquisitely 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 mind;  
 And the creation (by no lower name  
 Can it be called) which they with blended might  
 Accomplish: this is my great argument (l.996-1013).

If it is true that the earth is more beautiful than any ideal form of beauty, then it follows that paradise, the locus of true happiness, might be located upon earth. Paradise, therefore, is not lost

but is rather ambiguously poised between having already been found and being about to be found if certain conditions can be met. In the above passage the ambiguity arises from the line ‘once wedded to this outward frame of things’, in which the ‘once’ could either invoke a past state or a condition that must be met in the future. This ambiguous temporality recalls the influx that came into Wordsworth’s head in childhood but which unfolds when Wordsworth arrives in Grasmere as an adult. In both cases, nature grants human beings an inexpressible sense of what they might become, but what they might become turns out to have its basis in what they already were. Nature grants them, in other words, a sense of telos. As was argued earlier, however, this sense of this telos emanates from within the particular life that is lived, not from a metaphysical account of human nature, independent of time and place. In order to dwell, the adult Wordsworth must recover what the child Wordsworth was *in potentia* and humankind must recover pre-modern porousness so as to articulate it within new contexts.

The wedding of mind and nature *resembles* but is not equivalent to co-presence. It might be said that the wedding would involve a resolution of the tensions between mind’s power and nature’s presence which, I have argued, characterize Wordsworth’s poetry. Wordsworth has already discovered nature’s presence, but he has not discovered the means by which mind’s power and the ‘progressive powers [...] | of the whole species’ can be incorporated into nature. There has been a break between the two, which now allows Wordsworth, as well as those he opposes, to bring forth in a way that is (partially) independent of nature.<sup>159</sup> Wordsworth, ultimately, cannot and does not deem the progressive powers of the mind, that is to say, the will to reconstruct nature, malevolent. Therefore, he must live the contradiction between agency and active passivity until ‘The Recluse’ can marry them.

The challenge, however, is oxymoronic, for the Recluse project is constituted by modes of creative agency that break with presence. Thus, characteristically, Wordsworth’s final lines oscillate to the opposing pole. ‘And if with this’, Wordsworth writes,

I blend more lowly matter—with the thing  
Contemplated describe the mind and man  
Contemplating, and who and what he was,  
The transitory Being that beheld  
This vision, when and where and how he lived,

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<sup>159</sup> This tension between a critique of progress as manifested in society and a continued faith in progress is also invoked in Lucy Newlyn, “‘The Noble Living and the Noble Dead’: Community in *The Prelude*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 55–69 (p. 67) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521641160>>.

With all his little realities of life—  
 Be not this labour useless. If such theme  
 With highest things may [ ], then, Great God,  
 Thou who art breath and being, way and guide,  
 And power and understanding, may my life  
 Express the image of a better time,  
 More wise desires and simple manners; nurse  
 My heart in genuine freedom; all pure thoughts  
 Be with me and uphold me to the end! (l.1034-48).

In these lines, the inevitable failure of 'The Recluse' gives way to the more modest ambition that Wordsworth's life should 'express the image of a better time'. This image emerges from the 'little realities' of a particular form of life. In other words, it emerges from a dwelling place. Wordsworth does not so much speak the truth as he speaks out of the truth that is already present in his life. The image that will be produced is an artful and provisional representation of that presence, such as will bear the trace of its origins in the particular. The poetic image, here, makes no claims to universal validity, nor, however, does it relinquish the desire to orient itself towards a final end. In doing so it remains committed to truth, but in a manner that is responsive to such changes in the meaning of the world as are wrought by the passage of time.



## EPILOGUE

A recurrent theme throughout this thesis has been the relationship between art and nature, poiesis and techne, representation and presence. For Boswell, it was argued that art is superfluous to nature. This view links to an understanding of nature as an order of objects on top of which sits the subjective mind. Contrastingly, Sterne defends a radically relational notion of language (wit) against the notion that language is a framework for the rational representation of states of affairs (judgement). Judgement can never attain the precision that its practitioners desire for it because words are always accruing irrational relationships with other words. This is true, also, for things, which appear in different ways according to their contexts and according to who views them.

