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Uncommon Ecology: Reading the Romantic Oikos

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Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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UNCOMMON ECOLOGY: READING THE ROMANTIC OIKOS

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by

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Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This project contributes to the field of ecocriticism by reconsidering the idea of nature in the Romantic period in order to explore a new mode of artistic ecological thought. Ecocriticism develops in tandem with the environmental urgency of recent decades, responding mostly with an intense focus upon material nature in order to remind an increasingly artificial society of its earthly foundations and to encourage, in some kind or degree, a return to nature. Though the call for return is a powerful story, modern scientific and philosophical developments indicate that it is not ecologically sound. The return narrative requires at its base a stable nature to which to return; modern ecology, however, increasingly reveals nature as an unstable and uncertain process. It is therefore time to rethink the stories at the heart of our relationship with nature. This project looks to British Romanticism as the return story's most influential incarnation. Romantic ecocriticism often hails the Romantic "return to nature" as ecologically progressive: an assumption I aim to destabilize. Pairing close readings of works by William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Percy Bysshe Shelley with the post-structuralist theory often disregarded by ecocriticism, especially the community theory of Jean-Luc Nancy, I question the construction of Romantic nature. Community theory questions the ethics of reunion and instead posits difference as the basis of relation. Given that ecology is essentially the study of natural relationships, community theory enables a new mode of ecological consciousness that is both thought and felt. In Romanticism, community theory reveals an uncertain nature that is paradoxically and proleptically faithful to modern ecological thought, advocating not return or reunion but relation: specifically, a passionate relation experienced as joy. Navigating key concepts such as identity and difference, work and

play, productivity and creativity, economy and ecology, and ecstasy and joy, I explore a Romantic imagination of ecology as joyful community: I term this uncommon ecological imagination the Romantic oikos, calling upon the etymological root of ecology as home to think through the complexity of being together in place. The Romantic oikos creatively re-imagines humanity's place in nature: a creative task we are called to perform today.

Keywords

Literature; English literature; Romanticism; ecocriticism; ecology; community; literary theory; deconstruction; affect; William Wordsworth; John Clare; Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Introduction

The Project of Romantic Ecology

In this project, I explore the Romantic ecological imagination as it evolves in the poetry of William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Our modern understanding of nature and, therefore, our modern relationship with it begin in the Romantic Period. Currently, our multiple ecological crises urgently demand that we re-think this relationship. This project responds to this demand by returning to our cultural ecological roots in the Romantic period, via current literary and critical theory, in order to re-imagine our relationship with each other and with the natural other: to find in our cultural memory a path towards our ecological future. What unfolds throughout this project is a reading of Romantic ecology as a community, which I call the Romantic oikos.

The Romantic ecological imagination offers a playfulness that the modern environmental movement, literary and otherwise, tends to lack, a lack to which I attribute, at least in part, the movement's limited success. The environmental emphasis so far has been upon a projected reunion of the human and the non-human; often, it takes the form of a renegotiation of a contract in order to re-evaluate and regulate our destructive behaviour. On the surface, the approach seems very successful, given the preponderance of attention to environmental issues by media, government, and commerce. A closer look, unfortunately, reveals much of this rhetoric as cultural greenwashing. A few years ago, for example, there was a series of television advertisements by the Certified General Accountants Association of Canada that offered a modern image of accountants as good citizens of the modern world. Contrary to popular

belief, they argued, accounting is a dynamic, caring profession that thinks deeply and considers the effects of its actions upon clients, communities, and the earth. In one such ad, an accountant (or an actor portraying one) asks himself searchingly, “Does the earth deserve a balance sheet?” After a pregnant pause, he responds with a firm and resounding “Yes.”

Consideration of the environment in financial decision-making is no doubt what those in public relations think people want to hear; indeed, it is what many do want to hear, including many environmentalists. David Suzuki, for one, has vocally indicted the economic world for its ignorance of the earth, which he reminds us is the basis of all our raw materials. Global economics, he charges, refers to “the services of the natural world as ‘externalities’” (*David* 297).¹ As long as this oversight persists, the environment will always suffer at the hands of the economy. Indeed, Suzuki compares the economy to the mythological god in the volcano, one to which we sacrifice our virgin environments: “In the past, people trembled in fear of dragons, demons, gods, and monsters, sacrificing anything — virgins, money, newborn babies — to appease them. We know now that those fears were superstitious imaginings, but we have replaced them with a new behemoth: the economy” (“Behemoth”).

Suzuki is among the latest in a series of thinkers who address the contest between the economic and environmental worlds. These thinkers often respond by advocating a union between the two: often, a union to be achieved by extending the consideration of the economic—its rules and principles — to the earth. In his essay “The Land Ethic” from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a foundational text of ecological literature, Aldo

¹I cite his autobiography as the source of this quote, but he mentions this phenomenon in multiple texts and speeches.

Leopold is also aware of the divide between the environmental and the economic, noting that, as of yet, “[t]he land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations” (238):

a system of conservation based solely on economic self-interest is hopelessly lopsided. It tends to ignore, and thus eventually to eliminate, many elements in the land community that lack commercial value, but that are (as far as we know) essential to its healthy functioning. It assumes, falsely, I think, that the economic parts of the biotic clock will function without the uneconomic parts. (251)

The economy must consider the environment, he argues, and he rests his hope for the future upon a reformed economy achieved through the environmental enlightenment of the private landowner (251). Gary Snyder in his essay “The Place, the Region, and the Commons” (1990) expresses a similar hope for a reformed economy which features the signing of an expanded contract: “We need to make a world-scale ‘Natural Contract’ with the oceans, the air, the birds in the sky” (478). In the same year that Snyder’s essay was published,² Michel Serres also called for a natural contract in a book by that very name. He envisions the natural contract as an extension of the social contract. He criticizes the social contract for much the same reasons that Leopold and Suzuki criticize the economy—both ignore the earth: “From the time the pact was signed, it is as if the group that had signed it, casting off from the world, were no longer rooted in anything but its own history” (34). Serres’ natural contract would remedy this failure by making “the social contract enter the world” (46).

²Serres’ book was first published in French in 1990. The English translation, which I cite here, was first published in 1995.

Despite the rivalry between the environment and the economy throughout the twentieth century, twentieth-century environmental thought still tended to look to economic principles, extending them in order to address environmental problems. Romantic thought offers a much-needed, eloquently uneconomic counterpoint to the modern environmental approach. Considering how deeply entrenched economic forces are within contemporary society, the modern economic-environmental approach is understandable. Environmentalists hope for a grand-scale embrace of environmental concerns by attaching them to economic issues. This approach has been fundamental to the conservation movement, which argues that we must conserve the environment (also called “our” environment or even our “natural resources”) in order that future generations may have use of them. This argument holds that nature is the root of our economic prosperity, and should be respected and protected as such.³ Deep ecology (contrary to conservationist shallow ecology), on the other hand, argues that nature has an inherent right to exist quite outside of its possible utility for humans. Proponents of deep ecology, however, like Snyder above, can also champion economic principles in their quest for a paradigm shift at the core of human thought. Deep ecology calls for a fundamental rethinking and restructuring of our attitudes and behaviours; attention to the economic makes sense, then, when understood as the principle of human organization at the core of our relationship with the world. Romantic thought recognizes a different principle at the core of our relationship with the world, however: one that is excessive instead of

³At the time of writing, a news item was published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) about the planet’s 100 most at-risk species, in which Jonathan Baillie, director of conservation for the Zoological Society of London states that “The donor community and conservation movement are leaning increasingly towards a ‘what can nature do for us’ approach, where species and wild habitats are valued and prioritised according to the services they provide for people.” The groups involved in compiling the list of species, it is reported, “fear the 100 species will die out because they don’t provide humans with obvious benefits” (“Scientists”).

conservative. Rather than a society of economic transaction, Romantic thought as I read it in this project forms a relationship with the world upon a passionate foundation of communication.

Recognizing this Romantic counterpoint, this project argues that the possibility of union between the economic and the ecological is fraught with contrary fundamental motivations and is therefore inadequate as a sole approach to the problem. I recognize that economy and ecology have much in common. Both words stem from the same etymological root the meaning of which reveals the shared roots of their modern-day manifestations. They are both concerned with the life of the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or home. Their interpretations of *oikos*, however, and their approaches to it are markedly different. At its philosophical foundations, economy aims to regulate the *oikos*, to evaluate and modify the direction and magnitude of its energies. We witness its principles in the operations of markets and governments. It works in the interest of its own health, aiming to sustain itself and to grow. Its ultimate goal is self-preservation. Ecology, speaking again in theoretical terms, behaves almost oppositely. It aims to understand the *oikos*, a task it recognizes is not ultimately possible. Therefore, it celebrates the *oikos* and its diverse energies. We witness this in the science of ecology and in popular ecological sentiment both today and in the earlier periods taken up in this project. It is, in broad but nevertheless accurate terms, the love of nature. Economy, then, understands the *oikos* as its household, both its structure and inhabitants; on the contrary, ecology understands the *oikos* as the home, its relationships both physical and emotional. In short, economy is directed towards the self; ecology is directed towards the other. In its passionate engagement with the other, the Romantic relationship with the

world is ecological.

Economists and ecologists could no doubt dispute these definitions from social science and scientific perspectives. The specifics of these disciplines and how they understand themselves, though interesting in their own right, are not discussed here because they are not central components of my argument; in this project, I address economy and ecology not as specific disciplines but as cosmologies—ideas that help us to orient ourselves in the world. Considered as such, economy and ecology are less disparate disciplines in which adherents train and practice (important though these disciplines be), but world views in which each of us necessarily participates. As cosmologies, economy and ecology are different ways of considering place, and our place within place. They are therefore necessary to consider when imagining our relationship with the natural world.

As we glimpse in the brief overview of twentieth-century environmental thinkers above, and which I will discuss in more detail in the first chapter, economic principles have dominated our relationship with nature in recent years. The fatal flaw of the economic approach to nature is its inherent self-orientation. Within this model, nature, as the other, will always fare poorly. It has no voice in economic transactions. As I will discuss in the first chapter, nature cannot negotiate, and so it cannot enter contracts.⁴ Economy, as a cosmology, cannot accommodate the other without assimilating it into itself. Once assimilated, nature is no longer nature, but resource or product. Economy alone cannot form a relationship with nature because it cannot see beyond itself. In other words, it has no imagination. It is similar in spirit to William's Blake's experimental

⁴I argue this point in contrast to Michel Serres who at times advocates an economic approach in *The Natural Contract* (1990).

character, which without imagination (“the Poetic or Prophetic character”) “would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again” (“There is No Natural Religion [b]”), or to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s concept of τὸ λογίζειν, or reason, which he articulates in the beginning of “A Defence of Poetry” as “the principle of analysis,” “the enumeration of quantities already known” (510). Imagination, as Shelley also argues in “A Defence of Poetry,” is needed to reach beyond the self towards the other: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others ... The great instrument of moral good is the imagination” (517). Economy lacks the imagination to reach out towards the other; it is therefore unable, as Shelley would argue, to engage the other ethically.

Ecology, as a cosmology, allows us to consider the other without constant reference to our own interests. Ecology performs the imaginative going out of oneself necessary for an ethical relationship, an ability economy lacks. It enables us to respect nature on its own terms. The relationship is not limited to respect, however. The ecological relationship with the natural other is not founded upon a (necessarily one-sided) contract as in the economic approach; it is instead based upon affection. Unlike contractual agreements and balance sheets, ecology does not consider what it receives in return for what it gives, but only the gift. It is a Romantic orientation toward the world. The ecological relationship is founded upon what Shelley calls “[t]he great secret of morals”: “Love” (517). Love is the excess that reaches beyond the self. It imagines our relationship with nature not as an economic society, but as an ecological community. In this project, I call this passionate ecological community the *oikos*.

In thinking through this affective ecological community, I call upon the work of several critics and theorists who have articulated some key elements of its foundations. Firstly, my definition of community is indebted to the work of recent community theory, especially that of Nancy in *The Inoperative Community* (1982). Nancy's inoperative community is intensely ethical, being based fundamentally upon difference; it is therefore distinct from communion, which is based upon identity. The difference at the centre of Nancy's community demands that each of us engage the other without a will to assimilation or sameness. It is, therefore, a renunciation of the program of union. Union has been the goal of much environmental thought, and in literature, the field of ecocriticism as well. Many nature writers and ecocritics argue that "we are out of tune," as Wordsworth phrases it in "The World is Too Much with Us" (8), and advocate a return to nature, however defined and constructed. When we consider such environmental goals through Nancy's community theory, we recognize the potentially dangerous undercurrents of the desire for union: homogeneity, intolerance, and oppression. I refer to this understanding of communion in order to critique the dominant strain of environmental thought which casts communion as a solution to our divisions. I draw upon Nancy's community, instead, in order to consider the ecological potential of difference.

This project relates community theory with current explorations in ecological theory. The two fields are similar in spirit, given that each essentially explores the nature and performance of relation: between humans in the case of community theory, and between humans and non-humans in the case of ecological theory. Numerous ecocritics, especially Romanticist ecocritics, inform the arguments within these chapters. Those I

call upon most tend to consider nature and ecology theoretically, especially deconstructively. While this discipline has been maligned by ecocritics for its perceived inattention to materiality reality, I argue that such post-structuralist theory offers the elasticity and openness required to think ecological relation imaginatively. Ecosophist Felix Guattari demonstrates this flexibility in *The Three Ecologies* (1989), in which he divides the idea of ecology against itself, considering it a threefold entity. Theorists like Giorgio Agamben in *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002) and Jacques Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2006), in turning their attention to human-animal relationships, reveal deconstruction's productive contribution to ecological thought. More so than conventional environmentalist thinkers who desire union, I draw upon deconstructive thinkers whose playfulness resists union and embraces difference, reading this playfulness for its ecological potential.

In literary criticism, I engage Timothy Morton's deconstructive work in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) in order to understand and to articulate the core difference within my own work. I find Morton's emphasis upon the affective aspect of ecology compelling. Intriguing though Morton's case is, however, I find his chosen affect—melancholy—ultimately unconvincing, initially because it did not correspond with my own experience. Thinking through Morton's work and my own understanding of ecological relation as constructed through community theory and ecosophy, as outlined in the first chapter, I present instead an ecological experience predicated less upon affect than upon passion, or the suffering (in the sense of undergoing or experiencing) of an other: namely, the passion of joy. In thinking through joy, I call in the first instance upon previous thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza, and Nietzsche who have laid the foundations

of the vocabulary, then upon more recent work by Clement Rosset and Jacques Lacan. Lacan's changing definition of *jouissance* has exerted the most influence upon this project. Reading through *jouissance*, I locate in joy the radical excess necessary to reach beyond the self; it is therefore the heart, the *sine qua non*, of the oikos: ecology as inoperative community.

Joyful excess is the necessary element that is fatally lacking in modern economic approaches to ecology, and it is precisely the element that Romanticism performs in its poetry and thought. Joy defies self-interest in its radical orientation towards the other. In an ecological landscape that has been ideologically divided—between economy and environment, science and art, materiality and spirituality—Romanticism's joy plays upon the illusory nature of the boundaries between these polarities. Its defiance of such borders is accompanied, however, by its respect for difference. It is not a saccharine experience, not overwhelmingly bright and happy; it is not “environmentally friendly.” Rather, there is always at the same time potential for great pain as well. As a passion, joy contains suffering within itself. It is not an ideal, but the lived experience of the other and many others. The Romantic imagination presents a radical vision of ecology as community, as oikos, demanding perpetual relation between all things of the world.

I trace the presentation of the Romantic oikos in this project, beginning in the first chapter with an overview of the theoretical and critical problems which this project seeks to address. I begin with a summary of the theoretical orientation of ecocriticism to date, addressing both its successes and shortcomings. With the exception of writers such as Morton, ecocriticism has been held back, I argue, by its resistance to theory, especially its resistance to deconstructive modes of reading. The division that much ecocriticism

upholds between environmentalism's regard for material nature and deconstruction's disregard, or even denial, of material reality is false. I argue this point through a brief consideration of the history of nature within art, from Plato to the present. My conclusion is that regard for nature is not the sole concern of ecocriticism or the environmental movement, but that nature itself has been a central concern for art and philosophy throughout the ages, a history which climaxes, in my reading, in the Romantic period. Similarly, an unstable, fluid nature is not an invention of deconstructive thought, but is represented throughout Romantic literature. Romantic poetry presents an unstable nature that demands an unstable relationship with it, a playful relationship that embraces difference and mutability. After a discussion of recent community theory, I present this Romantic relationship with nature as an ecological community, one permeated throughout with the passion of joy.

In the second chapter, I begin my reading of Romantic poetry with a discussion of key texts by Wordsworth. Wordsworth is a divisive figure within ecological criticism. He is either celebrated as "poet of nature" for his attention to and obvious love of the natural world, or maligned as an egotist for whom the natural world is a window and mirror for his own thoughts and feelings. I aim to problematize the simplicity of this duality by revealing the complexity of Wordsworth's ecological vision. In my reading, representations of nature in Wordsworth's texts are inflected with his thoughts and feelings not because of his inability to consider the other, but because of his acknowledgement and acceptance that he has no unmediated access to nature; he must pass through his ideas about nature first. His impressions of nature will necessarily participate in his mental and emotional states. The central text for this discussion is the

fifth book of *The Prelude*, “Books,” to which I return throughout the chapter in order to reveal Wordsworth’s self-consciously poetic relationship with nature. It is an ecological stance because it is intensely self-aware in its relationship with the other. His “Poems on the Naming of Places,” which I also discuss, considers the relationship explicitly as he thinks through the project of inscription. Wordsworth is also keenly aware of the points at which nature rejects his interpretation and representation; they feature as key moments in his poetry. His “egotistical sublime,” as Keats might call it, therefore, does not indicate a self-absorption, but reveals an ecological resistance to self-imposition upon the other. I end the chapter with a reading of this resistance in *Home at Grasmere*, in which the presentation of ecological community manifests a respect for difference and distance.

Whereas Wordsworth’s ecological contribution is intense self-awareness, John Clare’s is intense self-effacement. In the third chapter, I read key texts by Clare in which his devotion to nature’s material reality is palpable. Clare is well known and respected among ecocritics for his attention to material fact and detail as it features in his locodescriptive verse. I advance a different reading, however, focusing less upon his earlier locodescriptive mode than upon the more lyrical mode of his later, mentally unstable years. Throughout Clare’s faithful descriptions of nature, the clearest image that emerges is of Clare’s own inability to know that which he describes. This inability to know emerges eloquently throughout his series of “Bird Poems.” Nature is forever mysterious in Clare’s verse, despite his faithful observation. This non-knowledge haunts Clare throughout his life to the point where materiality itself, including his own, seems uncertain, an experience he addresses as homelessness. I read this uncertainty in Clare’s asylum verse, especially his “Biblical Paraphrases,” as well as in his autobiographical

prose of the same period in which he describes his famous failed homecoming after his escape from the asylum. Despite his inability to rest, however, toward the end of his career, Clare embraces this inability, terming it a homelessness at home. I end the chapter with a reading of Clare's final poem, "Bird Nests," in which his recognition of homelessness in nature creates a paradoxically joyful homecoming, and constitutes Clare's contribution to the Romantic ecological imagination.

I conclude this project in the fourth chapter with a consideration of the ecology of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In a way, Shelley's ecological imagination is a triangulation between Wordsworth and Clare; it is based equally in consideration of the self and the natural other, a dual concern that stems from Shelley's philosophical allegiances to both idealism and materialism. I trace the development of these contradictory concerns in Shelley's thought and poetry in order to emphasize the ecological potential of their playful combination. In Shelley's thinking, the community of the Romantic oikos is addressed explicitly. The two substantial works which I take as the touchstones of my discussion, the early *Queen Mab* and the late *Prometheus Unbound*, are both projects in imagining an ideal community. I trace the trajectory of Shelley's ecological thought from the first text to the second and consider his philosophical developments in the interim. Shelley's ecological thought is at once material and spiritual, though throughout his life the emphasis switches from the first to the second. We see this shift between *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*. In *Queen Mab*, material necessity is the driving force of history and the source of the world's eventual salvation; in *Prometheus Unbound*, it is love. *Prometheus Unbound* does not forsake the material, however, for the redeeming love is manifested through sexual relationships metaphorically presented. *Jouissance*,

then, or joy, is the key to the earth's renewal in Shelley's thought.

These explorations of the poetry of Wordsworth, Clare, and Shelley reveal key elements of the Romantic ecological imagination, aspects often missing in today's environmental responses. The Romantic oikos is a radical ecological stance in which the natural world is presented as unstable, fluid, and unknowable. Its mystery as other demands our respect and constant attention; it demands an ethical consideration, or relation. The Romantic oikos presents the ecological world as a community, a never-ending relation instinct with joy.

Chapter 1

The Romantic Oikos

Prologue: Questions of Nature, Questions of Art

This project grows from a core belief that the question of nature is central to the question of art. The study of ecocriticism, which began to take shape most distinctly in the environmentalist urgency of the 1980s, has given voice to much of this questioning over the past decades.⁵ Ecocriticism is typified by a union of theory and practice.⁶ Linked in its origins to environmental crises, it focuses its academic and literary pursuits upon its potential effects. It reads texts for diagnoses and cures for our environmental maladies. Threatened with the loss of the physical world, ecocriticism has aimed to connect itself and the texts it studies—to connect art—to the physical reality of nature. It is a sincere venture and an important one, but one which, given the advances of modern ecological science, philosophy, poetry, and thought, does not suffice. Ecocriticism to date has been an environmentalist discourse, focusing upon the human/nature divide and searching for a means to bridge it. This project aims to contribute to the growth of an ecological, rather than environmental, ecocriticism: one that embraces the uncertainty of nature and bears witness to the tremendous uncertainty and ineffability of our earthly

⁵Greg Garrard begins his work *Ecocriticism* (2004) with the statement that Rachel Carson's "A Fable for Tomorrow"—the first chapter of *Silent Spring* (1962)—is often considered the beginning of "modern environmentalism" (1). He goes on to point out the highly and self-consciously literary nature of the fable as it draws upon several literary traditions. He calls it "a fairy tale" and an "idyll" (1), and points out its use of the fabulous and supernatural: "the founding text of modern environmentalism not only begins with a decidedly poetic parable, but also relies on the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse, pre-existing ways of imagining the place of humans in nature that may be traced back to such sources as Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible" (2). The beginning of modern environmentalism, in literary approach, is also the beginning of ecocriticism.

⁶Countless works of ecocriticism prove this statement, but Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), to be discussed later, makes it explicit.

moment.