Wollstonecraft articulates a Romantic conception of the relationship between art and nature, valuing notions of inspiration, spontaneity, and responsiveness. For Wollstonecraft, art does not embellish nature, but is rather the means by which nature, society, and the individual might be bound together once more. This aspiration is at the heart of Wordsworth's project. However, he encounters a rift between presence and representation. Wordsworth can encounter nature's presence but his art can never fully express it. For Wordsworth, there is a distinction between the perceptual thereness of things and our capacity to adequately represent them in sign systems. Wordsworth's poetry is ecological in so far as it creatively attempts to build a home (oikos) in language (logos). Correspondingly, blessedness makes happiness a matter of receptivity, while at the same time acknowledging the necessary role that hap plays in earthly existence.

A crucial suggestion of Locke's, one which encapsulates the spirit of the Enlightenment happiness, is that 'Mens Happiness or Misery is most part of their own making'.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest that Wordsworthian poiesis might give us a different sense of 'making' and of the quality of the relationship of that making to nature. We could view making happiness in instrumental terms, that is to say, we could view pleasurable states of mind or life satisfaction as an end towards which certain procedures are aimed (e.g. the pursuit of wealth, consumption of goods and of experiences, healthy eating, CBT). It is certainly true that certain material conditions, including

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, ed. by John W. Yolton and Jean Yolton, Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 83 <<https://www-oxfordscholarlyeditions-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198245827.book.1/actrade-9780198245827-book-1>> [accessed 30 December 2020].

physical and mental health, must be met as a base level for wellbeing. However, to view happiness in terms of instrumental making would, in my opinion, be reductive. The view of poiesis as artful making, or as careful bringing forth, conducted under the awareness of the non-signifying meaningfulness of nature, is compatible, I think, with a eudaemonist conception of virtue.

In MacIntyre's account the virtues are forms of practical or intellectual excellence which have goods internal to them. The means are more important than the ends. A small group of people gathering together to play music, for example, requires excellence on behalf of the musicians and that excellence is manifested through the activity rather than being a result of the activity. The same is true of acts of careful artisanship. A constructed thing is produced (an end), and it is quite possible that an artisan might approach her work as simply a means to producing a thing to sell. For the activity to have the character of virtuous excellence, however, the orientation towards the practice must carry intrinsic goods with it. Another example could be mentorship, in which the wellbeing or success of the mentee is the end that is produced, but the activity of doing so involves the mentor's careful bringing forth. I would suggest that happiness is not merely an end to these practices but is also embedded *in* them. If happiness describes positive relationships between self and world, self and other, self and things, then these artful and careful interactions are central to happiness, whereas instrumentality, exercised beyond its proper bounds, is corrosive to the good life.

Relatedly, as Dreyfus and Kelly argue, poietic excellences, including those of art, sport, music, and craftsmanship can have a sacred dimension.<sup>2</sup> 'The world', Dreyfus and Kelly argue, 'used to be [...] a world of sacred, shining things. The shining things now seem far away'.<sup>3</sup> In attentive forms of making and in various collective practices, however, the sacred is still there to be revealed. 'The task of the craftsman', they write, 'is not to *generate* the meaning, but rather to *cultivate* in himself the skill for *discerning* the meanings that are *already there*'.<sup>4</sup> Technical making is lost in its own representational systems and seeks to wilfully impose the form of these representations onto inert matter, in such a way as is repeatable, useful, and efficient. Poietic activity, by contrast, will often be characterized by its relative inefficiency and its non-utility. Poiesis also works from representations, yet it remains responsive to the calling that is in things, a calling that will be resistant to the uniformity that representational systems seek to impose. Poiesis seeks to bring forth the non-signifying meaningfulness of things through the activity of representation.

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<sup>2</sup> Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), p. 248.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

Instrumental practices and ways of thinking should not be viewed as aberrations, for they are manifest in all human societies. As such, they are essential to human flourishing. The problem is not that there is technicity, it is rather the extent to which it predominates and enframes the practices and understandings of modern societies. A grand aspiration, then, would be that practices with the structures described above might counterbalance instrumentality.