This project offers a theoretical ecological reading of Romantic poetry as a counterpoint to positivist ecocritical discourse. I turn to Romantic texts to explore how they understand nature, how they represent it, and how they relate with it. Two centuries ago, the Romantics were already thinking through these crucial environmental questions. The idea of nature that emerges in their works is highly unstable and uncertain, an idea that defies fixity and definition: a process. As such, its fluid identity runs contrary to its representation in much ecocritical discourse. For Romantic thinkers, nature is not an object to be possessed, nor a state of body or mind to be achieved (such as harmony, for instance, or stasis), but a living relation that both invites and repels. It is an intensely modern understanding of nature which anticipates the most current ecological advances. I therefore argue that Romantic thinkers were already performing a self-reflexive ecological critique the philosophical depth of which the most current ecocriticism is only beginning to attain. This project looks to Romantic texts and their experimental presentation of the relationship between humanity and nature in order to push ecocriticism, which is currently so aligned with environmentalism, into a more ecologically and philosophically rigorous mode. To achieve this result, I look to recent community theory in order to elucidate the ecological implications of Romantic nature, where nature figures as a community of others founded upon difference rather than identity. Ecology is relation; moreover, as I will argue from its definition in community theory, this relation exists outside the structure of economy—ecology's etymological twin—with its logical give and take interactions. Ecology must therefore be thought, felt, and expressed differently from the economic: passionately, and especially joyfully. I explore

this Romantic ecological community, this Romantic oikos, through the study of Romantic poetry as the mode of joyful expression that exceeds the bounds of the individual in an imaginative performance of ecological relation.

Despite the close association between itself, art, and nature, ecocriticism did not find these ecological questions; indeed, it joins a conversation that begins at least as far back as Plato's *Republic*. Plato's caution against poetry is founded upon questions about nature and humanity's very uncertain role within it. The argument famously goes that the artist is twice removed from the truth of things in copying the artisan's work, which is itself a copy of the godly form: "this is what the writer of tragedies, if he is an imitator, will be. Someone whose nature it is to be two removes from the king and the truth" (597e). Art necessarily lies, since the fact remains that, for instance, a painting of a chair *is not* a chair, whatever the artist's skill. The danger here is far greater than art misleading people, as the tenth book of the *Republic* suggests: "everything of that sort [imitative poetry] seems to me to be a destructive influence on the minds of those who hear it" (595b). Rather, Plato points to humanity's profound anxiety about its place in nature—broadly understood in this case as the world beyond humanity. If the artist lies by copying the artisan, the artisan too, the maker of the earthly chair, lies by copying the divine, and so the human realm is entirely removed from the realm of truth, which is the realm of nature. Art is therefore particularly egregious as an active, willful, and excessive transgression of the natural order.

Art reveals a Promethean anxiety, as I will read in the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Chapter Four. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to humans. In some versions (such as Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*), the theft is an

act of pity in order to help humanity, to enable them to work to improve their earthly situation. Similarly, after Adam and Eve's transgression, work is necessary for human survival in the newly-founded antagonistic relationship between humanity and nature. In all these contexts, human work is cast as an intervention into the natural. Sir Francis Bacon furthers this tradition in *The Great Instauration* (first published 1620). "Instauration" is now an obsolete term, but it retains the dual sense of "establishing" and "restoring" (OED). As a Christian thinker, Bacon aims to remedy the original Fall, hoping that through a revolution in scientific thought "there may spring helps to man, and a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity" (26). Each of these narratives—in ancient philosophy, in Greek mythology, in the Judeo-Christian tradition—indicates that what redeems humanity's natural transgression is its function. Artistic transgression, however, performs no such function; it therefore has access to no such redemption. I read this narrative at the root of the modern environmental anxiety over art.

Despite the modernity of its inquiry, ecocriticism often expresses an anxiety over natural transgression similar to that of the much older narratives above. Fueled by the urgency of their origins amid ongoing ecological crises—pollution, deforestation, overpopulation, extinction, climate change—ecocritical works have often been incendiary in tone, igniting proleptically from the sparks of a great conflagration to come. In the face of these multiple crises, each promising disaster, ecocritics can feel the earth giving way beneath them. The field has tended to respond with a desire to reconnect, to

compensate for what it feels as a grievous loss—Nature.⁷ In a materialist mode of response, some ecocritics have advocated a return to nature through a literary criticism that keeps the material earth as the solid core of its efforts. Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) states that ecocritics must not only recognize the materiality of nature, but also experience it first-hand, even scientifically. This is a familiar refrain throughout American environmental literature, as Leopold laments and accuses in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949): “Books on nature seldom mention wind; they are written behind stoves” (97).⁸ This materialist exigency responds to the myth of the Fall that operates throughout much western discourse. In perceiving loss, much ecocriticism has followed in the tradition of positing a goal for art, making art a project of recovery, in order to regain a former unity that is now lost—it makes art work.

Ecocriticism truly began to coalesce as a field through its reading of American literature. American ecocritics have tended to look to writers like Henry David Thoreau (whose work Buell engages in *The Environmental Imagination*) and naturalist writers like John Muir, John Burroughs, and Edward Abbey, whose works directly engage the American landscape and the changes and threats it faces.⁹ Romantic ecocriticism has participated in a similar recovery project to its American counterpart. Indeed, though

⁷Throughout this project, following Morton’s approach in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), I use the word ‘Nature,’ with an capital ‘N,’ to represent the archaic though still present sense of nature as an almost mythical entity, imbued with psychic significance throughout the cultural reception of the idea—Mother Nature, for instance. I use the term ‘nature’ to indicate an idea of nature divested of this psychic investment, or at least one which does not assume such an investment.

⁸Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is widely hailed as a founder of modern ecology and ecological consciousness. *A Sand County Almanac*, published posthumously, is a collection of essays that recount significant personal experiences he has had with nature and the ideas and theories for ecological living that these experiences have inspired. Leopold’s localness, close observation to material nature, attention to ethics, and emphasis upon personal, political, and social action make *A Sand County Almanac* a key example of American nature writing.

⁹David Mazel’s *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (2001) gives an overview of the key figures at the heart of the ecocritical field; it also affirms the importance of American literature and scholarship to the field.

much ecocriticism has focused upon American literature, some of the earliest critical forays which consolidated the methods of the school were studies of Romantic texts. Romantic ecocriticism has tended to interpret the Romantic “return to nature” almost literally. James McKusick declares that Romantic writing “emerges from a desperate sense of alienation from the natural world, and expresses an anxious endeavour to re-establish a vital, sustainable relationship between humankind and the fragile planet on which we dwell” (110). Like Buell (whose influence he cites), McKusick holds that “a true ecological writer must be ‘rooted’ in the landscape, instinctively attuned to the changes of the Earth and its inhabitants” (24). Similarly, Karl Kroeber looks to the Romantics as “forerunners of a new biological, materialistic understanding of humanity’s place in the natural cosmos” (*Ecological 2*). The object of Romantic art according to such critics is to rejoin the material world, which can be achieved, in part, by seeing it *as it is*. McKusick therefore praises John Clare for his meticulous description of the natural world (29) and his development of an “*ecolect* ... in the literal sense of a language that speaks for the oikos” (89). This form of poetic language “must strive to attain the opacity and concreteness of natural phenomena while also evoking the sincerity of response that can only emerge from a wild, unpolished idiom” (88). A language that imitates nature, “a linguistic analogue to the natural world,” is used “to remedy its loss ... Clare seeks to evoke the vividness and concreteness of a green world that is fast slipping away” (88). Such is McKusick’s interpretation of Clare’s claim that he “found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down” (“Sighing for Retirement” 15-16; qtd. in McKusick 89). An *ecolect* must represent nature as faithfully as possible. It therefore “resists a crude

anthropomorphism” (92).¹⁰ Environmental criticism can therefore seem to harbour a suspicion of rhetoric and, perhaps, even a latent suspicion of art itself. This mode of ecocriticism can be read as a modern, environmental manifestation of the Platonic anxiety about artistic transgression as unnatural. In its pursuit of union, it attempts to translate language and nature into the same term, an action that is potentially violent towards both. In doing so, it uncritically demands from nature a stability that it cannot manifest, and from language a sincerity that it cannot fulfill. It demands a language of immanence, of total identity, when language can only offer difference.

This project aims to re-envision Romantic ecocriticism through a return to and a rereading of British Romantic texts by William Wordsworth, John Clare, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. In this reading, Romantic literature performs a playfulness that the anxious and earnest teleology of materialist ecocriticism fails to acknowledge. In the Romantic period, each poetic treatise connects poetry fundamentally with nature. In the 1802 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” Wordsworth claims that “[p]oetry is the image of man and nature” (422) and that the poet “considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature” (423). In Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, a defining element of the poetic imagination is that it “blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial” and “subordinates art to nature” (495). Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” expresses the divinity of poetry in natural terms: poetry is “the root and blossom of all other systems of

¹⁰The ecolect, it seems, must also be employed by ecocritics themselves. Morton in *Ecology Without Nature* describes the tendency among ecocritics for what he terms “ecomimesis,” the representation in text of the supposedly real world circumstances of the moment of writing, attempting to draw the material world into the text itself. McKusick begins his study with a classic example, cited by Morton, beginning “As I write these words” (1); similarly, Onno Oerlemans: “as I write it is snowing outside my window” (26). Ecocritics must participate in the ecolect just as their subjects of study do.

thought”; “It is the perfect and consummate surface and bloom of things” (531). Since it is a natural process, therefore, “[a] man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry’” (531). Keats similarly hails poetry’s natural nature: “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (“Letter to John Taylor” 97). In his 1795 essay “Naive and Sentimental Poetry,” Friedrich Schiller addresses the relationship between art and nature in the Romantic period philosophically in order to argue for Romantic poetry as a key shift in the history of art, as an event. Schiller defines poets as “the *guardians* of nature” (106). Nature was at the heart of the Romantic conception of art, as it had been in previous eras. Less than a century earlier, Alexander Pope, for instance, could speak about nature quite confidently in *An Essay on Criticism*, listing a series of unquestioned attributes: nature is “[u]nerring” and “divinely bright”; it is the “[o]ne clear, unchanged, and universal light” (70, 71). For Pope, nature is a steadfast and trustworthy guide for a poet to follow. There is a key difference between Romantic art and its predecessors concerning the art-nature relationship: whereas previous periods primarily questioned the nature of art, the Romantics began to question the nature of nature. For Schiller, nature has become a question. Although poets are “the *guardians* of nature,” it is now possible that “they can no longer be quite so” for some have “already felt within themselves the destructive influence of arbitrary and artificial forms or have had to struggle with them,” in which case “they will appear the *witnesses* and *avengers* of nature”: “They will either *be* nature or *seek* the lost nature” (106). In the Romantic period, nature can be lost.

While Schiller thinks very much within the tradition of a fall from nature, his lost nature differs from the lost Paradise of other such narratives. For thinkers like Plato,

Bacon, and Pope, there is indeed a split between humanity and nature, and so the task is to recover the previous unity whether by reason, science, or art. For these thinkers, humanity is changeable and faulty and must correct itself, while the nature from which it has strayed remains steadfast. Schiller begins in a similar vein, defining nature as “the voluntary presence, the subsistence of things on their own, their existence in accordance with their own immutable laws” (84). He indicates the modern desire for a return to nature: “*They* [natural things] *are what we were*; they are what *we should once again become*” (85). He, too, sees nature as permanent and unified and humanity as mutable: “we change; they remain a unity” (85). Contrary to his predecessors, Schiller praises this mutability; whereas nature is perfect in its oneness, humanity’s mutability and its unbounded potential makes it akin to the divine: “What determines their character is precisely what is lacking for the perfection of our own; what distinguishes us from them, is precisely what they themselves lack for divinity” (85). This is the basis of Schiller’s distinction between naïve and sentimental poets: a naïve poet retains a sense of oneness with nature, while the sentimental is divided. This division enables the unique task of the sentimental poet, which is to unite the natural and the human. It is a task which the sentimental poet necessarily fails to complete, however, because it is ideal. Schiller holds that “[n]ature sets [man] at one with himself, art divides and cleaves him in two, through the ideal he returns to unity” (112). While Schiller adheres to the tradition of the Fall myth in his desire for a return to unity, he diverges from it radically by hailing the desired return as ideal, and therefore necessarily impossible. We view nature as something “for which we are challenged to strive, and which, even if we never attain to it, we may still hope to approach in an endless progress” (85). For the sentimental poet, this “endless

progress” is a goal “infinitely preferable to that which he *attains* in nature,” since “one obtains its value by the absolute achievement of a finite, ... the other by approximation to an infinite greatness” (113). Between Bacon and Schiller, there has been a fundamental shift in our perception of our relationship with nature. Though Bacon did not expect to see it in his own life, he nevertheless held that a return to nature is possible. He entreats his readers “to be of good hope, nor to imagine that this Instauration of [his] is a thing infinite and beyond the power of man” (17). In the Romantic period, quite contrary to Romantic ecocriticism’s reading of it, reunion with nature becomes a self-consciously impossible goal. Moreover, and again contrary to Romantic ecocriticism, the goal’s very impossibility is a point of celebration. Schiller’s thesis signals Romanticism’s new relationship with a new nature: nature as relation. It is therefore no longer a question of how to regain nature, how to return home; rather, Romanticism asks how to envision our natural homelessness and how to embrace it. This celebration of homelessness is a cornerstone of Romanticism’s new relationship with nature as relation itself—an understanding I signal throughout this project with the term *oikos*.

Romantic ecocriticism of the materialist tradition, however, focuses upon the pain of homelessness. Poetry’s goal is to return to nature; poetic language must therefore be aligned with nature. Post-structuralist approaches, with which materialist ecocriticism is frequently at odds, question these assumptions, both about the desire for reunion and about the pain of division. Paul de Man is not an ecocritic, and yet his deconstructive Romantic criticism offers a counter-narrative to the dominant ecocritical discourse which is nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, ecologically illuminating. De Man problematizes the connection between poetry and nature in “The Intentional Structure of

the Romantic Image” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), citing Hölderlin’s “Brot und Wein” in which “Worte, wie Blumen, / entstehn” (2).¹¹ De Man reads that, “since the intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower ... it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal” (4). He attributes this desire to “a nostalgia for the natural object” (6). Nostalgia, as critics like Susan Stewart in *On Longing* (1984) and Judith Broome in *Fictive Domains* (2007) have traced, is essentially a homesickness, and so “a nostalgia for the natural object” can be read as a homesickness for the materiality and stability of nature. De Man holds that the poetic image constructed through this nostalgia is “itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence” (*Rhetoric* 6). The instability of the poetic image, the uncertain relationship it represents with the natural world, appears in the evolution of the image in ecocritical discourse. Clare and Hölderlin can speak of words like flowers, but in the twentieth century critics must make a further distinction. Flowers no longer provide the *naturalness* they once offered. It is not enough for words to originate like flowers; they must be wildflowers. McKusick’s ecolect must be wild: “This green language cannot be affecting or persuasive if it remains an artificial construct, a hothouse plant; it must be the spontaneous product of natural forces working in tandem with prevailing local traditions” (88). Simple flowers are no longer natural enough. Ostensibly, the delineation between natural and artificial flowers is in part a testament to human interference in and contamination of the natural; more subtly, it begs the question of the understanding of nature at the heart of the recognition of this difference. Romantic poetry is a site for questioning the nostalgia for the natural and for challenging the desired natural

¹¹“Words, like flowers, / arise.”

connection between word and thing. It a site for defamiliarizing the natural through its relentless and sincere word play.

In Romantic philosophy and art, one finds that Romantic nature is not only irretrievably lost but also entirely other. I read Schiller's thesis as part of a wider Romantic discourse surrounding the period's growing discovery of the otherness and unfamiliarity of nature, to which the natural philosophy of the period, like F.W.J. Schelling's *First Outline of a Philosophy of Nature* (1799), testifies. Unlike those operating within the Fall myth, Schelling denies the existence of any human-nature divide, or, furthermore, any essential division between subject and object. Keith Peterson argues that, for Schelling, "[s]elf and world are of one substance, and we will continue to misunderstand ourselves and undervalue the natural world unless this ontological identity is expressed philosophically" (xv). Schelling undertakes just such an expression. At times, he gestures towards a Gaian concept of universal living organism: "THERE IS ONE ORGANISM THAT IS GRADUALLY ATTENUATED THROUGH ALL OF THESE STAGES DOWN TO THE PLANTS, AND ONE CAUSE ACTING UNINTERRUPTEDLY WHICH FADES FROM THE SENSIBILITY OF THE FIRST ANIMAL DOWN TO THE REPRODUCTIVE FORCE OF THE LAST PLANT" (149).¹² In this context, the individual is an almost illusory concept, necessarily incomplete in itself (105). At the same time that Schelling affirms an essential oneness of substance, however, he also affirms an "original heterogeneity" (10), a "*first spark of heterogeneity*" (158). Like Hegel, Schelling tends to think in threes. Unlike Hegel, his third is not a sublation of the other two but is instead a distinct entity whose very purpose is to destabilize the other terms in order to prevent them from

¹²The capital letters here are preserved from Peterson's translation.

collapsing into unity: “between three heterogeneous bodies no equilibrium is at all possible” (120). His concept of nature is therefore radically unstable, even anti-stable. Schelling visualizes the relationship between the organic and inorganic worlds in terms of excitability: “*Excitability* must be posited as the essence of the organism, by virtue of which alone the organic activity is really hindered from exhausting itself in its product that, therefore, never *is*, but always only *becomes*” (105). The result is a basis of nature that is a process, a “triplicity” that “must constantly *become* (arise and disappear, disappear and arise again), never *be*” (120). Romantic nature is unstable and fluid, less a thing than a process.

This unstable nature surfaces to disrupt and destabilize many British Romantic literary texts. Evidence of this instability can be seen by briefly tracing the Romantic evolution of the classical *genius loci*, or “spirit of the place.”¹³ In this tradition, a certain natural place or natural thing will have a guardian spirit or creature associated with it who tries to shield it from harm. A classical example is the story of Erisichthon,¹⁴ told by Ovid in the eighth book of *Metamorphoses*. Erisichthon cuts down a tree that is the dwelling place of a nymph beloved of Ceres. When his axe cuts the bark, the tree bleeds, and the nymph cries out in admonishment. In classical mythology, the *genius loci* often has an identifiable (often anthropomorphized) form and voice: its message is quite clear, though usually, and tragically, ignored. Erisichthon, for instance, charges ahead with his transgression despite the nymph’s warning: “Beneath the surface of this tree I dwell, / a

¹³Geoffrey Hartman has discussed the *genius loci* in “Romantic Poetry and the Genius Loci” in *Beyond Formalism* (1970) as part of Romanticism’s hope for “an enlightened poetry—the union of poetical genius with the English spirit of place” (329). Here I am interested in the particular forms that the figure of the *genius loci* takes in Romantic poetry.

¹⁴Commonly translated as “earth-render,” though Noel Robertson questions the translation in “The Ritual Background of the Erysichthon Story” (1984).

nymph of Ceres; dying, I foresee / your punishment at hand, and pleased, foretell / the consolation that your death will be” (8.1083-86). He is punished by Ceres, who orders Famine to breathe herself into him. He is so consumed with hunger that he sells all he owns, including his daughter, in order to obtain food. Finally, “when at last his illness had consumed / all that she brought him, and he still craved more, / the wretched man began to tear his limbs / asunder, mangling them in his maw, / and fed his body as he shrank away” (8.1232-36). Such *genius loci* stories are remarkable ecological narratives. The failure of the transgressor to regard the *genius loci*’s warning both marks the failure of and the great need for communication and community.

In the Romantic period, the *genius loci* figure persists but its form is much less distinct. In Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” unlike in the story of Erisichthon, there is no specific warning given to the transgressor, and the *genius loci*, the albatross, is not a nymph but an animal, one that, being unanthropomorphized, behaves and dies like an animal would, having been shot with a crossbow. Still, the drastic and supernatural turn of events seems certainly to be connected with the bird’s death. In this poem, revenge is exacted not obviously through the punishment of a god, but through nature behaving unnaturally: the winds stop; creatures crawl upon the water; the dead sailors walk, while the mariner seems unable to die. Despite the mariner’s final moral that “He prayeth best who loveth best, / All things both great and small: / For the dear God, who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (647-50), the active force in the plot of the poem is not God but nature. Unlike the classical *genius loci* who were clearly

representatives of the divine, in this instance nature is the moral authority.¹⁵ The poem seems like a warning against natural transgression, but what the transgression and punishment are must all be interpreted by the mariner (and audience), for the transgressed entity (the most concrete candidate being the albatross), unlike the nymphs of old, never speaks. Similarly, in Wordsworth's "Nutting," there is no wronged nymph to offer warning. The spirit here is even less distinct than in Coleridge's "Rime," where there is at least a bird whose death seems closely linked with the events; further to the point, there are actually punishing events that occur in "Rime." In "Nutting," the speaker is left with only an inexplicable sense of wrongdoing and punishment, "a sense of pain" (52) when beholding "[t]he silent trees" and "the intruding sky" (53). The speaker only senses that "there is a spirit in the woods" (56). Unlike the classical *genius loci*, the spirits of nature in these Romantic texts are indistinct, seeming to exist more in the transgressor's conscience than in external reality. The Romantic *genius loci* does not represent any particular locus but nature in the grand sense of the term. This peculiar form of *genius* speaks to the period's changing understanding of and relation with nature.

Not only does the Romantic *genius loci* now represent nature, but a particular conception of nature: an unstable nature. This unstable nature is most viscerally present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* where a natural transgression draws dire consequences. Victor Frankenstein gives life to an assemblage of dead matter—previously living materials that had, in a sense, returned to nature. While the body is cobbled together with

¹⁵I do not mean to suggest that Coleridge's albatross is entirely unconnected with the divine, since the numerous religious references throughout its initial description, the hermit, and the final moral would all contradict such a claim. Indeed, "As if it had been a Christian soul" (65), the mariner and crew hail the albatross "in God's name" (66). I mean instead to point out that in this incarnation of the *genius loci*, the divine intervention retires from the foreground of the plot, leaving nature itself as the force that the natural *genius loci* represents.

great method and skill, the result, the creature, is unpredictable and uncontrollable. As such, it is possible to read the creature less as a cautionary example of unchecked pride and ambition (though he is certainly that) than as a representation of the modern uncanny nature which the Romantics faced—a new form of *genius loci*. While he takes on a particular anthropomorphized form and voice, he is not connected with a specific place as were previous *genii*; rather, he is the representative of nature itself, as unstable as the natural parts from which he is assembled. Furthermore, Frankenstein is revolted by the form as the work of his own transgressive hands: “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart” (86). He is also revolted, however, by the sight of the self-transgression of active nature: a radically different nature from the passive and malleable source materials with which he started, and from the dominant perception of nature at the time. Frankenstein is terrified at the Romantic recognition of nature as uncertain and other. Tellingly, the creature, as representative of nature, is also uncertain of himself. If the creature is considered a *genius loci*, he is far more unstable than the mythological nymphs who precede him in the tradition. Unlike those of “Rime” and “Nutting,” the *genius* here is from its inception a hybrid of the natural and the unnatural, or nature behaving unnaturally. Frankenstein’s creature calls the nature of nature into question.

Nature in question throws the artist’s role into question. If poets, as Schiller holds, are the guardians of nature, then poets and their poetry must participate in the uncertainty of the nature they guard. I read Keats’ “negative capability,” as defined in his “Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27 (?) 1817,” as a response to this dilemma. Poets must respond to the question of nature in kind: they must be “capable of

being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (*Letters* 60). It is an a-teleological disorientation at odds with stability, and therefore at odds with the narrative of loss and restoration that had governed natural thought for the previous centuries. In the Romantic period, as is popularly held, there is a desire for a return to nature present throughout much of the literature. What this return means, however, what the goal and what the method, is no longer clear. Despite its desire, it dawns upon the period that a return to nature is impossible.

In the face of this impossibility, Romantic artists had to define a different role for their art. They did so against an intellectual background of thinkers like Plato and Bacon, for whom art is a social ill that contributes to the division between humanity and nature and impedes any future salvation. Those who previously defended art against such charges often did so by focusing upon its educative role or its capacity for social and moral improvement.¹⁶ They attempted to absolve the transgression of art by giving it a *telos*, an end to justify its means. Unlike Plato’s artisan who transgresses nature out of social duty, and unlike Bacon’s scientist who transgresses nature in order to ultimately reconcile with it, the Romantic artist transgresses nature for transgression’s sake. Like Keats’ “negative capability,” art is a-teleological and therefore not oriented towards work, but play. I understand play in opposition to work as an activity beyond the economic that is performed without a unifying goal to direct its unfolding: an open activity that does not aim to produce but to create. The Romantics struggled with the burden of this new knowledge, for with it comes the disavowal of the return to nature which had been so long the goal of Western narratives; rather than certainty, as Keats holds, “We are in a

¹⁶See *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History* (2008) by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett for an overview of the changing role of art in society throughout critical history.

Mist. *We* are now in that state. We feel the ‘burden of the Mystery’” (*Letters* 124).

Unabashedly transgressive, Romantic art desires to stay and play with the uncertainty of nature without reaching for fact and reason. In the absence of a telos, and in the presence of an unstable and uncertain nature, the Romantics had not only to define a new role for art, but also a new relationship with nature, one no longer governed by the goal of union. I consider the revelation of the incommensurable otherness of nature and the new relationship with art that this revelation demands to be the foundation of Romantic ecology.

In the following chapters, I will explore the Romantic oikos as it is diversely constructed by Wordsworth, Clare, and Shelley, respectively. I begin this first chapter with a brief overview of ecocriticism to date in order to illuminate what I consider its core error: its quest for a return to nature. Through modern ecological thought as well as literary and cultural theory, I consider the serious problems implicit in this desire for return. I particularly draw upon recent community theory, especially that of Nancy, in order to think through the complexities of the Romantic oikos. Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* is ecologically significant for its distinction between communion and community; in short, communion desires identity, while community desires difference. Thought through these terms, the ecocritical desire for a return to nature reveals itself as a desire for communion—identity. Ecology, however, depends upon diversity. Community, therefore, is an ecologically powerful concept. I consider the Romantic oikos as a presentation of ecology as community. Much like Nancy’s community, the Romantic ecological community is formed not through work, but through play. The relations that bond the community are not economic, but in excess of the economic; they

are passionate. Finally, I posit joy as the ecological passion. I trace the Romantic expression of this joyful ecology throughout this project.

1. New Directions in Romantic Ecocriticism

Despite its modern inquiry, ecocriticism (and environmental thought more generally) often expresses an anxiety over natural transgression similar to Plato's anxiety over art in *The Republic*. In its desire for reunion, Romantic ecocriticism overlooks the playfulness of Romantic art that expresses an uncertain nature and a creative resistance to return. I argue that Romantic ecocriticism might do well to embrace the natural uncertainty the Romantic poets present to us in order to respond to the radical uncertainty of our contemporary ecological situation.

In this anxious critical climate, recent theoretical and cultural appraisals of humanity's relationship with nature, which question the relationship's perceived simplicity, have incited severe rebukes by ecocriticism. Again, post-structuralist thought is particularly targeted. Alan Liu's bold claim in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989) that "there is no nature except as it is constituted by acts of political definition made possible by particular forms of government" (104) drew ecocritical fire. Bate finds the statement environmentally hostile: "It is profoundly unhelpful to say '*There is no nature*' at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization's insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth" (*Romantic*

56).¹⁷ The proposition that “there is no nature” is troublesome to those who set up experience with the materiality of nature as a corrective to modern alienation. Kroeber tries to refute Liu in the same way that Johnson tried to refute Berkeley,¹⁸ in a chapter appropriately titled “Surprised by Nature”: “no one old enough to remember life before antibiotics will march under the new historicist banner ‘There is no nature.’ Nor should anyone who has encountered a forest fire, sailed on the ocean, or been out in a middle-western thunderstorm” (*Ecological* 42). Again, the problem here is a hyperbolic confidence in the definition of Nature. The mode of ecocriticism advanced in texts by Bate and Kroeber desires a straightforward, natural connection between word and thing—in other words, immanence. More recent ecocritics who have embraced the potential of post-structuralist approaches have begun to expose ecocriticism’s lack of self-criticism, questioning the definitions of nature, humanity, and the relationship between the two.

From its materialist roots, ecocriticism is now moving towards the recognition of the possibility that we never had Nature (in the sense of a stable, eternal identity) to begin with. It has begun to recognize its fundamental problem of the necessity to theorize a relationship with the absolute other, the non-human world. Several recent post-structuralist ecocritics have begun a self-reflexive criticism of their field in which they

¹⁷Bate follows with a warning of things to come, emphasizing the human role in ecocide, the loss of the wild: “We are confronted for the first time in history with the possibility of there being no part of the earth left untouched by man” (56). He concludes with a call to arms: “When there have been a few more accidents at nuclear power stations, when there are no more rainforests, and when every wilderness has been ravaged for its mineral resources, then let us say ‘*There is no nature*’” (56).

¹⁸Having made this comparison between Kroeber and Johnson, I then discovered that Thomas C. Gannon makes the same comparison between Bate and Johnson in *Skylark Meets Meadowlark* (2009) when addressing the ecocritical rebuke of post-structuralist thought, though one is “painfully aware that Berkeley’s postmodern philosophical descendants would sneeringly deem such a stance to be naïve realism” (24).

identify the resistance to rhetoric with a resistance to theory.¹⁹ David Mazel (2000) criticizes those critics who unquestioningly accept “the ontological priority of the environment (or of nature, the wilderness, or ‘the ecology’) as the object of and the motivation for the environmental movement” (*American* 19). Dana Phillips (2003) also criticizes the anti-theoretical vein of ecocriticism, the proponents of which turn to nature as a cure for the post-modern (4). He counters instead “that ecocriticism should be *more* antirepresentational than other forms of criticism, not *less*, and perhaps more antipastoral and antihumanist as well” (18). Distinct from the “fundamentally materialistic” (Kroeber *Ecological* 9) vein of criticism, recent critics like Onno Oerlemans (2002) and Kevin Hutchings (2002) expose and question this desire for immanence. Oerlemans points out that environmentalism “does not offer a stable platform of values and ideas from which to launch a search for antecedents” (5). While environmental approaches share a “common desire for a firm ethical footing by rooting value *in* the physical world” (9), Oerlemans affirms that “we nevertheless experience consciousness and selfhood as distinct”: “Thus any desire we may feel for a reunion, for knowing our connection with the world, must be to some degree suspect” (11). This suspicious desire is “the fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of environmentalist thinking” which “forms its central conjunction with Romanticism” (11).

We are right to be suspicious: thought in a political context, the desire for reunion and oneness takes on a nefarious aspect. Hutchings shares Oerlemans’ distrust of holism, comparing ecological holism with governmental totalitarianism since both involve “the constitution of the individual entity in the context of a communal totality, whether this

¹⁹Ursula K. Heise offers a field guide to the developments of ecocriticism in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism” *PMLA* 121.2 (2006): 503-16.

totality is conceived in terms of the earthly biosphere or the political state” (7): in both cases, the emphasis is on the *function* of the individual (8). Within a totalitarian ideology (ecologically or politically), “individuality is tolerable to the extent that it does not disrupt the order constituting the systemic ‘whole.’ At the point of disruption ... the individual must either be contained within, or expelled from, the larger order; or its deviant behaviour must be instrumentally modified to conform to what is authoritatively perceived as its proper, holistically integrated mode of being” (8). Bate also recognizes the risk of totalitarian thought in ecology, citing Anna Bramwell for “the recent accusation that the greenest political party of our century has been the Nazis” (*Romantic* 11). Bate reads the risk entirely politically, however. He preemptively addresses the accusation by emphasizing the distinction between “love of the land and love of the fatherland,” a distinction that the “localness” of Wordsworth’s poetry encourages (*Romantic* 11). This approach skirts the larger ideological question of navigation between individual and community, or between self and other.

A theoretical method of confronting the potential for totalitarianism in ecological thought is to question and disrupt the totality of nature at its foundation. To this end, Morton addresses the question of totalitarian holism through a deconstructive approach to ecocriticism in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007).²⁰ That in doing so he feels it necessary to use a new term, ecocritique, to distance his work from ecocriticism is indicative of how un- (and sometimes blatantly anti-) theoretical some ecocriticism has been: “Some think

²⁰The framework of his approach, Morton says, is indebted equally to Marx and Derrida (7): “*Ecology Without Nature* is inspired by the way in which deconstruction searches out, with ruthless and brilliant intensity, points of contradiction and deep hesitation in systems of meaning. If ecological criticism had a more open and honest engagement with deconstruction, it would find a friend rather than an enemy” (6).

that ecocriticism needs what it calls ‘theory’ like it needs a hole in the head. Others contend that this aeration is exactly what ecocriticism needs. In the name of ecocriticism itself, scholarship must reflect—theorize, in the broadest sense” (10). Throughout his work, the theoretical standpoint allows Morton to acknowledge and discuss many of the problems that haunt the thinking about the self in nature. His focus, however, is upon the suggestion that nature itself is uncertain—a process rather than a state or firm ground. We can perceive nature only peripherally: “Nature loses its nature when we look at it head on. We can only glimpse it anamorphically—as a distortion, as a shapeless thing, or as the way in which other things lose their shape” (63). His work imparts a much-needed element of play to ecological thinking, which much previous ecocriticism, in its anxiety over sincerity, lacks. This playfulness reflects our experience of nature: “By operating as a modern trickster, ecocritique is paradoxically closer to nature” (157). In its regard for uncertainty and play, Morton’s approach both addresses and resembles the Romantic relationship with nature.

A theory of an ecological relationship predicated upon difference rather than identity, one that confronts the “incommensurate materiality of nature” (Oerlemans 13) as irreducible other, is crucial ground for ecological thought. It faces the totalitarian overtones that exacerbate previous projects and theorizes different modes of being in the world. Like Morton, I think that deconstruction offers important alternative ways of thinking about ecological relationships. De Man, though not usually considered within the ecological realm, presents one alternative in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” from the second edition of *Blindness and Insight* (1983), in which he presents the mode of the ironic mind as “an endless process that leads to no synthesis” (220). His distinction

between symbol and allegory can also be read ecologically. Symbolic thinking leads to a world that is “no longer seen as a configuration of entities that designate a plurality of distinct and isolated meanings, but as a configuration of symbols ultimately leading to a total, single, and universal meaning” (188); it appeals “to the infinity of a totality” (188). The symbol shares much of the danger against which Hutchings warns concerning the totality of ecological holism. De Man opposes allegory to symbol in ecologically revealing terms: “Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of temporal difference” (*Blindness* 207). Twenty years later, this renunciation of “the desire to coincide” marks new directions for ecological criticism.

The greatest ecological advantage of a theoretical (especially post-structuralist) approach, in my interpretation, is its playfulness; it offers a non-teleological reading akin to the Romantic idea of nature as uncertain, an idea that is more in tune with recent ecological thinking. I believe that a more fluid understanding of nature is indeed more ecologically faithful, ironically by virtue of the uncertain and unassuming nature of the faith. This is particularly the case if we consider *ecology* beyond the conventional confines of the *natural*. This movement beyond the natural is a hallmark of modern ecological thought. Phillips, for instance, draws upon the work of Bruno Latour and his concept of an incommensurable nature-culture. Ecological crisis (in this case, the thinning of the ozone layer) brings into focus the manifold pieces—both cultural and natural—at play, to the point where one can no longer make a firm distinction between culture and nature: “The horizons, the stakes, the time frames, the actors—none of these

is commensurable, yet there they are, caught up in the same story” (Latour 1; qtd. in Phillips 30). Serres in *The Natural Contract* (1990) is adamant about the need for truly global thinking. Nature is not the only thing at stake, for “[w]e have lost the world,” he argues, “and our a-cosmic philosophies” are too narrow to find it again (29). He thus calls for the foundation of a natural contract which “makes the social contract enter the world” (46), following in the tradition of environmental ethics that advocates for an extension of rights or moral consideration to the natural. Serres takes the social contract as a starting point, arguing that, to date, it has been excessively social, ignoring the place and circumstances of its signatories. Guattari in *The Three Ecologies* (1989) offers a similarly hybridized idea of ecology. Responding to the disunity he witnesses in ecological processes, he posits a new ground for ecology so discontinuous that he can think of ecology only as *ecologies* plural, addressing three different though interrelated branches: the social, the mental, and the environmental (28). In the social and mental branches, it is clear that by the time Guattari is writing ecology is no longer solely an environmental concern. These three interrelated branches constitute a discontinuous ground for ecological thought; they also posit an interconnectedness between the human, the cultural, and the natural.

While hybridity is a necessary development in ecological thought, it requires caution. Arne Naess, one of the founders of deep ecology, argues for a hybridized ecology in *Ecology, Community, and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy* (1989): a deep ecology that entails the “[r]ejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*” (28). Accompanying his appeal to a “*total-field image*,” however, is a warning against totalizing ecological thought. There is a danger when

thinking ecologically to think nothing but ecology, to see it everywhere. He therefore points to “[t]he dangers of ‘ecologism’: seeing ecology as the ultimate science” (39).

Though “[e]cology may comprise a great deal,” he argues, “it should never be considered a universal science” (39). This totalizing is a particular concern for deep ecology because of its global nature (40). To guard against this tendency, Naess emphasizes the specificity of his ecosophy and the necessary differences between his ecosophy and that of others, though developed along the same lines. Each person must negotiate his or her own ecological relationship:

In this book I introduce one ecosophy arbitrarily called Ecosophy T. You are not expected to agree with all of its values and paths of derivation, but to learn the means for developing your own systems or guides, say, Ecosophies X, Y, or Z. Saying ‘your own’ does not imply that the ecosophy is in any way an original creation by yourself. It is enough that it is a kind of total view which you feel at home with, ‘where you philosophically belong.’ Along with one’s own life, it is always changing.

(37)

Naess invokes a necessary heterogeneity in ecosophy.

Ecology, as most thinkers agree, requires that we think globally as well as locally, for the relational nature of ecology knows no regional or political bounds. Air and water currents defy the very concept of local phenomena, since their movements carry the ramifications of an event far beyond its original site. Recent reminders of this universality include the eruption of Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, both of which occurred in 2010. Clearly, we

need to think big. Morton, however, warns about “the evil that is our big picture gaze” (*Ecological* 96-97). When thinking totality, as we have seen in Naess, Hutchings, and others, there is a danger of totalitarianism: “What we’re examining here is that scary thing, ‘totality.’ Recent thinkers have been shy of totality. They fear that totality means totalitarianism. Totality may be difficult and frightening. But the current global crisis requires that we wake up and smell the total coffee” (40). He counters with a different definition of totality, emphasizing, like Naess, its inherent heterogeneity: “‘Totality’ doesn’t mean something closed, single, and independent, nor does it mean something predetermined and fixed; it has no goal” (40).

New ecological criticism must think broadly in order to address the scale and complexity of ecological ideas without condensing and simplifying them into a single concept. Recent approaches like those above have tended to focus upon the plurality of discourses involved. They aim to think beyond the conventional humanity/nature binary (and the spectre of its holistic union) by a further multiplication of the groups involved. Therefore Guattari identifies three related ecological spheres and pushes past humanity/nature to think instead in terms of the social, the mental, and the environmental; therefore Naess focuses upon the individuality of ecosophical approaches each rooted in local experience while reaching pluralistically towards the global; therefore Morton advocates that we think “*collectivism* rather than *holism*” (*Ecology* 102). Such approaches to the problem aim to perform integrative thought by proliferating concepts. They indicate that ecocritical thought has begun to change in reflection of the changing nature it engages, one that includes the unnatural within itself. In the end, however, it is unclear whether they achieve this goal, or whether they have instead added

new lines to the established argument. The humanity/nature divide remains throughout: Guattari reserves a special space for the environmental; Naess' ecosophy, for all its different individual manifestations, is still a guide for navigating between two groups: the human and the non-human. They still regard nature as a separate entity. Ecology, however, is not confined to questions of nature. It is not solely a question of the relationships between animals, and between animals and the biosphere, nor even of the relationship between humanity and the biosphere. In very recent years, the term "ecology" has been used increasingly outside of the conventional environmental contexts that once bound it. There can be *Ecologies of Affect* (2011), for instance, as well as *Cognitive Ecologies* (2011), *Ecologies of Comparison* (2011), *Media Ecologies* (2005), and an *Ecology of Reading* (2005).²¹ Ecology is no longer solely the relation between animals in place, but relation itself. Drawing yet more lines in the sand destabilizes the traditional environmental binary but still results in a static conceptual framework. It remains, at its core, an *environmental* discourse. Our *environs* are around us and outside us. Therefore Serres urges that we "forget the word *environment* ... It assumes that we humans are at the center of a system of nature" (33). *Environment* is instinct with binary division. *Ecology*, on the other hand, is etymologically rooted in *oikos*, or home. An *ecological* discourse does not follow from division; nor, however, does it follow from or advocate for union. Rather, ecology is a site where experiences of both unity and discontinuity are intensified. The concept and experience of home offers a site for thinking through the relationships between others, both human and non-human, in close

²¹*Ecologies of Affect*, ed. Tonya K. Davidson, et al.; *Cognitive Ecologies*, Evelyn B. Tribble; *Ecologies of Comparison*, Timothy K. Choy; *Media Ecologies*, Matthew Fuller; *The Wordsworthian Enlightenment: Romantic Poetry and the Ecology of Reading*, ed. Helen Regueiro Elam and Frances Ferguson.

proximity, where their otherness is perpetually encountered. Ecological thought thinks totally without thinking totalitarian, simultaneously addressing all and leaving all open to difference, change, and uncertainty.

This project responds to the ecological challenge to think the relationships between humanity and the other, or between culture and nature, by theorizing the site of these relationships as *oikos*. *Oikos* is therefore a synonym neither for nature nor for the environment; rather, it represents the manifold relationships that comprise the experience of co-existing in place and the inherent uncertainty and instability—the mystery—of that experience. The negative capability of Romantic poetry, as expressed in its embrace of difference and mutability, articulates the Romantic *oikos* as an imaginative and passionate community of others.

2. Ecology as Community

I look to ideas of community, especially those articulated by recent community theory, to perform a new, more fluid mode of ecological thought. Community theory has been largely overlooked by ecological criticism, yet the question of ecology is essentially a question of community; ecology is relation, and demands that we think of how and whether we can relate, or communicate, with one other. Ideas of community were of particular interest for Romantic thinkers. Many iconic Romantic motifs—the individual genius, the Byronic hero, the rural and the urban, the return to nature—pivot upon ideas of relation and the possibility of community with others. The Romantics were in part responding to the gravity and specificity of their historical moment which they were challenged to represent and express: namely, the political revolutions both actual and

potential, the Industrial Revolution, and the intellectual and artistic revolutions of their time. Twentieth-century theorists of community faced parallel challenges. In works by thinkers like Nancy, Blanchot, and Agamben, an idea of community emerges that is predicated upon difference rather than identity; it is a discontinuous “ground” of relation between singular others.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, theorists of community had to face the monumental collapse of community within the political programs of the period. Nancy and Blanchot explicitly face the fall of communism in their texts and endeavour to think a different idea of community among its ruins. To this end, Nancy makes a distinction throughout *The Inoperative Community* (1982) between communion and community. Communion “fuses the *egos* into an *Ego* or a higher *We*” (15); community, however, “is not the space of the *egos*—subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal—but of the *I*’s, who are always *others* (or else are nothing) ... It is the community of *others*” (15). Communion is the site of fusion, unity, and identity, whereas community is the site of difference. The distinction between these two terms is central to an ecological understanding of community theory. In my reading, Nancy’s theory of community can express in modern philosophical language the artistic struggle of the Romantics as they navigated between themselves and the world, revealing community theory’s ecological potential and implications.

While the community theory of Nancy and others is not explicitly ecological, its terms translate revealingly into ecological theory. In this context, the desire for reunion present throughout western environmental discourse—from early modern biblical interpretations of our peculiar natural position, to the Romantic withdrawal from society,

to the ecomimetic strain of modern nature writing in writers such as Leopold—seems a desire for communion. As such, and in the wake of the disastrous social experiments of the last century like Nazism and Stalinism with their disdain for difference, this desire now appears both ecologically and ethically suspect. The quest for communion, or holism in the environmental context, fails to make the crucial distinction between totality and totalitarianism. Holism allows for neither difference nor dissent. Ecology, however, demands difference and change. Communion is ecologically dangerous for the same reasons that it is socially dangerous: it prohibits diversity, and diversity, as has been well established in ecological research, is crucial for life. The Romantic emphasis upon strife and dissent, then, styling itself as “the voice of honest indignation”²² is key for thinking ecology as community.

The drive for oneness requires the translation of all things into terms not their own. Given humanity’s penchant for anthropomorphism, the desired union would likely have a human face. Blanchot addresses this problem in response to Nancy’s work: “As Herder says, there is nothing that must not be fashioned by him [man], from humanity to nature (and all the way to God). Nothing is left out, in the final analysis. Here lies the seemingly healthy origin of the sickest totalitarianism” (*Unavowable 2*). In the end, Blanchot continues, “this exigency of an absolute immanence implies the dissolution of everything that would prevent man . . . from positing himself as pure individual reality, a reality all the more closed as it is open to all” (2). It matters little, however, which particular shape the desired union might take. What matters is the violence inherent in

²²On plate 12 of Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Isaiah explains the audacity of his prophecy: “I saw no God, nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the infinite in every thing, and as I was then perswaded, & remain confirm’d; that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences but wrote.”

the shaping, in the translation from one form into another.

Jean-François Lyotard expresses a similar idea in *The Differend* (1983). The term “differend” denotes an injustice of expression. Lyotard uses legal vocabulary to describe the injustice, but the concept is not limited to the courts. In a case of the differend, a singularity conflicts with a totality whose totalitarian discourse defines and controls the terms, leaving the singularity without a voice or means of expression: “A case of differend between two parties takes place when the ‘regulation’ of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom” (9). In this situation, “the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim” (9). Lyotard writes of the differend as an explicitly human situation, qualifying that while in it they cannot express themselves in the dominant discourse, “[i]t would be absurd to suppose that human beings ‘endowed with language’ cannot speak in the strict sense, as is the case for stones” (10). Nevertheless, the case of the differend is significant for ecological thought. Non-human and even non-biotic entities like “stones,” while voiceless, play a crucial role in this context and require serious consideration. A hallmark of environmental discourse is the social justice trope of speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves.²³ Lyotard’s work calls the trope of speaking for nature into question. While such advocacy is important work, it must not be performed uncritically. Lyotard is clear that the victim within a situation of differend, the singularity that language cannot express, cannot simply adapt to another’s language. Rather, the victim is called to create a new language:

²³ There have been at least two ecocritical books that draw upon the concept explicitly: *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (2004) by Sylvia Bowerbank and *Speaking for Nature: How Literary Naturalists from Henry Thoreau to Rachel Carson have Shaped America* (1980) by Paul Brooks. Similar phrasings are common in articles and chapter headings.