This must also involve consideration of the things with which we surround ourselves and with the things that we make, for these things also make us. The Grecian urn in Keats's poem is one such thing. For Keats, the urn is a 'Sylvan historian, who canst thus express | A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme' (l.3-4).<sup>5</sup> The urn depicts 'happy, happy boughs!' (l.21), a 'happy melodist' (l.23), and a sylvan scene of 'happy love! More happy, happy love | For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd' (l.26-27). However, there is more than a hint of irony in these statements. The happiness that is conveyed in the urn's images is in tension with its 'Cold Pastoral' (l.45) and with the reflections upon mortality that arise from the contemplation of a scene that features characters long gone, and of a cultural world that has been extinguished. In addition, the urn's supposed expression of a tale sweeter than rhyme is ironized when one recognizes that the Grecian urn's being is in language. What to make, then, of the poem's closing lines in which the urn, 'a friend to man', says to him: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all, | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (l.49-50)?

In a sense, the poem dramatizes the way that we are enraptured by the things we make, by our representations. Keats' ekphrasis describes the way in which representation requires a forgetfulness of things. In order to get the sense of Keats' poem we must imagine that the urn is *really there*, and thus must forget the thingliness of words, although we might later reflect that the urn is a linguistic artifact. To recognize that the poem invites us to confound representation with presence and to recognize the irony of Keats' statements is to think carefully about the manner of our involvement with the things that make up the world. We must also recognize, however, that absorption in representations is not something that we could avoid. The final lines of the ode might be taken as an expression of the necessary oscillation between what things represent and what they present. On the one hand, truth is beauty because we will forever fail to arrive at truth in abstract representations. It is therefore important that our pursuit of truth should be poetic, which is to say, concerned with the artful and provisional realization of what is already present. Truthful representation brought forth artfully is like Keats' attentive ekphrasis, which describes a thing but also reminds us that the ekphrasis is not that thing. On the other hand,

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<sup>5</sup> John Keats, *John Keats Complete Poems*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University), pp. 282-83.

beauty is truth because excellent practices, conducted artfully, cannot but be oriented towards the truth. If we acknowledge that we will not arrive at a punctual and final truth it does not need to follow that we should pursue a lie instead. Just as reading Keats' poem requires our forgetful absorption in an image, careful thinking, including interpretation as a mode of thinking, only has intelligibility when it directs itself towards the truth that it will never fully be able to grasp.

In equating beauty with truth and in having a thing embody truth, Keats thematizes the limits of thinking. A similar notion is invoked by W.B. Yeats who, in a letter of 1939, a few weeks before his death, writes: 'When I try to put all into a phrase I say, "Man can embody truth but he cannot know it." I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence...' <sup>6</sup> Like Keats, Yeats gives priority to a non-representational understanding of truth, thus potentially invoking a stance of anti-intellectualism. However, language is not merely representation, it also presences. It does so when it shows the materiality of words but also when certain words attain certain resonances within particular historical-cultural moments. Certain vocabularies emerge as particularly responsive to a particular set of existential conditions and are recognized for this responsiveness by the communities who draw upon them. Indeed, in following the course of thinking that has produced this dissertation, I have often been led away by the resonant suggestiveness of certain words as well as by their history. These have been words like inspiration, blessedness, bringing forth, hap and happiness, ecstasy and ekstasis, art and artificiality, poetry and poesis, presence and representation, alienation and dwelling. My hope is that these words not only have presence for me but that they are also presencing for others. What is more, if truth is embodied in a life rather than known by an observer, that does not mean that intellectual practices are unimportant. Careful thinking can be considered as a form of excellence, a virtuous practice necessary for the good life, such as produces an end but which also has goods intrinsic to it. To recognize the limitations of intellectual productions is not to devalue the importance of thinking, which now more than ever, as instrumental procedures come to effect more and more areas of our lives and certain processes become more and more unthinkingly automatic, is vital. It is to recognize, however, that thinking is not the only way in which truth can be pursued, but is rather one means of pursuing truth, one excellent activity among others, and that it must often give way to these other virtues. Thinking emerges in response to conditions that are given by the world, takes a course that is directed by the presencing of words, and then, approaching its final point, it stops for breath.

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<sup>6</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Letters of W.B. Yeats: Edited by Allan Wade* (London: Hart-Davis, 1954), p. 922.

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