This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist. (13)

In ecological thought, relation remains to be phrased; there is no distinct idiom in which to think nature and culture together. Lyotard's notion of the differend addresses the precarious position of the singular within the discourse of the total. Previously, environmental thinkers aimed to address this concern by speaking *for* the singular—nature—that exceeded the hegemonic discourse of the human, to represent its concerns in a human court. Read ecologically, the differend questions that project's method and efficacy. Lyotard notes that because the animal cannot possibly bear witness to the damages it suffers, it "is a paradigm of the victim" (28). The trope of speaking for the other remains a case of a projected reunion, a communion that cannot bear singularity. Read in the context of the differend, to translate the victim, to absorb the particular, is to silence it.

Nancy identifies a necessary relationship between communion and death. The desire for reunion with nature understood as communion is therefore particularly troubling. Communion is essentially immanence, and total immanence, according to Nancy, can be achieved only in death (12). Death is the site of total identity where

difference is impossible. Nancy also connects death materialistically with a return to nature, for only in death is the final condition of total immanence fulfilled:

“decomposition leading back to nature” (12). The convention is present throughout environmental and particularly Romantic writing, particularly as a return to nature in which intimate interactions with nature frequently draw comparisons with death. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Alastor” poet, as I discuss in the fourth chapter, forsakes human companionship in search of an ideal love, yet his path to death corresponds with a journey deep into the natural, non-human world. In Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” the nightingale’s song leads the poet to tempting thoughts of death. He confesses that he often has been “half in love with easeful Death, / Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme” (52-53), and while the nightingale sings “Now more than ever seems it rich to die” (55). Wordsworth frequently luxuriates in the theme, such as in the Lucy poems. In “A Slumber did my Spirit Seal,” Lucy in death is “Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees” (7-8). Dorothy Wordsworth describes an episode in her entry for 29th April, 1802 in *The Grasmere Journal* in which her brother is drawn towards contemplation of death much like Keats was drawn to it through the nightingale:

We then went to Johns Grove, sate a while at first. Afterwards William lay, & I lay, in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut & listening to the waterfalls & the Birds. . . . we both lay still, & unseen by one another—he thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth & just to know that ones dear friends were near. (92)

Northrop Frye has discussed this Romantic death drive, noting that “the only point at which one visibly enters into an identity with nature is death. Thus death is all we can usually see of what may or may not be the fullest entering into life. This paradox haunts many Romantic and post-Romantic poets” (34). The Romantic desire for a return to nature, then, may truly be a return to the ground.

Recent theory has called this aesthetic construction of a return to nature into ethical question. In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2002), Agamben reads the desire for return revealingly through the work of Georges Bataille and early church theology, discussing the goal of Christianity as a return to Paradise which he interprets as a reunion with nature. Like Bate (via Bramwell) and Hutchings, Agamben sees totalitarian possibilities in environmental discourse. He cites a connection between Nazism and geographical connectedness in thinkers like Friedrich Ratzel, who theorized that “all peoples are intimately linked to their vital space as their essential dimension,” an idea that “had a notable influence on Nazi geopolitics” (43). Agamben cites the potential danger of thinking communion between human and animal: “Perhaps concentration and extermination camps are ... an experiment of this sort, an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman, which has ended up dragging the very possibility of the distinction to its ruin” (22).

In response to the actual and potential violence of communion, contemporary theorists advocate for an idea of community founded upon difference rather than identity. This uncommon ground of community is faithful to an understanding of ecology as relation and flux. Humanity necessarily participates in this ecological fluidity. As Blanchot asks, “why should not man, supposing that the discontinuous is proper to him

and is his work, reveal that the *ground of things*—to which he must surely in some way belong—has as much to do with the demand of discontinuity as it does with that of unity?” (*Infinite* 9). For thinking along such lines, Timothy Clark holds that Blanchot “cannot but be pitted against vast stretches of environmentalist thought, based as it usually is on a romantic programme of ‘reconnection’ with ‘nature’ or ‘the earth’” (126); indeed, “Blanchot’s work refuses, in its very constitution, that temptation which a deep ecologist never seems able to resist, that of making a new foundation or absolutist ground out of ‘nature’ or the ‘earth’” (136). Community theory counters the desire for communion. In Nancy’s conception, community is “made up principally of the sharing, diffusion, or impregnation of an identity by a plurality” (9). It is based upon the contestation of boundaries, where only others exist. Rather than unity or identification, community is founded upon disunity or dislocation. It consists of plural “‘places of communication’” which “are no longer places of fusion, even though in them one passes from one to the other; they are defined and exposed by their dislocation. Thus, the communication of sharing would be this very dis-location” (25). Community is possible through a process of identity sharing which is never finished: “Sharing is always incomplete, or it is beyond completion and incompleteness. For a complete sharing implies the disappearance of what is shared” (35). Because the process is ongoing, total identification is never achieved, nor is it ever the goal.

Like communion, Nancy’s idea of community is also related to death, though in a very different way. Communion is predicated upon death; community is predicated *against* death. While death is the ultimate site of total communion—the identity of communion—community takes place through life performed against the knowledge of

the death (and communion) to come. While one is alive, one experiences death only through the other. The death of the other witnesses the necessary distance between others, emphasizing difference: therefore, “[c]ommunity is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others” (15). Immanence is the ground upon which community performs itself: “community *is* the ecstatic consciousness of the night of immanence” (19). Unlike communion, which is coterminous with immanence, community arises tangentially to immanence, in an oblique relation: “The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. Community therefore occupies a singular space: it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, the impossibility of a communitarian being in the form of a subject. In a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes—this is its peculiar gesture—the impossibility of community” (15). The death that always underscores community is the common ground at the basis of our relational experience. There is a unity, or an ultimate communion, but it is also deferred, experienced only through others. Community, on the other hand, belongs to the present and to living experience.

In death, therefore, all things are one, while in life all things are singular and relating. This tenet has tremendous implications for how one thinks of the things of the world. It is not correct to think holistically of a Gaia-like identity; the world is not yet (and not ever) one. Nor, however, are things entirely and atomistically independent of one another. The issue is a re-imagination of a longstanding philosophical problem—how to navigate between the one and the many? The problem takes on new and urgent significance in the ecological world. Ecology demands that we think simultaneously of

the one and the many, being constructed paradoxically on the dual pillars of interdependence and diversity. Community theory allows us to re-cast the problem between the one and the many in ecological terms; it is now a problem of the navigation between humanity and nature as well as between a fixed, eternal nature at the basis of existence and a temporal, fluid nature which we must engage in the present.

Nancy's community is devoted to present experience, for it is an active plurality predicated upon a communion to come. To express the latent connection between the members of community, the core of community's performance, Nancy speaks of the members not as individuals but as singularities. He draws this distinction from atomist theories like that of Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*, in which atoms are the building blocks of existence. However, considered individually, independently, they are nothing. It is only when they connect or disconnect—relate—that anything occurs. It is the relationship between atoms, their coming together and falling apart, that creates the world. Nancy follows this logic in his own work on community. The individual subject, he posits, is akin to an atom, and in isolation is nothing: “the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death” (3). When they relate in community, individuals are no longer individuals but singularities: “Community is made up of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*” (31). Singularities are the *others* who relate in the performance of community. Singularity, then, is a way of thinking relation without thinking identity or multiplicity for it navigates between the one and the many, identifying with neither.

Agamben conceives of singularity in a similar way in *The Coming Community* (1990): “Singularity is ... freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose

between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal” (1). Singularity is opposed to identity-formation and unification as in the program of the State, which cannot tolerate “that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (86). Rather, as Agamben holds, singularity “is not a final determination of being, but an unraveling or an indetermination of its limits: a paradoxical *individuation by indetermination*” (56). Guattari similarly cites the ecological experience of heterogenesis: “processes of continuous resingularization” in which “[i]ndividuals must become both more united and increasingly different” (45). Singularity is important when thinking ecology because it offers a way of thinking outside the binary of nature as the non-human and humanity as non-nature. Nancy even approaches such a point in his own text: “it is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to ‘man’ and excludes, for example, the ‘animal’” (28). The ecological world no longer divides into two camps. In community, we must instead think about relation between countless relating singularities. In this project, the idea of singularity is addressed to reconsider the common charge against the perceived solipsism of the Romantic ego. Thought through community, the Romantic ego is not an atomic individual but a singularity. Ecologically, it is an interface between the self and the other and therefore a dynamic site of relation.

Because singularities are relating *others*, they are inherently oriented towards and defined by *others*. In its constant reaching towards (or away from) another, the concept of singularity is intrinsically ethical in nature. The myriad manifestations of ecocriticism, despite the contests between them, are united in their ultimate regard for environmental ethics. While it has grown and changed tremendously over the decades, ecocriticism

remains committed to the urgency of ecological crises and a responsibility to the reality of ecological existence. Many have tried to define ecocriticism, and though the definitions vary they ultimately agree on their shared responsibility towards action, however defined. Buell, for instance, defines an environmental text, in part, as one in which “[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation” (7). Richard Kerridge in the “Introduction” to *Writing the Environment* (1998) holds that “ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (5). Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (2004) draws upon Cheryll Glotfelty’s earlier *The Ecocriticism Reader* to state that “ecocriticism ... is an avowedly political mode of analysis” and that “[e]cocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda” (3). Ecocriticism, and environmentalism more generally, tends to focus upon achieving changes in behaviour, or *effects*. The ethical orientation of the singularity would seem to share in this focus. Nancy’s thoughts about community, however, and his development of the idea of singularity, can offer ecocriticism a way to think ecological ethics without closing it down and fixing its potential into goals. Thinking about ecology as community opens the possibility of an ecocriticism and ecological thought that participate in Romantic art’s transgressive playfulness. This possibility appears in the distinction between productivity and creativity.

Nancy’s community is thus “inoperative.” Unlike communion, “community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project—nor is it a *project* at all” (15). Community is also “[d]istinct from society (which is a simple association and division of forces and needs) and opposed to emprise (which dissolves

community by submitting its peoples to its arms and to its glory)” (9). It is entirely different from communism, for work is at “the very basis of the communist ideal: human beings defined as producers” (2). Rather, community is actively opposed to work: “Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, or institutional” (31). I understand the meaning of *work* in Nancy’s text to be the process of production, a process that unites individuals in order to achieve a certain and fixed goal or product. Work is therefore similar in spirit to communion, in that it is founded upon a sense of identity and oneness. In its direction towards an end, it stays on a path and blinds itself to the periphery: it closes down possibility. For this reason, the fusion inherent in work makes it “a work of death” (15). The work of death is seen when individuals are united and transfigured into some larger absorbing narrative, such as mythic ideals like “homeland, native soil or blood, nation, a delivered or fulfilled humanity, absolute phalanstery, family, or mystical body” (15) and also more common ideas such as society and economy, ideals that express “the techno-economical organization or ‘making operational’ of our world” (23). Such an organization, though it is often referred to as “community” in common expression, “is still essentially a matter of work, of operation or operativity” (23). Community, however, “is calibrated on death as on that of which it is precisely impossible to *make a work* (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it)” (15).

Though opposed to work so defined, community is not at all without consequence. It is not idle, in the common sense of the term. On the contrary, the performance of community is a tremendous and insistent responsibility. Nancy ends his essay about community with a call to continued action: “We must not stop writing, or

letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself”: “We can only go farther” (41). Community does not work or make a work, for it does not condense individuals under the goal of a fixed product. Instead, community comprises the continuous relations of singularities whose ceaseless activity resists the constraints of a program towards a unifying telos. It is not work, but play. It is the difference between productivity and creativity—creativity is open to difference, diversity, and change. Thinking ecology through community offers a different way of thinking humanity’s relationship with nature, one no longer concerned with working to achieve a prior and mythical state of union. It is an artistically playful, creative response to our situation in the world, and the ecological problems we face require tremendous creativity. In its rejection of the product (seen for instance in its critique of Enlightenment ideals, its critique of the industrial ethos, and its critique of modern society) and in its devotion to creativity and play, Romanticism offers a vision of an inoperative ecological community.

This sort of discourse may sound idealistic to a fault. However, it can have very material effects upon the way we understand our place in the world and, therefore, the way we relate to the world. Ecological problems are enormously difficult to assess because they are so complex in their interactions and impacts. Despite the most advanced methods and sensitive instruments, the scientific community has been unable to produce accurate models of ecological change.²⁴ These scientific models are crucially

²⁴Leigh Glover argues in *Postmodern Climate Change* (2006) that climate change modeling has been particularly troubled because although greenhouse gas emissions “are the basic source of a problem that can be analyzed scientifically,” they “are (predominantly) generated by social activities that are inherently less amenable to strict scientific rationality” (122). Even when just considering more scientifically verifiable data, the number of variables to consider is so immense as to limit the certainty of climate prediction: “no serious scientist can guarantee the validity of the results. Climatologists long ago stopped giving concrete values for the predicted temperature in the year 2100. Nowadays they talk in terms of probabilities. For example, under emissions scenario A, it is 80 percent certain that the global average temperature will increase by at least 2 degrees Celsius” (Dambeck).

important in determining technological and political courses of action concerning such problems of ecology. The problem lies in the narrowness and fixity of our responses. In general, we expect science to be certain and exact. Questions of ecology, however, address living things and future unknowns. Therefore, we have to be open to non-teleological thinking—to creativity—so that we can respond to the inevitable changes in ecological thought and experience. The playfulness of community in modern thought in which singularities relate in ever-changing constellations, paralleled in the playfulness of Romantic poetry, exposes a way to such creativity. The playfulness of Romantic thought and art is sometimes read as a countering response to the (sometimes excessive) rationalism of the preceding Enlightenment. Blake sums up the position in the “Conclusion” to “There is No Natural Religion [b]”: “If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again” (7). Romantic play precludes the possibility of this stasis, “the same dull round,” in its

In recent decades, our rhetoric surrounding climate prediction has needed to shift to accommodate the growing recognition of uncertainty. For instance, where once we discussed “global warming,” we now speak of “climate change,” for the issue is not necessarily one of unified warming but of increased unpredictability of climate. Colloquially, the change in terms helps to address those who offer each cold day as a proof against the validity of climate change. On the other hand, the necessary uncertainty of models that reflect the difficulties of prediction when considering living and complex processes has inadvertently fueled the rhetoric of climate change skeptics. Whenever the models change or a prediction fails, some groups call the very reality of the issue into question. For instance, in 2005 the United Nations warned that the world could see 50 million climate refugees—people displaced by disasters related to climate change—by 2010. In 2011, when the refugee crisis had not materialized, the UN distanced itself from the prediction (Bojanowski). The problem that Leigh Glover outlined above seems to have been at play here. In response to the criticism and in explanation of the error, Stephen Castles of the International Migration Institute at Oxford University points out that the model failed to account for the social aspects of human behaviour: “Castles said people usually don’t respond to environmental disasters, war or poverty by emigrating abroad” (Bojanowski). At play here is also the definition of “climate refugee”: natural disasters do displace people every year, but it is unclear which disasters should count as climate-related. In fact, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre says that about 42 million people were displaced due to natural disasters in 2010 (“Natural Disasters”). If these disasters are related to climate change, as the IDMC considers likely, the UN’s prediction may not have been as false as has been accused.

rejection of an end. Ecologically, then, Romanticism offers a way of creatively thinking uncertainty and flux that the modern ecological crises, as articulated above, demand.

3. Ecological Affect and the Romantic Oikos

The creative force that powers the various constellations of relation for many thinkers of community is affect. References to ecstasy, joy, and love permeate Nancy's community discourse. Ecstasy is the consciousness of community (19), whereas "[j]oy is possible, it has meaning and existence, only through community and as its communication" (34). Love, moreover, "exposes the unworking and therefore incessant *incompletion* of communication" (38). Blanchot relates community to ecstasy as well, and in ecologically provocative terms: community, he says, introduces the knowledge of the "'beside-ourself' (the outside) which is abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a singular relationship" (*Unavowable* 17). He defines love in ethical terms as "an infinite attention to the Other" (43). For Blanchot, love twines community together, and community is counter to the State: "The community of lovers ... has as its ultimate goal the destruction of society" (*Unavowable* 48). Agamben also thinks a community of lovers in erotically charged ways, defining singularity as that which is exposed as "whatever you *want*, that is, lovable" (*Coming* 2). The performance of community, the playful unworking that is its activity, is also described affectively. This is particularly the case when Nancy and Blanchot look to the work of Bataille, for whom relation was passion: "unworking takes place around what Bataille called the sacred, but then clarified

as “the unleashing of passions” (Nancy 32).²⁵

What these thinkers contribute to ecological thought is a way of thinking the material together with the psychical/spiritual/transcendental without establishing a necessary binary. The most cerebral problems are at the same time physically rooted in the body and the world. As we have seen, there has been a tendency in environmental and ecocritical thought to posit such a binary, and to imply a necessary choice between a scientific and a metaphysically idealist approach. This mode of ecocriticism has pitted itself sometimes explicitly against theoretical, and especially post-structuralist, approaches.²⁶ Community theory read ecologically demonstrates that these priorities need not compete, nor need they be considered separate priorities at all. Affect is the transgressive experience that calls both body and mind into question. It is an experience that can arise without any physical force, yet have very physical effects. An affect arises when a body is *affected*: an other has had an effect upon it. Therefore, affect signals the experience of relation; no one is exempt from relation as it is inherent in one’s experience of the world.

²⁵Each of the community theorists I discuss here—Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben—addresses Georges Bataille and his theories of and experiments with community. While foundational in community theory, the ecological implications of such theory are gestured towards in the trajectory of these later theorists. Therefore, while Bataille is always at the margins of such thought, I do not address his work directly in this project.

²⁶Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (2004), for example, disparages “[s]tructuralism and post-structuralism” as “important trends in literary and cultural theory that would seem to marginalise the role of literal truth in literature and culture, even in science itself” (9). He takes feminist literary theory and its distinction between sex and gender as an example: “Whilst this strategy provides opportunities for women to escape repressive stereotypes, it also represents a marked prioritisation of the claims of culture over those of nature” (9). In light of these competing priorities, Garrard holds that “[t]he challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (10). He ultimately maintains, however, that ecocritics must “defer, in the last analysis, to a scientific understanding of the world” (10). Pages later, he quotes Peter Coates’ argument about “universally disempowering postmodernist logic” in which “the belief in the existence of a global environmental crisis is just another grand narrative” (qtd. in Garrard 13-4). Garrard quotes Coates 185-6.

Because all things exist and participate in nature, and because nothing exists in isolation, all things affect and are affected. All things are to some extent passive, in that they undergo, or suffer, the effects of others. Passion, therefore, is the affective experience of relation. As such, it plays an important role in current community theories like Nancy's. For Nancy, passion is the relation between singularities—the experience of being open to an other: “The singular being, because it is singular, is in the passion—the passivity, the suffering, and the excess—of sharing its singularity” (33). It is not a total and infinite openness, however, for that would signal an experience of oneness and identity that is instead found in Nancy's idea of communion. Such would be the end of passion, for in total identity there would no longer be any others to affect or to be affected. Amid the openness to relation, difference must be maintained. As we have discussed, difference is the key distinction between communion and community. Community is the experience of sharing singularity (33), and Nancy is clear that it is an ongoing sharing that is never completed (35). Sharing is always incomplete and is therefore a constant activity.

Community's incomplete sharing and constant activity parallels Romanticism's call for constant creativity through a-teleological play. The Romantic writers discussed in this project express the passionate, constant activity of community creatively in their art, where it is recreated as a question of ecology—of how a singularity relates to the other and to the world. As we have seen, Romanticism's love for nature is well known, but the nature of this love and the definition of 'nature' are continually questioned, both by critics and, firstly, by the Romantics themselves. Romantic verse runs from the environmentally diametric extremes of Clare's rapturous natural cataloguing in his early pre-asylum verse,

as I will discuss in the third chapter, to Shelley's equally rapturous philosophical poems like "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "To a Sky-Lark," poems which would seem to have little stake in material nature, as I will discuss in the fourth chapter. In "To a Sky-Lark," the material bird could seem to be denied its very existence: "Hail to thee, blithe Spirit! / Bird thou never wert" (1-2). Romanticism contains both extremes within its corpus, since Romantic poets like Clare and Shelley often veer between a devotion to the materially present—the here and now—and to the otherworldly, whether it be mental, emotional, or spiritual. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Wordsworth voices this dual concern in *Home at Grasmere* when he praises how the human mind is "to the external World / fitted" while at the same time "the external World is fitted" to it (818-19; 821). He does not elaborate upon how this reciprocal fittedness occurs, and the omission has fueled much debate in Wordsworth criticism. Wordsworth leaves the question open. Romantic poets acknowledge and embrace their uncertainty about nature and their own place within it and respond to it playfully in their art, not to resolve the problem but to articulate the question. This ability to abide with the question is a key contribution of Romantic thought to modernity, and one which is necessary in order to think critically and creatively through the radical uncertainty of our ecological situation.

Nancy recognizes "in the thought of community a theoretical excess" (25). The experience of this ecological excess, of being open towards the other, is passion. Romanticism is key in this ecological literary study because the Romantic poets embraced this passion, despite the dangers involved. Inherent in passion is the potential for suffering, as Nancy points out. Relation means to suffer the other. The Romantics perceived and expressed this connection in their art. Their passionate excess frequently

crosses over into pain and sadness, even towards thoughts of death. This excess is clearly seen throughout Wordsworth's Lucy poems, which are particularly poignant in their navigation of love, death, and nature. Such pain arises between the desire to communicate, the desire to open oneself to relation, and the recognition of the incommensurable difference that prohibits communion: "But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!" ("She Dwelt Among Th'Untrodden Ways" 11-12).

Romanticism's ecological strength is its denial of the economic structure of society and its embrace of this passionate and playful excess, in all its pain and joy.

Romanticism's embrace of suffering has inspired Morton to posit melancholy as the ecological affect, offering the formulation of "[d]ark ecology" as "a melancholic ethics" (*Ecology* 186).²⁷ Freud's definition of mourning in "Mourning and Melancholia" calls its ethical effectiveness into question. The basic difference between mourning and melancholy in Freud's thought is in the relationship each has with an object. Mourning can identify a source of its grief, an object that has been lost. Melancholy can determine no such source, for it mourns loss itself. The originlessness of melancholy fits well with the ecological perception that nature is not something over there, separate from the self. However, in Freud's description, the melancholic ego is divided against itself: failing to find an origin elsewhere, in an object that it has lost, the ego focuses upon itself as the lost object, merging itself with loss. Therefore, "[i]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" ("Mourning" 246). Freud's

²⁷Morton's understanding of Freud's melancholia is as "a refusal to digest the object, a sticking in the throat, an introjection" (186). Morton draws more directly upon Judith Butler's understanding of melancholy in "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification." He argues that "[j]ust as for Butler 'the "truest" gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man,' so the truest ecological human is a melancholy dualist" (186). Morton cites Butler 138-40.

melancholic, while self-debasing, is at the same time narcissistic: “The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy” (“Mourning” 246). Melancholy’s self-absorption leaves little room for consideration of and relationship with the other.

As seen in our earlier discussion of Morton, in *Ecology Without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought* (2010),²⁸ he offers a melancholic ecology in order to address the culture of ecological crisis and the failure of “‘bright green’” ecological thought: “‘Bright’ conveys optimism, intelligence, and an acceptance of the sunny world of consumer products. The inventors claim that ecological thinking can accommodate itself to postmodern consumer capitalism” (*Ecological* 15-16). He posits instead “dark ecology”—“a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world” (*Ecology* 184-85)—which is founded upon the affect of melancholy as an alternative and corrective idea. Romanticism certainly lends itself to such a dark interpretation, given its well-established fascination with death, ruins, solitude, and the like. The argument for melancholy is persuasive. It is a mourning for that which we are constantly in the process of losing, and that which is a part of ourselves, and so the process of mourning cannot be complete: our ecological experience is therefore melancholic. Morton’s formulation of melancholy is also ecologically

²⁸In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton expands his ideas in *Ecology Without Nature*, moving further away from a distinctly literary criticism towards a more broadly philosophical discussion. In his consideration of the interconnectedness of all things in nature (including the synthetic things most would call unnatural), he presents the philosophical basis for the specificities of approach in *Ecology Without Nature*.

pragmatic, since, while we recognize our connection to the lost object, we at the same time preserve a sense of difference: “It is precisely the point at which the self is separated from, and forever connected to, the mother”; “It maintains duality, if not dualism” (*Ecology* 186). While the otherness of the other is present in melancholy, the ethical implications are unclear. Morton’s description of the situation is self-consciously marked by uncertainty: “Unable fully to introject or digest the idea of the other, we are caught in its headlights, suspended in the possibility of acting without being able to act” (*Ecology* 186). Dark ecology’s revealing focus on the negativity and uncertainty of nature is a crucial corrective to the positivist, teleological strain of environmentalism that has inhibited the development of theoretical perspectives. Its depressive approach, however, is potentially counterproductive when encountering the other in an interconnected world. When read through Freud’s formulation, melancholy seems too limited, too narrowly focused, to speak to the reality of our earthly moment: this is particularly the case when considering that moment’s very real experience of joy. In this project, I present joy as the ecological affect which makes possible the performance of community.

In *The Story of Joy* (2007), Adam Potkay traces the transmutation of depictions of joy through religion, philosophy, and art from the Bible to Sam Mendes’ film *American Beauty* (1999).²⁹ Joy appears as a powerful yet inexplicable passion. Despite the difficulty of definition, several attempts begin to take shape over the course of the book through the representations of joy in different sources. A refrain emerges, one with

²⁹Potkay’s work on joy participates in a recent resurgence of interest in Romantic affect, including works like Todd’s *Sensibility: An Introduction* (1986), McGann’s *The Poetics of Sensibility* (1996), and Thomas Pfau’s *Romantic Moods* (2005). The resurgence is tied to a parallel interest in Romantic physicality, seen in works like Ruston’s *Shelley and Vitality* (2005) and Gigante’s *Life* (2009). Taken together, this interest in physical sensation and reality may both incite and respond to the ecocritical interest in connection with the material world.

ecological implications: joy is founded upon an experience with an other: “[j]oy is what we feel, and as self-reflective beings know we feel, in situations, real or imaginary, in which what was lost is found; what was missing restored; what constrained is lifted; what we desire arrives; or what arrives satisfies a desire we hadn’t known we’d had” (vii).

While this definition speaks of reunion, or a return after an absence, it nevertheless stops short of communion, or oneness. Joy is an experience of the other in which the boundaries between others are touched, but respected. This simultaneous connection and disconnection, at once together and separate, everything and nothing, is what Potkay calls the “paradox of joy”:

Between the instinct to become nothing or to become everything—
between the desire to lose oneself in some greater whole or narcissistically sense everything as one’s (non-) self—the distance is not so great, or none at all. These extremes meet, and in their meeting lies what I’d like to call the *paradox of joy*. ... The paradox of joy involves the nexus of loss and restoration, self-dispersion and perfect concentration, we so often find in human utterances about joy. (16)

In “narcissistically sens[ing] everything as one’s (non-) self” and including within itself a sense of “loss,” joy includes melancholy as part of its own experience. In losing this loss, however, in “the nexus of loss and restoration,” joy entails a sense of negative restoration that is out of reach for the melancholic. While the boundaries touch, in joy, difference remains. Indeed, difference is what distinguishes joy from ecstasy, for in ecstasy the self

is dissolved (Potkay 3, 25).³⁰ Joy becomes ecstasy when its paradox is resolved and the self is totally abandoned. This understanding of ecstasy parallels Freud's understanding of melancholy, a lens through which ecstasy appears narcissistic; joy, on the other hand, is relational in its concern for the other. Unlike ecstasy, joy is related not to communion, but to community in Nancy's sense of the term, a community with difference or a discontinuous ground at its foundation. Indeed, Nancy holds that the singularity's passion "is what is designated by the doublet of the word '*jouissance*,' namely joy (*joie*): "Joy is possible, it has meaning and existence, only through community and as its communication" (34).

Joy plays a constitutive role in a community that encounters and respects the boundaries between others; it is a passion that is markedly ethical. In its foundation of an affective community, joy is "a linchpin between emotions and *ethics*" (Potkay viii). Unlike melancholy, then, which is characterized by a "cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love," and "inhibition of all activity" (Freud "Mourning" 244), joy carries with it a responsibility toward constant activity, toward play. It is a recognition of others and a responsibility to act ethically towards them. Joy need not, indeed cannot, support the status quo. As a passion, joy interrupts the quotidian as an excess that it cannot withstand. It is unsettling and disruptive: "[j]oy provides the possibility of experiencing differently, making possible a different correlation of knowledge, decentering and dissolving norms and therefore reordering the conditions of subjectivity" (Wilson xiv). However, joy shares many attributes with melancholy.

³⁰*ek-stasis* means "out of place." I read ecstasy as the experience of being outside the self and, in accordance with descriptions of ecstasy in religious literature, the dissolution or, which amounts to the same thing, the absorption of the self in communion with God or the universe.

Neither the joyful nor the melancholic can give a reason for why they feel the way they do. Just as melancholy subsumes the lost object within the ego, creating a generalized mourning that permeates one's life (Freud "Mourning" 249), joy "tends to overshoot the particular object that first caused it and to affect all objects indifferently, resulting ultimately in an affirmation of the jubilant character of existence in general" (Rosset 3). Both states are at a loss to explain themselves. In Clément Rosset's formulation, the distinguishing difference between melancholy and joy "is that the first fails to describe what does not exist, while the second fails to describe what does exist. In other words, joy is always somehow engaged with the real, while sadness unceasingly confronts the unreal—and that is its specific misfortune" (5). Joy engages the real. Unlike melancholy, it reaches out in relation; unlike ecstasy, it does not transport us elsewhere. We experience joy right where we are, in our earthly moment.

Given its orientation towards the other, its regard for difference, and its dedication to the earthly present, I posit joy as an ecological affect which performs the relation of community. I read this joy throughout the Romantic ecology of Wordsworth, Clare, and Shelley. My project in the following chapters endeavours to read these ecologies through the modern community theory of Nancy, Blanchot, and others in order to argue that Romanticism's most groundbreaking ecological contribution is to think of ecology as a community. The trope of home acts a site for thinking through the contiguous lines shared between these ideas. Previously, Romanticist ecocritics have invoked the *oikos* to ground and define their own understandings of ecology. Bate holds that in *Home at Grasmere* Wordsworth produces "a *logos* of the *oikos*, the home" in which "[m]an has come home to nature and the place takes on a wholeness, a unity that is entire" (*Romantic*

103). McKusick cites the oikos in arguing that “the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge clearly foreshadows the modern science of ecology in its holistic conception of the Earth as a house-hold, a dwelling place for an interdependent biological community” (29). Hutchings and Morton have criticized the environmental discourse of “home”: Hutchings points out the hierarchical, patriarchal assumptions often implicit in the politics of home (27), while Morton makes a positive declaration “against the affirmative talk of ‘dwelling’” (*Ecology* 187). As we have seen, thoughts of home need not be so “affirmative,” however. Home need not be a totalizing image of oneness, or a place of purity with walls to keep the foreign out. Freud highlights the home’s unsettling potential for otherness in his essay on “The Uncanny.” For Freud, home is a space of ambivalence, connoting both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time: *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, as he notes, are sometimes interchangeable (199). Home can be a site where things encounter each other in their startling otherness, where difference is recognized and respected. I return to oikos as the root of ecology in order to develop a new approach to ecological criticism based upon a different interpretation of the word. Whereas ecocritics have tended to look to oikos as an original, stable site of unity and identity (like Bate’s “wholeness” and McKusick’s “holistic conception” above), I look to oikos as a place of difference. The Romantic oikos embraces the transgression of its art and playfully questions the contiguous lines between art, humanity, and nature.

The difference in my interpretation of oikos and that of other ecocritics derives from a difference of etymological interpretation. The Greek word oikos means house or home. Two English language words derive from this term: economy and ecology. According to their respective etymologies, economy is the *nomos* (custom or law) of the

oikos, whereas ecology is the *logos* (word) of the *oikos*.³¹ Each term connotes a very different orientation towards the idea of home. Despite their shared origin, the terms are fundamentally opposed in my usage. Economy can be understood as the pursuit of balance, as can be seen in its balance sheets. Jean-François Lyotard explains it well in his essay “Oikos”:

Economy is the *nomos*, that is, the regulation of the circulation of forces and information or messages (I know that these are not the same, but let me put it that way for the moment), it is a question of regulation, that is to say, of the ability to preserve, conserve, store, and use the past, past events, the effects that past events have had on the system or the apparatus, and to use this information in order to adjust for efficiency, optimal performance. (99-100)

Economy thus understood is the organizing principle of the operative society which Nancy critiques. The balance of nature that continues to be cited by many environmental thinkers participates in this economic view; its relationship to the economic balance sheet, as we saw in the Introduction, is not insignificant. This harmonious view of nature, however, has been seriously contested: “recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about ‘the balance of nature’ have typically acknowledged” (Cronon 24). These modern ecological insights suggest that “‘nature’ is not nearly so natural as it seems” (25). Yet the spectre of natural balance

³¹The OED lists the primary meanings of *nomos* as “usage, custom, law, melody, composition” from the base verb meaning “to deal, distribute, hold, manage.” The meanings for *logos* are “word, speech, discourse, reason” from the base verb meaning “to say.”

persists despite both modern ecological insight and the widely-held conclusion that an economic world view is both a source of our ecological crises and ultimately incapable of addressing these crises. In its disregard for ecological concerns, economy shows itself to be very much about the distribution (*nomos*) of the oikos, where oikos is understood very much as the human *household*.

Economics, as we saw earlier, is at the heart of one of the central texts of modern environmental philosophy, Serres' *The Natural Contract*. Serres calls for an extension of the social contract to a natural contract, which "makes the social contract enter the world" (46). Thinking economically, he laments that "We have not yet set up a scale in which the world is taken into account in the final balance sheet" (37). Though admirable in its motivation and goal, *The Natural Contract* follows the environmental myth of the natural balance and prescribes and defines relationships through their ability to achieve and maintain balance. In defiance of the previous system in which humans only took from nature, the establishment of a natural contract, Serres hopes, will establish a more just system of give and take: "Equity therefore demands that we render at least as much as we receive, in other words, that we do so sufficiently" (90). Serres acknowledges the problem, however, that the proposed signatories of the natural contract do not share a language, a problem that Lyotard's notion of the differend urges that we take seriously: "What language do the things of the world speak, that we might come to an understanding among them, contractually?" (Serres 39). Rather than invalidating the natural contract, Serres points out that this linguistic lack is at the base of the social contract as well, for it too "was unspoken and unwritten: no one has ever read the original, or even a copy" (39). He holds instead that "the Earth speaks to us in terms of

forces, bonds, and interactions, and that's enough to make a contract" (39). Therefore, amid all the talk of contractual obligations, Serres appeals in the end to an affective basis: "There is nothing real but love, and no other law" (50). Here we see the paradox in his program. Serres' appeal to love represents an appeal to an uneconomic force to bind an economic covenant. Love, like all passion, is excessive, in excess of the economic logic of cost-benefit analyses which would regulate the equitable system of growth through a "give and take" relationship; it does not respect contractual obligations. Rather than appealing to affect to ground the economic system, we must recognize that the economic system is not the right approach for ecological thought, that the earth cannot be contained in a "balance sheet."

Ecology, as I understand it, is founded upon a sense of *oikos* as home. Home offers a sense of belonging and responsibility without the connotations of possession and exclusion imparted by the term *house*. It is not concerned with the custom and the distribution of possessions of *nomos*. Rather, it is rooted in *legein*, to say: communication is at the etymological heart of ecology. This linguistic foundation can be found at the modern definition of ecology as relation. Ecology, therefore, is fundamentally oriented towards the other. The act of speech is in excess of the individual, transgressing the individual's boundaries to reach out towards the other in communication. To address our manifold ecological crises, ecology demands that we respond in like spirit with ecological thought. Ecological thought is excessive, for it thinks beyond the sphere of its own interests; it reaches out towards those who are external to economic concern.

The Romantic *oikos*, the ecological community presented in Romantic poetry, is

an inoperative community performed and expressed through affective means. It articulates singularity and reaches between singularities in an ethical stance toward the other, both human and non-human. Moreover, it performs this community without the expectation of return—both in the sense of return to nature or paradise and in the sense of economic return. The performance of community instead demands an openness and giving without limitation or recompense. Many of the singularities we encounter—other humans, non-human animals, and all the inanimate things of the world—are incapable of articulation and action; they can neither thank nor repay. They are therefore incapable of entering a contract and completing an economic transaction. Nevertheless, they are singularities with whom we share the performance of community, with whom we communicate, and with whom we must relate. The performance of community is therefore necessarily excessive—ecological rather than economic. Joy is the experience of this excess. This project reads the performance of this joyfully inoperative community ecologically in the Romantic oikos.

Chapter 2

Wordsworth's Extravagance

Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her

“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey”

1. The Ecotistical Sublime

Although ecocriticism has established itself primarily through studies of American literature, some of the earliest and most influential ecocritical works are studies in Romanticism. Before Lawrence Buell's landmark *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), which lists criteria of environmental texts and posits the writings of Thoreau as their fulfillment, Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) had already claimed British Romanticism as ecocritical territory through a new reading of Wordsworth. In order to do so, however, Bate had to respond to the dominant modes of twentieth-century Romantic criticism which, though diverse, unite to place Romanticism, and especially Wordsworth, beyond any obvious ecocritical range.

One such mode, exemplified by critics like M. H. Abrams, celebrates the transcendent Romantic genius by focusing upon the psychic and spiritual goals of Romantic poetry. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) begins and ends with readings of Wordsworth, who is regarded throughout as the exemplary Romantic poet whose visionary poetic program represents the Romantic program at large. Wordsworth's vision, Abrams contends, “is that of the awesome depths and height of the human mind, and of the power of that mind as in itself adequate, by consummating a holy marriage

with the external universe, to create out of the world of all of us, a quotidian and recurrent miracle, a new world which is the equivalent of paradise” (28). Marxist readings, on the other hand, critique the “Romantic ideology” (to borrow Jerome McGann’s phrase) wherein Romanticism’s self-representation as transcendent genius is achieved at the expense of historical and material reality. In *The Romantic Ideology* (1983), McGann points out the displacements and elisions of Romantic poetry in which the socio-historical tumult of the period is consciously erased. Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” he argues, is an exercise in such socio-historical erasure. All possible references to social unrest occur early in the poem and are quickly elided into the idyllic landscape until, by the end of the poem, “the mind has triumphed over its times”: “Thus the poem concludes in what appears to be an immense gain, but what is in reality the deepest and most piteous loss. Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world only to gain his immortal soul” (88). These two modes of Romantic criticism, though contrary to each other, both preemptively challenge a conventional ecocritical reading that seeks to discover material nature in Romantic texts. In his ecocritical reading of Wordsworth, Bate responds to both of these modes through readings of diverse modes of Romantic poetry. He stakes his ground in his Introduction: “Hartman threw out nature to bring us the transcendent imagination; McGann throws out the transcendent imagination to bring us history and society” (8). Bate advocates a return to Wordsworth’s nature: “The time is now right to allow Wordsworth to become once more what he imagined himself to be, what Shelley called him, and what he was to the Victorians: ‘Poet of Nature’” (9).

Due in part to foundational studies like Bate’s *Romantic Ecology*, Romantic ecocriticism has flourished. Indeed, Romanticism seems a logical foundation for

environmental theory since it has been closely associated with the natural world, perhaps more than any other literary movement; the Romantic call for a “return to nature,” its preference for the rural over the urban, and its reaction against the ethos of the Industrial Revolution are so well-known that they are almost cliché. These quintessential Romantic motifs coalesce in the poetry and figure of Wordsworth. With the possible exception of John Clare, whom I will discuss in the next chapter, Wordsworth is the Romantic poet who most fulfills the ecocritical ideal. Often, his works claim to be firmly rooted in place, like many of his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads*, some of which evoke the time and place of composition within the composition itself: most famously “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798.”³² His *Guide to the Lakes* pays close attention to the details of the scenery and is rigorous in its description. Wordsworth also meets ecocritical requirements in his political (we would now call it environmental) activism. He protested a railway construction between Kendal and Windermere through a series of letters and a sonnet published in the *Morning Post*, judging its proposed intrusion into the country landscape as a “rural blight” (Mulvihill 305).³³ More fundamentally, Wordsworth attributes his calling and growth as a poet to his close relationship with the natural world. In the first book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth calls out to the natural setting of his childhood, locating in this relationship the beginning of his poetic inspiration:

Was it for this

³²All poems that appeared in a version of *Lyrical Ballads* are quoted from the Broadview edition edited by Gamer and Porter. All other short poems are quoted from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by de Selincourt.

³³James Mulvihill gives a thorough account of the episode in “Consuming Nature: Wordsworth and the Kendal and Windermere Railway Controversy,” *MLQ* (Sept. 1995): 305-26. The line went ahead despite Wordsworth’s opposition, and was completed 21 April 1847.

That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
 To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
 And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,
 And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
 That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou,
 O Derwent! winding among grassy holms
 Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
 Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts
 To more than infant softness, giving me
 Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
 A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
 that Nature breathes among the hills and groves. (1.269-81)³⁴

In the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, this overture to the Derwent River begins the poem.

Despite the efforts of Bate and others, the perception of Romanticism as solipsistically anthropocentric, and therefore anti-ecological, continues. Five years after Bate's work, Buell still criticizes Romantic poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley, whom I will discuss in the last chapter, and John Keats for their stylized and insincere overtures to nature. Buell identifies in Shelley's skylark and Keats' nightingale a "self-absorption" when compared to more honest accounts of natural entities like Whitman's bird in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (7); in Buell's view, the skylark and the nightingale are little more than avatars for the poets' own psyches. The debate about Romanticism's relationship with nature continues within Romantic criticism, but it began within the

³⁴All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1850 version, unless otherwise noted.

Romantics themselves. Buell may criticize Keats for an extreme self-consciousness, but Keats had already levelled a similar charge against Wordsworth. In his letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818, he contrasts his own “poetical Character” with “the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” (*Letters* 194). Unlike Wordsworth’s, Keats’ poetical character “is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing” (194-95); the poet, he says, “is continually in for and filling some other Body” (195). He made a similar statement a year earlier in a letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817: “if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (55). If in his own estimation Keats’ poetical character is an absence that fills the space of others, Wordsworth’s egotistical sublime, by contrast, is a great presence, “a thing per se and stands alone” (194), which commandeers others and absorbs them into itself.

The accusation of solipsism against Wordsworth that arises within Romantic criticism, therefore, has deep roots, having begun in Wordsworth’s own time. From an environmental perspective, the charge is enormously troubling and, in ecocritical study, would preclude Wordsworth’s writings from being included in the burgeoning environmental canon. Wordsworth, it has been widely held, is interested first and foremost in the strength of his own mind. The ecocritical counterargument, like we find in Bate’s work, often points to texts in which Wordsworth’s relationship with nature seems paramount. Numerous poems easily lend themselves to ecocritical readings. “The Tables Turned” urges the reader to leave books, the vessels of human knowledge, behind and to instead “Let Nature be your teacher” (16). “Hart-Leap Well,” which has particular prominence as the first poem in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, tells the tale of a slaughter of a hart for sport and can be easily cast as a narrative for animal rights. The

silent *genius loci* of “Nutting” punishes a youth for his wanton desecration of a hazel-grove, leading him in the final line to lend his own voice to the admonition when he cautions a “dearest Maiden” (52) that “there is a Spirit in the woods” (54). “The World is Too Much with Us” reviles the alienated disconnection of the modern world and longs for a return to a mythological pantheism that bears witness to the agency and power of nature. Poems like these, with their blatant environmental messages, are easily praised in an ecocritical mode because they clearly conform to the environmental code that much ecocriticism endorses: a code that focuses upon problems and solutions.

While such poems are certainly important when considering Wordsworth’s proto-environmentalism, they inform only part of his ecology. I recall here the distinction between environment and ecology articulated in the previous chapter. Environment, etymologically rooted in the *environs*, or surroundings, contains within itself a sense of division between humanity and nature. Environmentally speaking, therefore, nature is apart from us and surrounds us. Environmentalism perceives this division and seeks to resolve it by regaining or rejoining the natural. It is a concept quite distinct from my understanding of ecology. Ecology, etymologically rooted in the *oikos*, or home, entails no such binary division between humanity and nature; neither, however, does it entail oneness or unity. Rather, ecology means a constellation of others founded upon a common ground of difference. It is a cosmology rather than a program, and while it is intensely ethical, it works toward no particular goal; it focuses not upon work, therefore, but play. Returning to this etymological root, I call this understanding of ecology the *oikos*. In this chapter, I aim to reveal the particular manifestation of the *oikos* in Wordsworth’s poetry.

I therefore look to less blatantly environmental texts—in other words, texts that do not obviously lend themselves to an environmental program; instead, in order to trace Wordsworth’s oikos, I focus upon texts which imagine the peculiar community between humanity and nature. To do so is to depart from most ecocritical readings of Wordsworth, which have tended to focus upon his locodescriptive or eco-political writings.³⁵ It is a necessary departure because the oikos—ecology understood as and through community—marks a departure from the dominant understanding of nature within environmental thought; ecologically, nature is no longer something that is necessarily outside and apart from us. Understood through this different sense of ecology, nature becomes something radically unstable. This instability offers a much-needed widening of the traditional ecocritical purview, one which is especially necessary in Romantic ecocriticism for, as I argue throughout this project, this unstable nature is already present within Romantic thought. In light of the Romantic oikos and the unstable nature it entails, Wordsworth’s poetry and criticism require reconsideration. Environmentally, Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime” seems dangerously anthropocentric; ecologically, however, and as I will discuss in this chapter, it can be read as a progressive assertion of singularity, especially when read through community theory like that of Jean-Luc Nancy and his distinction between communion and community. Communion is a total union or identity between self and other, in which all differences are collapsed. Ecologically, it is the desire for oneness

³⁵I think specifically here of Bate and McKusick. Bate, as we have seen, looks both to Wordsworth’s political activism, like his anti-railway campaign (48-51), and his locodescription, like his *Guide to the Lakes* (42-3). McKusick praises Wordsworth along similar lines: “Wordsworth was truly ahead of his time, and radically innovative in his concern for the preservation of traditional ways of life, and in his defense of the poor, the homeless, and all the wild creatures that dwell beyond the pale, outside the conventional boundaries of human civilization. In his persistent engagement with these issues, Wordsworth foreshadows some of the most vital concerns of the modern environmental movement” (65).

with nature which underpins much environmental thought. Community is the relation between singularities where difference remains. Ecologically, it is the continued relation between human and nature where otherness is respected. In this light, Wordsworth's egotism may be a stance against appropriation and in defense of the fundamental difference upon which ecology as community—the oikos—is founded.

The key text for understanding Wordsworth's oikos is *The Prelude*. As is well known, Wordsworth's text was named upon its posthumous publication because Wordsworth had intended it to be a prelude to a much larger work, *The Recluse*, which he never completed. *The Prelude* provides this chapter's framework of the discussion and the foundation to which the discussion will return throughout—and fittingly so, for Wordsworth also returned to *The Prelude* throughout his life. Widely regarded as Wordsworth's greatest achievement, it spans his entire poetic career as he composed, recomposed, and revised it throughout the decades.³⁶ *The Prelude* is primarily read as an account of the growth of the poet's mind, though this growth does occur through its interactions with the natural world. Nevertheless, Wordsworth's "high argument," as stated in *Home at Grasmere* (which was also intended as part of *The Recluse*), is to sound the human mind. The human mind, however, is "to the external World / fitted" while at the same time "the external World is fitted" to it (818-19, 821). Wordsworth's theme, therefore, is the "blended might" (823) of mind and nature. Already, Wordsworth here

³⁶In its notoriously complex textual history, *The Prelude* went through three substantial periods of composition and revision: 1799, 1805, and 1839. It was finally published for the first time just months after Wordsworth's death in 1850. The development of *The Prelude*, therefore, parallels and witnesses some of the most significant periods of Wordsworth's creativity and poetic output: his first foray occurs alongside the composition of his contributions of *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, while the expanded 1805 version corresponds with the writing of the "Intimations" Ode. The palimpsest of *The Prelude* reveals in glimpses Wordsworth's philosophical development and, I argue, his ecological thought, his sense of the Romantic oikos, as well.

questions the boundary between humanity and nature that still plagues modern environmental thought. His focus is not upon nature as material fact, but upon nature as relation.

In this chapter, I focus upon the episodes of *The Prelude* in which this relation is most poignantly and complexly addressed: namely, those found in the fifth book of *The Prelude*, entitled “Books.” In this book, nature is presented as unstable text, while at the same time text is presented as unstable nature. In this chapter, I read key scenes of the fifth book which reveal Wordsworth’s imagination of the oikos—the Arab dream, the Boy from Winander, and the Drowned Man—and juxtapose them with poems that comment upon and develop differently the same themes, primarily the “Poems on the Naming of Places” and “Home at Grasmere.” Through my reading of these texts, I trace the development of Wordsworth’s oikos through his initial desire for union with nature, his meditation upon difference, and finally his confrontation of the inability to rejoin nature and his embrace of community. I term this embrace Wordsworth’s extravagance, which is key in distinguishing his own singular interpretation of the Romantic oikos.

2. Inscription

The fifth book, “Books,” marks a significant departure from the project of *The Prelude*: “Hitherto, / In progress through this work, my mind hath looked / Upon the speaking face of earth and heaven / As her prime teacher” (11-14). He speaks of a nature that can seem “to the eye of fleeting time, / A deathless spirit” (17-18). In this book, however, he turns his mind to things more transient, but which nevertheless have tremendous influence:

Though also, man! hast wrought,
 For commerce of thy nature with herself,
 Things that aspire to unconquerable life;
 And yet we feel—we cannot choose but feel—
 That they must perish. (18-22)

Wordsworth feels he must address the influence of books in his upbringing before he can continue with the project, being “indisposed / To any further progress at a time / When these acknowledgements were left unpaid” (611-13), as the concluding lines of the book state. Book Five makes for an interesting comparison, then, with statements like “Expostulation and Reply” and “The Tables Turned” of *Lyrical Ballads*. The lines quoted above echo the former specifically; there, William responds to his friend Matthew’s insistence upon the importance of books with an appeal to the value of physical sensation: “The eye it cannot chuse but see, / We cannot bid the ear be still; / Our bodies feel, where’er they be, / Against, or with our will” (17-20). Here, too, he refers to the “speaking face of earth and heaven” as a teacher: “Think you, mid all this mighty sum / Of things for ever speaking, / That nothing of itself will come, / But we must still be seeking?” (25-28). In the companion piece, “The Tables Turned,” books are “a dull and endless strife” (9). The peculiar treatment of books in Book Five therefore constitutes a peculiar reversion of a well-established theme in the rest of Wordsworth’s poetry. Rather than the blending of mind and nature that forms the thesis of the work, Book Five turns to the human mind’s self-reflection, the commerce of the mind’s nature with itself.

And yet, this turn to books corresponds with a meditation upon their physicality and their role as material manifestations of mind and spirit. It begins with a reflection

upon the ephemerality of humanity's existence within the all-embracing "deathless spirit" of the earth. The meditation quickly becomes an apocalyptic vision affirming the persistence of the spirit of nature despite the annihilation of all its material avatars:

Should the whole frame of earth by inward throes
 Be wrenched, or fire come down from far to scorch
 Her pleasant habitations, and dry up
 Old Ocean, in his bed left singed and bare,
 Yet would the living Presence still subsist
 Victorious, and composure would ensue,
 And kindlings like the morning—presage sure
 Of day returning and of life revived. (30-37)

Nature would remain; all the most prized artifacts of humanity, however, "all the adamantine holds of truth / By reason built, or passion, which itself / Is highest reason in a soul sublime ... Where would they be?" (39-41, 45). Faced with the vision of a post-human future, Wordsworth wishes for a reprieve gained through a surer vehicle of humanity's achievements: "Oh! why hath not the Mind / Some element to stamp her image on / In nature somewhat nearer to her own? / Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad / Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?" (45-49).

Essentially, Wordsworth here expresses a desire for inscription, to bond human culture with physical nature in order that the mutability of the former might participate, if imperfectly, in the comparative permanence of the latter. Inscription is an artistic act of blending mind and nature, and is a project to which Wordsworth returns throughout his work. In the fifth book of *The Prelude*, he speaks of the project philosophically, from a

distance; as we shall see in the Arab dream, he no longer believes in the possibility of such a communion. He speaks in *The Prelude* from a position of experience, for he had earlier embraced the project in earnest in the “Poems on the Naming of Places” of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. This group of poems is an experiment in inscription; each poem aims to create links between humanity and nature through linguistically attaching human actions and emotions to the specific place where they have occurred. To do so is also to attempt to sustain oneself against the passage of time by uniting the transience of one’s individual nature to the greater and more lasting system of relations. Even within the “Poems on the Naming of Places,” however, Wordsworth begins to discover the impossibility of perfect inscription. Even as he attempts to inscribe himself onto nature, his self-conscious language reveals the unconquerable distance between himself and the natural other. This distance reveals Wordsworth’s ecological sensitivity. Before returning to *The Prelude*, I will discuss just one of these poems, “It was an April morning,” as indicative of the inscriptive project of the whole. It is the most sustained meditation upon the nature-human relationship of the series and as such offers the clearest insight into Wordsworth’s developing ecology.

In “It was an April morning,” Wordsworth’s act of naming mediates between and attempts to unite the traditionally divided human and natural worlds. He operates here within a similar system to that articulated by Friedrich Schiller in his essay “Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” (1795), discussed in the previous chapter. Schiller divides poets into two types: naïve poets are nature while sentimental poets seek lost nature. The sentimental poets, finding themselves apart from nature, aim for an ideal reunion. Wordsworth aims for a similar ideal reunion in this first poem of the series through an

imaginative figuration of both humanity and nature which culminates in the final act of inscription. He begins with a sentimental description of the natural setting that is laden with anthropocentric imagery:

It was an April Morning: fresh and clear
 The Rivulet, delighting in its strength,
 Ran with a young man's speed ... (1-3)

The temporal associations here all indicate youth and innocence: naivete. Both April and morning correspond metaphorically to the first stage of life, a metaphor which is intensified with the introduction of the first character, the rivulet. "Rivulet" is a diminutive of river, implying a little river and so, connotatively, a young river. It is personified and masculinized through its action of "delighting in its strength" and running "with a young man's speed." This personification presents the rivulet as a complex character, a personality, rather than a lifeless body of running water merely following its gravitational necessity to move from higher to lower ground. It is a sentimentally anthropocentric figuration of nature.

The figuration is not entirely anthropocentric, however. As well as humanizing nature, Wordsworth poetically naturalizes humanity. He approaches the human through the natural by calling to mind that mythical time of natural harmony still in cultural memory. He translates the natural into the textual, which is the sentimentally intelligible. His medium for this is *Paradise Lost*:

There was such deep contentment in the air
 That every naked ash, and tardy tree
 Yet leafless, seem'd as though the countenance

With which it look'd on this delightful day

Were native to the summer. (13-17)

These newly introduced characters, “every naked ash and tardy tree / Yet leafless,” are botanical representations of Adam and Eve; the trees are “naked,” “[y]et leafless,” alluding to Adam and Eve in their unfallen, innocent state, before they eat the forbidden fruit and think to cover their nakedness. The phrase “yet leafless” therefore at once calls to mind both Eden and the eventual exile from Eden through its allusion to the fig leaf, a western symbol of the fall into self-consciousness through the awareness of innocence. Wordsworth uses the biblical fall as a trope for the intellectual fall: in Friedrich Schiller’s terms, from naïvete to sentimentality. Finally, to further bridge the divide, Wordsworth shifts the time from the past to the present in order to open the possibility of a naïvete within sentimentality. The innocent, naïve, naturalized parents are presented in the spring, as staged in the first line. They are naïve in the childhood of humanity. However, each seems to have a “countenance” which is “native to the summer.” This temporal shift from spring to summer, bringing spring into summer, parallels a similar move of childhood within maturity, and thus naïvete within sentimentality. In indicating this movement, and by translating the natural into the human, Wordsworth subtly presents the possibility of union with nature to the modern sentimental mind.

After this poetic preparation which metaphorically begins the bridging of mind and nature, the poem culminates with an act of inscription:

‘Our thoughts at least are ours; and this wild nook,

My EMMA, I will dedicate to thee.’ (38-39)

The first of these two lines juxtaposes the concept of possession with that of wilderness

in the recognition that humans cannot possess nature in any meaningful way, nor can they become one with it. “Our thoughts at least are ours” is Wordsworth’s admission of this fact: humans possess only their thoughts, or their perception, of nature. Since his thoughts, and not the “nook,” are his own, he “will dedicate” the nook to Emma. “Dedicate” is from the Latin *dedicare*, to declare. In dedicating the nook to Emma, he essentially declares that he will associate thoughts of her with thoughts of it in his own mind. He dedicates the nook rather than gives it, for it is not his to give; only his “thoughts” are his own.

Jonathan Bate, who concludes his *Romantic Ecology* with a chapter on “Poems on the Naming of Places” as inscriptions, contends that the naming of the place in “It was an April morning” forms a bridge between natural and human, naive and sentimental (105). He reads the dedication in this first poem as a way for Wordsworth to dwell ecologically in the oikos: “The ‘spot’ is dedicated,” he argues, “and thus becomes ‘home’” (94). However, the spot is not, in fact, dedicated; the intended dedication does not take place within the poem. Rather, Wordsworth states that he “will dedicate” it. The future tense here is important. He defers the dedication to the indefinite future. This deferment is strengthened by the word “will” when thought in comparison with the British *shall*. “[W]ill” suggests determination on behalf of the speaker, rather than a simple future tense marked by *shall*. A simple future suggests a simple act. The use of the determined “will,” by contrast, implies a difficult act. This performative is a promise both to the addressee, “EMMA,” and to the speaker himself.³⁷ He dedicates himself to the act of

³⁷J. L. Austin’s notion of a performative utterance—an utterance that does not describe reality, but changes reality in the moment of speaking—is articulated most famously in *How to do Things with Words* (1962).

dedication. Angela Esterhammer, discussing Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty," comments upon a similar performative, "commend" (50). She underlines the distinction in the poem between Wordsworth and "those who 'rely / Upon the genial sense of youth' (11-12)" in a similar way that Schiller distinguishes the naïve and the sentimental. The youth "do not need to name," while, "[s]etting himself apart from this group, Wordsworth marks himself as one who *does*" (35). She holds that "[t]he distinction lies not only in self-consciousness, but in Wordsworth's need to verbalize his commitment": "he requires the letter" (35). The letter of the inscription makes impossible the union of mind and nature that the inscription attempts to perform. The inscription can never be fully achieved, the union never fully completed.

The necessary incompleteness of the inscription participates in the pervasive mood of the poem: uncertainty. As seen through his deferral of the dedication, Wordsworth is reluctant to make an affirmative declaration in the poem. In his hesitation to inscribe humanity onto nature within the very act of inscription, which is the poem itself, Wordsworth reveals contradictory desires: he both wishes to forge a relationship between humanity and nature, seen in his embarkation upon the naming project, and ultimately to maintain a distance between the two. Wordsworth is uncomfortable with the prospect of union. I suggest that this hesitation to unite, in contrast to a conventional ecocritical reading, is itself ecologically sound, stemming from an acknowledgement of and respect for the complex nature of nature itself and our necessarily complex relationship with it. To forge an imaginative union is to elide difference, an action that would be at best dishonest and at worst violent.

Geoffrey Hartman, in his discussion of Wordsworth's genre of surmise, highlights

the instability of the mode in similar terms that modern ecology speaks to the natural world: “Surmise is fluid in nature” (*Wordsworth's* 8). He first connects the stance to the elasticity and unpredictability of relation: “Knowing that his relation to nature is as unpredictable as a relation to Grace ... Wordsworth adopts the stance of surmise which points to liberty and expansiveness of spirit” (9). Nevertheless, Hartman points to the inherent “melancholy” of the mode. While surmise expresses freedom and fearlessness, it is at the same time accompanied by a “darker burden” (12): the connection between writing and death. Hartman discusses the epitaphic nature of inscription wherein the “halted traveler” confronts “the knowledge of death” (13). Surmise is a mode of language that approaches the material world obliquely, eschewing a direct connection or communion. Wordsworth approaches nature obliquely—and with good reason, given the relationship between inscription and death.

Discussions of the epitaphic function of writing are well established now, not least by Wordsworth himself in his three *Essays upon Epitaphs* where “commemoration of the dead lurks near the origins of culture” (Fosso 4). Writing is seen as an attempt to outlast one’s transience by inscribing a reminder of oneself onto something more permanent. This is precisely the experiment in the first poem on the naming of places, and exactly the anxiety with which the fifth book of *The Prelude* begins. In an epitaph proper, upon a grave marker, the purpose is clear—the deceased is remembered to the world through the engraving. Every act of writing achieves a similar result, however. Each inscribes something human onto something material and tangible—in broad terms, onto nature. Douglas Kneale recalls that the act of writing upon paper is tantamount to writing upon

trees (93).³⁸ Literary theory has long posited the foundation of writing upon absence, culminating, perhaps, in Derrida's notion of writing as "dangerous supplement" (*Grammatology* 141-64).³⁹ The engraving on the headstone takes the place of the deceased. Writing is therefore intimately connected with death and loss. Derrida addresses Rousseau, whose anti-rhetorical stance in *Emile* (for instance) opposes writing, or books, to nature. It is a similar stance to Wordsworth's as expressed in "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned." Rousseau's Savoyard considers our reliance upon the written word a "mania" (303), proclaiming that he finally "closed all the books" and opened the book that is "open to all eyes: it is the book of nature" (306). In Derrida's thinking, writing supplements "presence," which through his various discussions comes to mean Nature, always with a capital 'N': "the absolute present, Nature, that which words like 'real mother' name" (158). Nature is both the perceived origin—the foundation of life which writing obscures—and the perceived end. Wordsworth calls the grave "the all-uniting and equalising receptacle of the dead" ("Essays" 128). This equation of nature and death haunts Wordsworth's project of inscription, the incompleteness of which signals a resistance to the project of union with nature.

At the same time that Wordsworth approaches nature through the act of inscription, therefore, the act's incompleteness creates a distance. Kneale characterizes Wordsworth's surmise as a stance of maturity (28-29), the ability to maintain a distance. In "It was an April morning," Wordsworth emphasizes the inaccessibility of the natural

³⁸Indeed, every artistic production requires a manipulation of nature—an troubling fact for a Romantic poet. Think of Shelley's anxiety over the making of his guitar, assuring us that no tree was harmed in its making; the source tree "Died in sleep, and felt no pain" ("Guitar").

³⁹Derrida's supplement is of course a modern reiteration of a longstanding anxiety about writing. While Derrida addresses Rousseau, the problem extends to ancient philosophy. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates warns that the author cannot accompany his written words and argue for them (275d-e).

world to human intelligence through the indeterminacy of his presentation, the “as if,” “appears,” and “seems” of his surmise. As he is apart from this world, he can only suggest, never affirm. When humans and nature confront each other, a careful sensitivity, a respectful distance, is required.

In addition to the uncertain language of surmise, Wordsworth also maintains this distance through his poetic figuration of nature through prosopopeia, giving a face to the natural world. This figuration, however, is ethically suspect. Paul de Man considers prosopopeia the primary vehicle for the epitaphic message, “the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave” (*Rhetoric* 77). The epitaph speaks for the dust, blurring the distinction between living and dead, human and nature. What troubles de Man about this border crossing is the “latent threat” of prosopopeia “that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (78). The epitaphic mode thereby gains “a sinister connotation that is not only the prefiguration of one’s own mortality but our actual entry into the frozen world of the dead” (78). De Man here points out the threat of communion. Though Wordsworth is initially attracted to the prospect of communion, as seen in the project of inscription, de Man notes that Wordsworth is wary of the prosopopeic style of epitaph, preferring to keep the boundaries between life and death intact. The survivors, not the deceased, should speak through the headstone (61).

Prosopopeia is especially suspect when considered ecocritically. It can be argued that any mode of re-casting nature, of giving it a mask, is to de-nature it. The trope is troubling given that so many of our environmental problems stem from the failure to see nature as it is, to face it head-on. In “It was an April morning,” however, the prosopopeic

play need not be read as an elision of material fact. Instead, prosopopeia forms the basis of communication between the human and the natural. Unwilling and ultimately unable to join with nature—to commune with it—Wordsworth approaches it linguistically through the letter. His use of prosopopeia follows from the recognition that his thoughts at least are his. Indeed, his thoughts at most are his; nature is never his, and so he can possess only his perceptions of it. His prosopopeia is a response to the uncertainty of Romantic nature. Wordsworth's nature is uncertain, and so is his relation with it. For this reason, Wordsworth's dedication, the symbolic act of the union of the dell with Emma, and symbolically of the earth with humanity, must be deferred. Therefore, in "It was an April Morning," the dedication is deferred to the uncertain future, at which time the shepherds "[m]ay" use this name. The perfect union with nature is possible only in death, when "we are gone and in our graves" (45). Romantic ecology, predicated upon this union to come, engages the present moment and embraces its uncertainty.

3. The Stone and the Shell

In his ultimate resistance to union, even throughout texts like "It was an April Morning" in which the inscription project seems to promise a final consummation, Wordsworth reveals the beginnings of an exceptionally sensitive mode of ecological imagination. In maintaining a necessary distance between humanity and nature, Wordsworth presents an idea of nature as fundamentally relational because it is predicated not upon identity but upon difference. If we think ecology through twentieth-century community theory, this resistance to union appears as the hallmark of modern ecological sensitivity. Wordsworth's longing for a "return to nature" is necessarily just

that: a longing, one which is not, and should not, be fulfilled. Much like Schiller's ideal reunion of human and natural, it must be infinitely deferred. Nancy's community theory holds that total identity between self and other is only attainable in death, where death is the site of perfect stasis. Like Schiller's ideal union, then, Nancy's communion must also be infinitely deferred in order to engage the present living moment; instead, the present moment requires not identity but relation, and therefore not communion but community. The "return to nature," as with all social programs of oneness, must be suspect when we consider the logical conclusion of its narrative: death. Wordsworth eloquently expresses the perfect union with nature in death in the anxiety and frustration of his "Lucy" poems. In "A Slumber did My Spirit Seal," Lucy's death is a viscerally physical reunion with the earth, expressed in an image of utter stillness and silence: "No motion has she now, no force / She neither hears nor sees / Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees!" (5-8). Moreover, Lucy's reunion with nature is simultaneously a divorce from Wordsworth. In life, he has no access to the dead. Being alive, he is fundamentally *different*: "But she is in her Grave, and Oh! / The difference to me" ("She Dwelt Among Th'Untrodden Ways" 11-12). The separation is painful but also hopeful, for the difference makes life possible.

This necessary difference from nature in Wordsworth's thought is not merely the opposite of the identity it resists. Unlike identity, this difference is not total. Lucy in her grave is entirely other, but Wordsworth as the living mourner is not, for his thoughts reach out towards her in her grave. Lucy has reunited with nature; therefore, she has become as other as the dell in "It was an April Morning." In the Lucy poems as in "It was an April Morning," Wordsworth's thoughts at least are his, and he will dedicate them

to Lucy as he promises to do for Emma. The distance and difference between humanity and nature can never be total, for the ultimate reunion in death, the “communion to come” (13), as Nancy calls it, underscores our existence. Communion is to come; community is here, in the present. Therefore, the present difference and distance between humanity and nature are the bases of relation which make relation, and therefore community, possible. Ecology is relation, and so ecological awareness and sensitivity—ecological ethics—demand that we relate with the natural other. A relational approach to nature reveals it as unstable and incommensurate: an other that humans engage through myriad and changing interpretations. As sentimental humans in the present, our only access to nature, the only way we can relate with it, is culturally. Wordsworth’s approach recalls the medieval concept of the Book of Nature, or *liber naturae*, for the modern ecological world. In addition to the inscription project of “Poems on the Naming of Places,” Wordsworth returns to the image of the book of nature in *The Prelude*. In Book Five, Wordsworth turns to this image explicitly after the initial desire for inscription in the face of apocalypse with which the book begins. In the dream vision of the stone and the shell which both follows an apocalyptic threat and contains one within itself, he moves from the desire for inscription to consider the thing inscribed: the book of nature. This dream vision reveals the Romantic ecological reality of nature as unstable text.

In the fifth book, having considered the transience of human endeavour versus the permanence of material fact and having cried out with a wish for inscription to unite the two, Wordsworth relates the dream of the stone and the shell. In the dream, Wordsworth finds himself in a desert when a Bedouin figure appears, carrying a stone and a shell and claiming both to be books. He says he is off to bury them both before a great deluge

occurs. Wordsworth gives chase but never catches up. The dream ends at the beginning of the foretold deluge. The ecologically provocative source of Wordsworth's dream narrative takes part in the blending of culture and nature and helps form the thematic crux of the episode. Jane Worthington Smyser (1956) first identified the dream as originally belonging to René Descartes. "On the night of 10 November 1619," she writes, "Descartes had three dreams" (270); the third dream, in which Descartes is suddenly faced with two books, a dictionary and a volume of poetry, she connects with *The Prelude*.⁴⁰ Smyser then quotes Descartes' interpretation of the dream as recorded by Adrien Baillet (1691). The dictionary, Descartes believes, represents scientific knowledge while the volume of poetry, which he values more, represents philosophy joined with wisdom, as expressed through poetic inspiration. The two books are symbols within the dream of the two choices Descartes faces for his life's path: "Quod vitae sectabor iter" (Which path of life will I follow?). As seen in its book titles, Descartes' dream centres around the problem of direction. Wordsworth's re-imagination of Descartes' dream is similarly focused upon a problem of direction, though in his dream the books are represented as peculiarly out-of-place natural entities, carried by a nomad over a desert landscape. Through these symbolic transfers, Wordsworth's problem of direction becomes singularly ecological. If like Descartes he is seeking direction in life, he is at the same time seeking direction in the world; indeed, the two can no longer be

⁴⁰"In the third, Descartes beheld a Dictionary on his table. He did not know how it came to be there, but he was enraptured with it, confident that it would prove useful to him. Almost immediately he chanced on a second book, without knowing how it too had come to be there. This second one was a collection of poetry, entitled *Corpus Poëtarum*. As he was leafing through this volume, a man whom he did not know appeared and began to converse with him. The man presented to him a poem by Ausonius entitled "Est et Non," as being of great worth, and Descartes in turn searched the volume of poetry first for that poem and then for another poem of Ausonius entitled "Quod vitae sectabor iter," which he had already seen in the volume" (271).

considered independently.

It is generally held that the stone (“Euclid’s Elements”) represents science while the shell (an “Ode”) represents art: the two central domains of human achievement that Wordsworth pre-emptively mourns in the introduction to the dream, “The consecrated works of Bard and Sage” (42). The first “held acquaintance with the stars, / And wedded soul to soul in purest bond / Of reason, undisturbed by space or time”; the second “was a god, yea many gods” and “had voices more than all the winds, with power / To exhilarate the spirit, and to soothe, / Through every clime, the heart of human kind” (103-5, 106, 107-9). Wordsworth seems to privilege the poetic, understandably, as “something of more worth” (89), though Theresa M. Kelley contests the presumed distinction between the two.⁴¹ Indeed, Wordsworth too contests the difference in the same breath through which it is established; “the adamantine holds of truth” (39) can be built by reason or by passion, but passion is also a form of reason: “highest reason in a soul sublime” (41). He questions the division that the presence of different symbols, the stone and the shell, would seem to enforce. Ultimately, in this passage and through these symbols, Wordsworth is questioning the division between nature and culture. These symbols vanish as quickly as they appear, however, as the deluge foretold in the shell’s prophecy becomes a present fact. The Arab flees before it on a quest to bury both stone and shell, calling them both books (102).

Recent critical reception of the stone and shell dream is diverse in its approaches, but tends to focus upon the relationship between the dream’s symbols with the ostensible subject of the book, “books.” More specifically, these post-structuralist approaches

⁴¹In “Spirit and Geometric Form: The Stone and the Shell in Wordsworth’s Arab Dream,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22.4 (Autumn 1982): 563-582.

follow Wordsworth's own questioning of the relationship between word and thing.⁴²

They signal both a movement away from and towards the material fact of nature. This paradoxical trajectory parallels a similar movement in ecological thought, however, as it develops a new understanding of nature as a fluid process. Reflecting upon the history of humanity's relationship with nature—scientifically, artistically, economically, emotionally—and the many changes in both human perception and natural fact, the natural world begins to appear as a highly unstable text, calling into question the division between nature and culture. As Collings asserts, “[n]ever a merely biological or geological domain, a literal ground of meaning which one could take for granted, nature was always a symbolic construct” (182). Therefore, we read in recent criticism that “[n]ature is more of a book to Wordsworth than actual books are” (Weinfield 336).⁴³

Wordsworth's Arab dream is introduced by way of a conversation he has with “a studious friend” (51), in which he relates his fears for the future. The conversation

⁴²In recent scholarship, J. Hillis Miller set the dominant tone for this inquiry in “The Stone and the Shell: The Problem of Poetic Form in Wordsworth's Dream of the Arab” (1972)—a now-classic post-structuralist reading in which the book features as a substitution, “a replacement of a reality which always remains at a distance from the printed image” (256). Mary Jacobus (1979) also discusses the dream in terms of “[t]he gap between word and thing” which, “once opened, proves Wordsworth's richest source of meaning” (620). There is a shift, however, towards a more direct discussion of the role of material nature in the dream: “if the face of nature could itself become an intelligible text, there would be no need of representation, and no need of nature either” (Jacobus 618). Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch (1984) reads the apocalyptic imagery of the deluge through the geological theory of the period and the consequent burgeoning idea of a nature quite different from the eternal mainstay previously perceived. He points toward Wordsworth's desire for natural and naturalizing language through which he tries to assimilate the things of the world into an interpretive schema. However, the Arab figure “resists naturalization and ends by all but carrying the poet off into its phantom world of pure romance and symbol. Small wonder De Quincey thought the dream the *ne plus ultra* of the sublime” (460). David Collings draws upon Bernhardt-Kabisch's work in his own reading of the dream in *Wordsworthian Errancies* (1994). Also drawing upon geology, Collings' post-structuralist approach anticipates some of the developments of modern eco-theory, suggesting a nature that is radically uncertain, “capable at any time of becoming something radically different from what it is” (182), and therefore even unnatural: “Geology suggests that nature is not ‘natural,’ not at all something that one can take for granted or regard as inevitable or self-identical” (182).

⁴³Douglas B. Wilson in Chapter 6 of *The Romantic Dream* (1993) and Joel Faflak in *Romantic Psychoanalysis* (2008) (106-8) both offer psychoanalytic readings of the Arab dream which present Wordsworth himself as a book to be self-analyzed.

culminates in the narration of a peculiar dream with ecological implications.⁴⁴ The dream arises from a coincidence of books and nature—the dreamer reading *Don Quixote* “in a rocky cave, / By the sea-side” (58-59). He is distracted by mournful thoughts of mutability, however, at which point he closes the book and turns his eyes “toward the wide sea” (64). He then turns his mind directly to that which previously has been only suggested: “poetry and geometric truth, / And their high privilege of lasting life” (65-66). Poetry and geometry represent two modes of interpreting nature; they are two distinct and sometimes competing ways in which humanity represents nature to itself. Wordsworth’s reasoning cannot hold the representations from the thing itself, however, as his physical nature joins with the setting through sleep, wherein rational logic succumbs to dream logic: “My senses yielding to the sultry air, / Sleep seized me, and I passed into a dream” (69-70).

The dream begins with a vision of a desert in the midst of which the dreamer finds himself entirely and anxiously directionless: “I saw before me stretched a boundless plain / Of sandy wilderness, all black and void / And as I looked around, distress and fear / Came creeping over me” (71-74). The black, void desert is an image of uninterpretable nature, free of symbols to read. The would-be interpreter is lost on this blank page without a hermeneutic map. Soon, however, a figure appears, and the dreamscape changes from the “black and void” to the infinitely interpretable. This figure “seemed an Arab of the Bedouin tribes” (77). At first he seems a guide-figure, one at home in the desert and for whom the page is not blank. Indeed, Wordsworth “rejoiced, not doubting but a guide / Was present, one who with unerring skill / Would through the desert lead

⁴⁴In the 1805 version, the friend, confessing that he too has had “kindred hauntings” (56), relates the dream as his own. In 1850, the dream has become Wordsworth’s.

me” (81-83). Immediately, however, this potential guide becomes a landscape himself, requiring its own navigation. He comes laden with symbols: “A lance he bore, and underneath one arm / A stone, and in the opposite hand, a shell / Of a surpassing brightness” (78-80). The stone and the shell further signify the occasion of the poem, the negotiation between culture and nature. The stone, according to the Arab, is ““Euclid’s Elements,”” while the shell “[i]s something of more worth”” (88, 89). The Arab invites the dreamer to place the shell to his ear. Traditionally, one would expect to hear the crash of ocean waves through the shell. The dreamer, however, hears a sound less natural than cultural:

an unknown tongue,
Which yet I understood, articulate sounds,
A loud prophetic blast of harmony;
An Ode, in passion uttered, which foretold
Destruction to the children of the earth
By deluge, now at hand. (93-98)

Despite the cultural significance of these images—language, articulation, prophecy, poetry, passion—we cannot be certain from this description that the sounds the dreamer hears are human in their source. Here, as it is throughout the dream sequence, nature and culture are blended.

If Wordsworth consciously drew upon Descartes, as Smyser maintains,⁴⁵ this

⁴⁵Smyser makes the case that the “studious friend,” who is the dreamer in the earlier version and who told the dream to Wordsworth, is not Coleridge but Michel Beaupuy. While there is no evidence that Wordsworth ever read Baillet, Smyser argues that Beaupuy was well-read in French philosophy and would have undoubtedly known Descartes’ famous dreams. It is likely, she holds, that Beaupuy told Wordsworth the dream, given that the earlier version of the poem indicates that Wordsworth was “told” it by another (272).

dream passage is ecologically significant given Descartes' monumental, if maligned, status in modern environmental thought. Descartes' primary contribution to philosophy, especially from an environmental perspective, is his rationalism, as most clearly witnessed in his scientific method. His *Discourse on Method for Rightly Directing One's Reason and Searching for Truth in the Sciences* was published in 1637 along with three other essays on geometry, optics, and meteorology which were meant to give practical illustrations of the method. The purpose of the method, as its extended title makes clear, is to act as a way to reason rightly and to discover the "truth." His philosophical oeuvre centres around the achievement of clarity through the discernment of difference. At times, this project reaches radical limits, such as when he famously posits the complete duality of body and mind. He discusses the nature of this duality in detail throughout *The Passions of the Soul* (1649). His famous *cogito* encouraged his predecessors to consider nature as entirely secondary and subservient to the human mind. Both body and soul can each have an impact upon the other, but the soul is the stronger of the two. The presence of a soul is what distinguishes the material matter of the human body from all other matter.

The world, in Descartes' view, therefore divides into *res cogitans*—thinking things, things with souls—and *res extensa*—non-thinking things without souls, things which manifest the property of material extension only ("Principles" 1:48). The place of animals within this system, as *res extensa*, has incensed later-day animal rights advocates. The animal has no rational soul; when creating it, God "excited in its heart one of these fires without light ... which I conceived to be of the same nature as that which heats grain, when we store it before it is dry" (*Passions* 38). In its zeal for the "truth" about the

composition of matter and animal sensation, this perception of animal life ethically enabled the practice of vivisection. The intense anthropocentrism of the *cogito* and its ramifications for humanity's relationship with nature have earned Descartes the ire of modern environmentalism.⁴⁶

Descartes' environmental impact is not solely felt within the realm of animal rights, however: the Cartesian plane, which labels a point in space with numerical coordinates indicating its distance from two fixed perpendicular axes, enabled humanity to scientifically define its place in the world. While the actual coordinate plane came afterward, it was named in Descartes' honour because his essay on *Geometry* (1637) laid the foundations for its development. It is this aspect of Descartes' philosophical contribution, so central to modern human experience, that Wordsworth most directly draws upon in his re-telling of the dream. Viewed in this light, Wordsworth's dream vision is a critique of Descartes' desire for certainty and denial of community. The difference is signaled immediately, as each dream opens upon a very different landscape: Descartes discovers a familiar book upon his familiar table; Wordsworth begins in the unfamiliar and otherworldly, a black, void desert. Immediately, in Wordsworth's dream, Descartes' vision of a readable world, a world mapped upon a grid, is denied. Instead, Wordsworth presents a world without direction, without coordinates either physical or semiotic. The books that Descartes finds in his dream—the dictionary and the volume of poetry—are already known to him. He takes the volume of poetry and looks for a particular poem he had already seen there. In Wordsworth's vision, the books have receded into symbols. The two fields of human accomplishment, science and poetry, are

⁴⁶See Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980) for the dominant perception of Descartes in environmental thought. See Peter Harrison's "Descartes on Animals" (1992) for a counterpoint.

presented as natural entities, the stone and the shell; they resist being read. Descartes begins to interpret the dream for himself while still dreaming, deriving sense and constructing a lesson out of all that he is experiencing: “before Descartes awoke, he recognized the experience to be a dream and while still asleep, he began to interpret the dream” (Smyser 271). Wordsworth does no such thing, either while dreaming or upon waking; rather, his dream vision ends in an apocalyptic deluge that washes the dreamscape of all signification. Descartes’ and Wordsworth’s dreams therefore follow opposite trajectories: Descartes’ moves towards specification and direction (“Quod vitae sectabor iter”), while Wordsworth’s moves towards increasing uncertainty—lost in a doomed landscape, abandoned by his Arab guide.

The divergence is imaginatively expressed in Wordsworth’s presentation of the dream symbols. Smyser, when speaking of Descartes’ dream, praises it for its verisimilitude: “The random conversation, the confused search for the two poems, the inexplicable appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the Dictionary, the ultimate vanishing of the man and the books—all these happenings bear the marks of an authentic dream” (271). What she considers unusual is Descartes’ ability to interpret the dream as he dreams it. Wordsworth’s very different dream, though he himself did not dream it, nevertheless sounds like an actual dream in its very departures from Descartes’ real experience. It presents the highly symbolic dream logic outlined by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).⁴⁷

A key, repeated element of Wordsworth’s dream is the paradox of the symbol, that

⁴⁷The component of Freud’s dream logic most at play in Wordsworth’s dream is overdetermination, wherein the different elements of the dream can contain multiple and changing meanings. Freud discusses overdetermination in the sixth chapter of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “The Dream-Work.”

something can be two things at once without contradiction. Though he acknowledges the logical problem when reflecting upon it later, in the moment of the dream Wordsworth is entirely comfortable with the impossibility. The Arab tells him that the stone is “*Euclid’s Elements*” (88)—which could itself be an indirect reference to Descartes, since his geometric method combines Euclid’s geometry with the theoretical rigour of algebra. The Arab does not identify the shell, but instead gives it to Wordsworth to experience directly. The shell’s performance of prophecy in a passionate, choral ode is described through Wordsworth’s involvement. Nevertheless, both are called “books” by the Arab (102), and Wordsworth, in the context of the dream, finds no fault in the logic:

While this was uttering, strange as it may seem,
I wondered not, although I plainly saw
The one to be a stone, the other a shell;
Nor doubted once but that they both were books,
Having a perfect faith in all that passed. (110-14)

The dream logic continues as he follows the departing Arab, who now has also become Don Quixote:

and now

He, to my fancy, had become the knight
Whose tale Cervantes tells; yet not the knight,
But was an Arab of the desert too;
Of these was neither, and was both at once. (121-25)

The dream logic of Wordsworth’s vision is entirely absent from Descartes’ account. The inherent paradox of dream logic—in which a thing can be two things, and

neither, at once—is anathema to Descartes’ program of certainty derived through dualism. Wordsworth here offers a counterpoint worldview in which Descartes’ stark separations between mind and body, human and animal, culture and nature do not hold. This ecological counterpoint begins in the difference between each dream’s point of entry. Descartes begins with the discovery of the dictionary, the sum of human knowledge, which he is delighted to find since he thinks it might be useful to him, “qu’il pourroit lui être fort utile” (Baillet 82). Wordsworth begins with a very different tone, entering the dream through Don Quixote whose character is the opposite of usefulness. The presentation of both scientific and artistic endeavours as natural artifacts—a stone and a shell—symbolically questions the division between culture and nature. Humanity, as the dream logic represents, is both cultural and natural at once. Wordsworth counters Descartes (and the dominant philosophical worldview which is the descendant of his philosophical contribution) and his project of absolute separation with his own central thesis of the blending of humanity and nature. Wordsworth’s blending, his simultaneous rejection of unity and disunity, is the cornerstone of a progressively ecological imagination, one that begins the foundation of ecology as community.

Wordsworth’s blending creates a logical problem, however, being founded, as it is in the dream vision, upon paradox. It does not make sense in the rational universe embodied in the model of Descartes. To the rational mind, the stone and the shell are not and cannot be books. Wordsworth acknowledges the problem even as he describes them. It is extraordinary for him that this logical problem did not distress him in the moment of the dream. The dream logic is not accessible to the operation of the logical mind; in fact, it is wholly inoperative. Wordsworth can accept it only through faith, “Having a perfect

faith in all that passed” (114). This faith is a favourite theme throughout Wordsworth’s poetry and Romanticism itself. In order to blend, there must be a non-rational mode of relation between the two distinct worlds of Descartes’ rational dualism: for Wordsworth as for many Romantics, the mode is affective. Descartes posits the separation of mind and body; Wordsworth connects them through an appeal to the heart through poetry. Therefore, the stone as *Euclid’s Elements* can wed “soul to soul in purest bond / Of reason” (104-5), while the shell, poetry, addresses “the heart of human kind” (109). Affect acts for Wordsworth’s blending as it does for Nancy’s community; it enables the reaching out from one to the other: in this case, from the human to the natural.

That the blending of nature and culture is introduced by “an Arab of the Bedouin tribes” (77), a nomad, is also ecologically provocative. Nomadism is an ecologically powerful notion; in opposition to the ecocritical virtue of intensive attention to specific place, it (or its connotations)⁴⁸ defies rootedness, possession, and territoriality. The nomad, symbolically, is at home, nowhere and everywhere. Theoretically, nomadism maintains a distance and difference from others, never laying claim to place. It is interesting, given such associations, that Wordsworth looks to this nomadic figure as a guide. The Arab, like the symbols he introduces, is a figure of a new manner of ecological relationship in which one is simultaneously a part of and separate from the other, both and neither at once. The new relationship with nature is a challenge to the dominant cosmology and must be approached, each time and for each person, in a singular way. Appropriately, then, Wordsworth’s guide abandons him in the desert.

⁴⁸Timothy Creswell in “Imagining the Nomad: Mobility and the Postmodern Primitive” gives an account of the uses of nomadism in recent theoretical discourse across the disciplines and interrogates it for its misrepresentation. My comments on nomadism refer to its symbolic importance within literature and literary theory, rather than the realities of nomadic peoples.

4. The Book of Nature

The ecological understanding of nature presented in Wordsworth's dream, in which nature is multiply interpretable, follows logically (or dream logically) from the prelude to the dream and its desire for inscription. It presents nature as a text. After the dream vision, Wordsworth turns his attention to books in a more colloquial sense through a discussion of natural education. This discourse is introduced with a reference to the *liber naturae*, where "Nature's self" is considered "the breath of God, / Or his pure Word by miracle revealed" (221-22). Nature, and the fairy tales that share its setting in youth, offer the child "One precious gain, that he forgets himself" (346). This self-forgetting questions the industrial distinction between leisure and productivity; here, the most wayward hours, the extravagance of the wandering body and mind, offer enormous benefits to one's constitution and understanding. It is in this spirit that Wordsworth begins *The Prelude*, confident that "should the chosen guide / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way" (1. 16-17). Throughout this section of the book, Wordsworth points to the integral polysemy in the relationship between humanity and nature. The fundamental separation between the two creates a space of play. Nature is unknowable in itself, and this indeterminacy is the basis of ecological sensitivity. Nature and humanity face each other, and upon the surfaces innumerable stories play out if the distance is respected. In the fifth book of *The Prelude*, there are two similar scenes in which this difference imaginatively plays out: "There was a Boy" and the discovery of the drowned man. Each of these episodes are vignettes of ecological education in which youth confronts the incommensurability of the natural world.

“There was a Boy” follows Wordsworth’s discourse on natural education. The play between the Boy from Winander and the unseen owls across the surface of a lake represents the play of difference between humanity and nature. The Boy’s playful interaction with the owls emphasizes the non-coincidence of humanity and the natural world. The distance between the two is made tangible here in the form of the lake. The lake is by definition deep and dark (when a lake is defined as a body of water so deep that light cannot reach the bottom). The darkness is intensified here by the time of day—dusk. The lake acts as a dark chasm, an unstable, liminal space which sustains no certainty. Appropriately, the owls’ actions translated across the lake exhibit an apparent randomness beyond human reasoning. At first they seem to play along, to cooperate with the Boy and obey his wishes by responding to his mimic hootings; another time, they fall silent. The more meaningful experience in this episode is when the owls assert their autonomy and act against the Boy’s wishes. The education is in the silence, for it is in such moments that the otherness of nature reveals itself, when the natural elements of the scene, hitherto unnoticed, come into the foreground and impress themselves upon the Boy’s conscious mind and the alien “voice / Of mountain torrents” (383-84) is heard. When the owls act contrary to the Boy’s desires, the Boy becomes aware, like the young Wordsworth at the sublime image of the looming mountain in the darkness, of “huge and mighty forms, that do not live / Like living men” (l. 398-99). In this episode, nature asserts itself as something other than the human, beyond human control and understanding. The Boy had grown well used to the place—the cliffs and islands knew him well—but in the silence it has now rewilded.

Bate argues against those who read the Boy from Winander as a statement solely

about the power of the imagination, urging us to “not forget that it is also about a boy alone by a lake at dusk blowing mimic hootings to unseen owls. Which are there to answer him” (*Romantic* 115). Bate is justifiably careful to remind us of the natural presence of the scene and to appeal to nature’s physicality. The owls are indeed integral characters, as are the mountain torrents and other things of the natural world that assert themselves in the silence. They are not solely figments of the Boy’s, or the poet’s, imagination. Nevertheless, they are not immanent facts but representations within a poetic text. Bate’s insistence upon the co-operative relationship between the Boy and the owls does not do justice to the gravity of the silence, nor to the fact that the Boy, in the later version, dies at a young age. These aspects complicate Bate’s harmonious reading. Morton criticizes Romantic ecologists like Bate for wanting to hear “immediacy ... in the echoes of the owls across the lake,” noting instead that “Wordsworth withdraws this immediacy even as he appears to offer it” (*Ecology* 76). In my reading, the episode dramatizes both the human mind and natural other in an ecological relationship predicated upon difference. Nature confronts the human as an other; its voice, as Kneale points out, is “unable or unwilling to harmonize perfectly with the human voice” (83). The unknown element of nature, “nature’s self-concealment” as Hartman characterizes it, “is necessary to the soul’s capacity for growth, for it vexes the latter toward self-dependence” (*Wordsworth’s* 43). Nature’s distance and difference throw humanity’s attempts at control and comprehension back upon itself.

Throughout Wordsworth’s poetry, there is a persistent attraction and repulsion to nature. While the people he depicts are drawn to nature time and again, there is a countering admonition that warns them to keep their distance. The Boy learns this lesson

from the owls and the unsettling presentation of nature that rises against him in the darkness. The Boy in turn offers a lesson to the poet and by extension the poet's audience. The distance between the Boy and those frightening forms is resolved in his death; through the grave, he has become part of the "grassy churchyard" and the specific "spot, the most beautiful vale / Where he was born" (392, 391-92). The poet observes the silence of the Boy's grave in much the same way that the Boy once observed the silence of the owls. Hartman points to the demonic and daimonic aspect of nature that "shows what danger the soul runs in seeking a natural home" (*Wordsworth's* 88). Wordsworth was keenly aware of this danger, as is perhaps reflected in the history of the poem's composition and transmission. The original version of 1799 was written in the first person; Wordsworth was himself the Boy who calls to the owls across the lake at dusk. His revision to the third person is a rejection of identity with the Boy and a rejection of the Boy's desire for a natural home.⁴⁹ It is the opposite trajectory of the history of the Arab dream, which Wordsworth revises in order to claim ownership of what was originally his friend's dream. He is content with a dream of identity. Outside of the dreamscape, however, Wordsworth, requires distance. He revises the Boy as an other, recasting himself as a visitor at the Boy's grave. Standing mute at the grave, Wordsworth is now faced with the untranslatable nature with which the Boy has now united. Again, in "There was a Boy," nature and death seem synonymous.

The discovery of the drowned man that immediately follows discusses the relationship between nature and death. The episode begins with the poet in a similar

⁴⁹Tilottama Rajan discusses the changes between the two versions of the episode in "Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness" (198-200), with particular attention to how the perspective changes when the poem is placed within the larger narrative of Book Five.

frame of thoughtless mind as the Boy who is only half-conscious of the world around him. It seems a pleasant scene of indeterminate loveliness, where the valley's "paths, its shores, / And brooks were like a dream of novelty / To my half-infant thoughts" (428-30). The tone begins to change with the discovery of unattended garments by the lake, which at first are meaningless to the young poet. He cannot read them. The tone darkens further with the anxious crowd, however, who can read them. In a stark contrast, the drowned man emerges amidst an otherwise picturesque scene:

At last, the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape
Of terror ... (448-51)

As in "There was a Boy," here too the lake acts as a dangerous liminal space. The dead man erupts from the surface of the lake as the notion of death disturbs the calm of the child's (and reader's) mind. Again, the tale serves as an admonition against the zeal to join with nature. The dead man represents the danger in such a venture, what may lie underneath the calm surface.

Lakes function for Wordsworth in a similar way that streams function for the writers of Medieval romance. It is a familiar paradigm. The knight's horse takes fright at the sight of running water and refuses to cross. It is when the knight crosses on foot that the supernatural element of the tale occurs.⁵⁰ The lake offers the depth and darkness that a stream does not, however. For Wordsworth, the lake is a transformational space that, unlike the Medieval stream, cannot be crossed by the living. Like the dead Boy, the dead

⁵⁰I think particularly of "Lanval" by Marie de France, but there are many examples.

man is now inaccessible to human experience. Having joined with nature and become other, the dead man can only be engaged metaphorically, through the mediation of poetics. Nature, including the dead man, cannot be known, only read, interpreted. For this reason, the young Wordsworth places a necessary textual distance between himself and nature in order to maintain his identity in the face of dissolution. Despite the terrible spectacle,

no soul-debasing fear,
 Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
 Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
 Such sights before, among the shining streams
 Of faëry land, the forests of romance.
 Their spirit hallowed the sad spectacle
 With decoration of ideal grace;
 A dignity, a smoothness, like the works
 Of Grecian art, and purest poesy. (451-59)

Through “the shining streams / Of faëry land,” Wordsworth invokes the romance tradition which is more accessible than the lake to the poet. He borrows the tradition’s symbols in order to make the lake into a text. In the Medieval romance quest, the knight returns across the stream to rejoin the living. There is no return from the lake.

In this aesthetic turn to poetic convention, Wordsworth signals a distance from the reality of the lake and, by extension, the reality of what a material union with nature entails. The Boy from Winander and the drowned man episodes reveal both the textuality of Romantic nature as well as its incommensurability. In the fifth book of *The Prelude*,

“Books,” even as he claims to leave nature aside for a moment, Wordsworth in fact turns to nature more intensely, considering the core of his understanding of it and his relationship with it. This is not to suggest that nature for Wordsworth is purely text. He is keenly aware of nature’s materiality; he is also keenly aware, however, of what this materiality entails for those who would return to nature. Indeed, he harbours such desires himself. In Dorothy’s journal, for instance, we read how Wordsworth would lie on the ground in silence, shut his eyes, and fantasize about the peace of the grave (92). Ultimately, as we see throughout his poetry, he defers any such union. This deferral, however, does not constitute a rejection. The distance he maintains respects the difference he perceives. Rather than a communion with nature, therefore, Wordsworth is able to envision a community. He presents an image of this ecological community, his manifestation of the Romantic oikos, in *Home at Grasmere*.

5. Ecological Community in *Home at Grasmere*

In Book Five of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth expresses his nuanced ecological position founded upon difference. He rejects complete union with nature found ultimately only in death; at the same time, he rejects complete division, such as that encapsulated in Descartes’ drastic dualism. In navigating both of these absolutes in his relationship with nature, Wordsworth ecologically anticipates some of the key elements of modern-day community theory, especially Nancy’s emphasis upon singularity. Singularity, for Nancy, is a way of thinking relation between others without a collapse into unity, at which point identity would be achieved; no relation would be possible, for in identity there is no longer an ‘other’ with which to relate. Radical separateness,

however, also precludes relation. Nancy considers the individual the site of absolute separation. The individual is akin in spirit to Nancy's idea of communion, for "the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death" (3).

Singularity is a way of thinking togetherness and separateness, unity and disunity, at the same time. It acknowledges the shared foundations of experience, perhaps most easily thought about as nature in its role of cradle and grave. In life, however, the singularity maintains distance and difference as it relates with others. Nancy's ethical position of the singularity, the site of relation in community, is also the site of blending in Wordsworth's ecological thought. The blending of humanity and nature brings them into relation with one another while maintaining their specificity. This blending is Wordsworth's contribution to Romantic ecology, in which ecology is figured as a community of others.

The trope of "home" is integral in Wordsworth's thought as a site for thinking through the contiguous lines shared between the discourses of ecology and community. I agree with Max Oelschlaeger that "environment" is a problematic term, emphasizing division (48). Ecology, rooted in the sense of *oikos*, or home, offers an alternative, but does not, in my usage, operate as an antonym, representing unity. Rather, "home" represents the complexities of being-together in place, a site where one continually engages the boundaries of others, both human and natural, an experience presented in Wordsworth's *Home at Grasmere*, composed in 1800 and revised numerous times afterwards.⁵¹ The poem describes the experience of a homecoming for both the poet and

⁵¹Like *The Prelude*, *Home at Grasmere* was not published in Wordsworth's lifetime; unlike *The Prelude*, however, he left no direction for it to be published after his death (Darlington ix). The reason, Beth Darlington suggests, is because it was not considered complete on its own; rather, as the final manuscript reads, it was the first book of the first part of *The Recluse* (ix), the large, unfinished, philosophical poem of which *The Prelude* was meant to be just that—a prelude.

his sister Dorothy, returning to reside in Grasmere after many years of absence. As in “It was an April Morning,” here too the poet engages a particular place as oikos, or “home.” In the “Naming” poem, however, the projected designation of ‘home’ is the final act. Here, the place is introduced as home, and the poet proceeds to imaginatively draw out the manifold significations of this concept. The poem plays between the representations of home as human residence and home as ecological oikos. As such, it experiments with the projected experience of oikos: the experience of ecological relation as a community of singularities.

Wordsworth’s oikos, developed through the poetic language of *Home at Grasmere*, contests the boundaries of subject and other (both human and natural) without resolving them within a single identity. It does this first by respecting the singularity of things. The poem engages the tradition of environmental thought and its fascination with death within the first few lines where Wordsworth describes his boyhood fascination with the place: “‘What happy fortune were it here to live! / And,’ if a thought of dying, if a thought / Of mortal separation could intrude / With paradise before him, ‘here to die!’” (11-14). This wish for death resembles Keats’ call in “Ode to a Nightingale,” where the speaker is similarly drawn to the promise of immanence through a natural entity: “Now more than ever seems it rich to die” (55). Wordsworth’s wish is made ambiguous even in its initial utterance, however, turned mid-thought into a conditional with the introduction of the “if” clause. His death is further displaced by the following lines, calling it not a wish but “one bright pleasing thought, / A fancy in the heart of what might be / The lot of others, never could be his” (16-18). These lines can of course refer to the wish of the boy to inhabit the place, which does not seem possible at the moment of utterance, but they

may also enlighten the concept of immanence through death.

Death, as Nancy holds, is experienced only through the other. Similarly, Wordsworth says in the note to his “Intimations” ode that “Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being” (*Fenwick* 159). Images of movement and heterogeneity permeate both the boy’s perception of the place and his own intentions towards it. He observes the natural elements “evermore / Disporting” (30-31) and aims to participate, longing to live in the place

only for this end:

To flit from field to rock, from rock to field,
 From shore to island, and from isle to shore,
 From open ground to covert, from a bed
 Of meadow-flowers into a tuft of wood,
 From high to low, from low to high, yet still
 Within the bound of this huge Concave; here
 Must be his Home, this Valley be his World. (38-45)

The boy’s experience of the place is inoperative, as Nancy would call it; the relationship does not approach any fixed, unifying goal. The boy’s only “end” or goal is play, and it is the sense of play, his inoperative interactions with the distinct natural phenomena, that will transform the “concave” into a “home.”

The boy’s relationship with Grasmere, therefore, is similar to the Boy from Winander’s relationship with the owls and the lake; both pivot strangely between the poles of death and play. While the Boy from Winander’s relationship ends in death, the

boy in Gramere refrains from such a union and stops at the *thought* of death.

Wordsworth's Romantic ecology is similarly structured, moving along paradoxical lines of grief and play. The figure of Orpheus is helpful for thinking this paradox through.

Following Wordsworth's own mention of the "Orphean lyre" (*Prelude* 2.233), Kurt Fosso constructs Wordsworth as an Orphean figure while discussing death-founded community in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth was well familiar with the story, having translated it from the fourth book of Virgil's *Georgics*. Fosso reads Orpheus, and his presence in Wordsworth, as "the mythic figure par excellence both of the elegist and of the prototypical resistant mourner who refuses to accept loss or mediating substitutes" (165).⁵²

Fosso emphasizes Orpheus' role as liminal figure between the living and the dead. Curiously, he tends to overlook the role of the lyre. Orpheus is an artist. It is Orpheus' art, the power of his lyre, that enables his entry into the world of the dead without becoming dead himself. Orpheus' art charms the world of the living as well. His relationship with nature is recounted by Virgil; in Wordsworth's translation, "For sev'n long moons he sat by [S]trymon's shore / And sung the [tale] of sorrow o'er and o'er / High o'er his head as sad the mourner sung / Aerial rocks in shaggy prospect hung / The solemn forest at the magic song / Had ears to joy—and slowly moved along" (44-49).⁵³

⁵²After his wife Eurydice dies, Orpheus descends to the underworld to retrieve her. Upon their return, he transgresses the one condition of Eurydice's release and looks back at her before they both gain earth. Eurydice returns to the underworld, this time forever.

⁵³The scene is more fully developed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Having returned from the underworld, Orpheus comes to a plain without shade: "plucking his resounding lyre strings, / he summoned many shade trees to his presence" (10.128-9). Then follows a detailed catalogue of different trees who come to shade him:

the oak tree sacred to great Jupiter
a grove of poplars (once Heliades)
and the Italian oak, with deep green leaves;
soft linden, beech and laurel (still unwed)

Through art, Orpheus can navigate between life and death and the human and natural realms as a border figure. Fosso contends that Wordsworth is “more elegist-mourner than nature-loving sage” (24). In the Orphic mode, and given the well-attested connection in Romantic thought between nature and death, there is no reason why he cannot be both. The Orpheus myth both underscores the distance between life and death, human and nature—through Orpheus’ own failed attempt to bridge the two—and the role of art in playing between the two.

In *Home at Grasmere*, this Orphic play emerges between the boundaries of the singular poet and the multitudinous beings of the place. Rather than being resolved into the human subject, the materiality of Grasmere openly challenges the other. The boy is immediately apart, having come to the vale “Alone and devious” (4). The challenge of materiality is perhaps most explicitly encountered in the winter scene, where the natural elements seem to interrogate the newcomers:

Stern was the face of Nature; we rejoiced
 In that stern countenance, for our Souls thence drew
 A feeling of their strength. 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,

with the tender hazel and the useful ash
 (providing us with spheres and javelins);
 pine without knots, the acorn-laden ilex,
 the genial plane tree and the maple too
 (unrivaled in the brilliance of its hue) (130-8)

Orpheus’ lyre also charms inorganic nature. The stones and wooden spears that the Maenads throw to destroy him fall at his feet, “as though begging pardon” (11.16). The Maenads are finally able to harm him only by drowning out the lyre with their own instruments.

“Wild Wanderers, whither through my dark domain?” (163-69)

The sheer physicality of the elements in their winter severity, the “naked Trees” and “icy brooks,” could alone rebuff the strangers. Their resistance is embedded in a cultural context, however, as Wordsworth endows them with speech. Their words, though seemingly hostile, do not entirely match their physical presence. One might expect the harsh and impenetrable winter elements to utter speech that is equally uncompromising, such as simple, strong indicatives or even exclamations. Instead, nature asks questions. Particularly, the elements question the newcomers’ purpose, trying to map them into a trajectory: Whence come ye? To what end? What would ye? Whither? The insistent questions remind us of Shelley’s “Triumph of Life” and especially de Man’s reading of them in “Shelley Disfigured,” in which they suggest the “interpretive labor” of Romanticism (*Rhetoric* 94). They also remind us of Wordsworth’s own questions about the river Derwent that begin *The Prelude* of 1799, asking the river’s intention for cradling his infancy. In Shelley’s poem, too, the speaker asks the questions. In *Home at Grasmere*, the questions are doubtlessly Wordsworth’s own, but they are projected onto the material elements of Grasmere. Just as the severe landscape seems to resist him, he resists it; the questions go unanswered. In this failed exchange, Wordsworth signals a disunion with the place through his resistance to teleology, since the questions all address motivations and goals. Like his youthful avatar with whom the poem begins, Wordsworth is there for no “end.” Throughout the poem, Wordsworth’s language demonstrates an awareness of the temptation to absorb the boundaries, to join in pursuit of a *telos*, and resists it.

This discontinuity between people and place becomes most clear through

Wordsworth's development of the twin themes of "strangers" and "dwelling."

Throughout the poem, Wordsworth preserves a certain distance between himself and his

new "home." Susan Wolfson reads the poem quite differently, focusing upon

Wordsworth's troubling statements of possession: "The poet of *Home at Grasmere* voices

a colonizing imagination that could give Keats's conquistador Cortez, staring at the

Pacific, a run for his bounty"; "If *Home at Grasmere* is mythologized as a 'true

community the noblest Frame / Of one into many incorporate' ... the poetry equates 'one'

with *I*" (189). Even in his initial statements of possession, however, that "the fairest spot

of earth, / With all its unappropriated good" is his "own" (73-75), he immediately

questions this possession by dividing it: it is "not mine only" (75) but equally that of the

fellow inhabitants, primarily his sister: "A younger orphan of a Home extinct, / The only

Daughter of my Parents dwells" (78-79). The juxtaposition of the terms of inclusion

—"home," "dwells"—and exclusion—"orphan," "extinct"—is striking, and sets the tone

for the poem's exploration of being-together in place.

Nor is the possession shared between these two alone; Wordsworth refers

throughout to the other inhabitants of the vale as well, both human and animal. He denies

the originary temptation of the experience by recalling the human history of the place:

"Look where we will, some human hand has been / Before us with its offering" (440-41).

He draws a comparison between Grasmere and Eden based on this very point:

among the bowers

Of blissful Eden this was neither given

Nor could be given—possession of the good

Which had been sighed for, ancient thought fulfilled,

And dear Imaginations realized

Up to their highest measure, yea, and more. (104-9)

Grasmere has an advantage over Eden, the place of complete union, in the experience of separation which Eden lacks. Grasmere is decidedly post-lapsarian, but is not, for that reason, any less a paradise. Rather, it is more so, approaching the ideal—a thought very much in line with Schiller. Nancy's community, however, while predicated upon a union to come, the "night of immanence" (19), differs from Schiller in that the living discontinuity of the present moment does not yearn for that eventual union as an ideal. It is this living present that Wordsworth draws out in his presentation of the community of Grasmere. Wordsworth presents the present day inhabitants of Grasmere as a discontinuous community. He again divides his experience of place in speaking of "[a] power and protection for the mind" that is "[d]ispensed indeed to other Solitudes" (377, 378). These solitudes include the many singular characters of the vale whom he hails; "the small grey horse that bears / The paralytic Man" (505-6), "the patient brute / On which the Cripple in the Quarry maimed / Rides to and fro" (507-9), and "The famous Sheep-dog" (510). He considers both them and himself "strangers." The first instance occurs with the swans, who, like Wordsworth, have come from afar: "*their* state so much resembled ours; / They having chosen this abode; / They strangers, and we strangers" (252-54). He also refers to the birds as "Strangers to me and all men" (533) not in the sense of newcomers but "Strangers to all particular amity, / All intercourse of knowledge or of love / That parts the individual from his kind" (534-36). The birds are strangers in their impenetrable otherness to human experience. Strangeness is not limited to the natural other, but is also attributed to humans. The name of stranger is also given to one

well known to them, their brother, yet still a stranger to the vale, “a Stranger” he names, “whom we love/ Deeply, a Stranger of our Father’s House” (653-54). When discussing the sheep-dog, Wordsworth gives a temporal aspect to stranger status, stating that the dog “will not be/ A Stranger long” (511-12) and that, as with other inhabitants, he will “be free to claim / Acquaintance” (519-20). Strangeness is tempered, though not resolved, through the process of dwelling.

One becomes a “dweller” through a sustained and respectful relationship with a place. Similar to Nancy, Wordsworth sets this relationship in opposition to that of work. For Nancy, a key distinction between community and communion is the absence or presence of a goal and the unifying drive to work towards it. In its absolute elision of difference, a work is necessarily a “work of death” (20). Community is founded not upon doing but upon being; as such, the experience of community—communication—is unworking (31). This opposition to work helps illuminate Wordsworth’s peculiar construction of community in *Home at Grasmere*, particularly in its critique of society: “he truly is alone, / He of the multitude, whose eyes are doomed / To hold a vacant commerce day by day / With objects wanting life, repelling love” (593-96). Communication requires an unworking of such commerce in order to achieve the revelation of the other in its life and love. Dwelling demands that they behave ethically towards the place, requiring that “[t]he Inmates” be “not unworthy of their home, / The Dwellers of their Dwelling” (647-48).

This dwelling is performed through positioning oneself contiguously in relation to others, respecting their boundaries and allowing them to remain other in their transience and finitude. Therefore, Wordsworth speaks of the necessity to exhibit “love for every

thing” (288)—a phrasing that highlights the specificity of the singular things as opposed to the grouping of “everything.” In doing so, Wordsworth in *Home at Grasmere* imaginatively enacts a similar concept of community to that developed by Nancy, a community of others sharing identity without completion, where otherness is never resolved. Wordsworth is “pleased / To have about him, which way e’er he goes, / Something on every side concealed from view, / In every quarter something visible, / Half-seen or wholly, lost and found again— / Alternate progress and impediment, / And yet a growing prospect in the main” (484-90). Such is the nature of the Romantic oikos, home, a place where human and natural dwell together.

Wordsworth’s poetic language throughout *Home at Grasmere* represents the necessary difference between humanity and nature. In his uncertain phrasing and his insistent questioning, surmise is again the dominant mood. Despite his comparison of Grasmere with Eden, to Grasmere’s benefit, Wordsworth qualifies his utopian perception. He introduces the explanation of his perception of “Perfect contentment, Unity entire” (151) with the parenthetical surmise “(or is it fancy?)” (136). There is also the hasty rescission of his shameful query about the fate of the swans, that perhaps one of the Dalesman had shot one or both. Despite the utopian rhetoric that follows, in which the “dwellers in this holy place / Must needs themselves be hallowed” (277-78), Wordsworth again qualifies his idealized perception; he comes to the reality of the place, he maintains, “not dreaming of unruffled life, / Untainted manners” (347-48). Wordsworth is careful with his language, circling and recircling his definitions and positions. At one point, he directly addresses the problem of language in a tone akin to the mournful query that begins Book Five of *The Prelude*:

Is there not

An art, a music, and a strain of words
 That shall be life, the acknowledged voice of life?
 Shall speak of what is done among the fields,
 Done truly there, or felt, of solid good
 And real evil, yet be sweet withal,
 More grateful, more harmonious than the breath,
 The idle breath of softest pipe attuned
 To pastoral fancies? Is there such a stream,
 Pure and unsullied, flowing from the heart
 With motions of true dignity and grace,
 Or must we seek that stream where Man is not? (401-12)

Again, the spectre of a natural, authentic language haunts Romantic thought. It is the longing for the poetic word, as de Man has identified, “to originate like the flower ... to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal” (*Rhetoric* 4). This language is apparently found only in nature as the language of materiality, “of solid good.” It is the hypothesized language of mythic unity with nature, formed through “[t]he idle breath of softest pipe attuned / To pastoral fancies.” As in other passages of the poem, Wordsworth posits this language in the interrogative mode; it is not a straightforward lament, but a series of questions. He is tempted, but ultimately uncommitted to the desire to which the questions allude. Like Keats, for whom it is “too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre” (“Ode to Psyche” 36-37), however, Wordsworth too denies the possibility of return, mournfully conjecturing, and only conjecturing, that

such a natural language is found only “where Man is not.” For humanity, poetic language must intercede, enforcing the very division it seeks to mend.

Nevertheless, Wordsworth’s mournful tone begins to change as he articulates an ecological community in *Home at Grasmere*. When considering the widow’s connection to the fir-grove that she and her departed husband had planted in order to shelter their flock from the weather, itself a complex ecological tale of oikos, he resigns himself to silence. Having at first played with the idea of repeating her story “in tuneful verse” (413), he soon thinks better of the project. Choosing instead to maintain the difference between them, he concludes that some things are better left unsaid, some distances better left unbridged:

Be this

A task above my skill; the silent mind

Has her own treasures, and I think of these,

Love what I see, and honour humankind. (423-26)

The ability to leave things unspoken signals the ability to overcome the desire for mastery through language. Wordsworth does not do this, however; he does recount the widow’s tale, but he does so in an uncertain tone, turning the story instead upon his relationship to the story. It is a manner of *occupatio*, in which Wordsworth neither tells the story nor truly fails to tell it. It is a passage of neither unity nor disunity. Instead, Wordsworth extends to the widow the same reverent distance he maintains toward the myriad elements of his new community, both natural and human, maintaining a respect for their singular otherness. This difference between others, and the sensitivity toward it, is the foundation of the ecological oikos.

The discourse of community offers ecological criticism a theoretical framework for mounting new approaches to the navigation between humanity and nature. When read through theories of community, Romanticism presents imaginative exercises in community formation between the human and the natural. This community does not have to participate in the post-lapsarian quest for reconnection; rather, Wordsworth aims to dismiss “all Arcadian dreams, / All golden fancies of the golden Age” (625-26). It is not a true dismissal, however, for as we can hear in his mournful tone, Wordsworth maintains a longing for union with nature. Rather, he defers such a union to the indefinite future. Dismissing communion or unity as a goal, Wordsworth instead retains in the present moment the boundaries that would dissolve through communion, respecting the singularity of himself and of other beings, both human and natural. Such is the relationship offered through the experience of oikos, home, the being-together of singular beings in specific place. In *Home at Grasmere*, Wordsworth describes the experience of “[a] true Community, a genuine frame / Of many into one incorporate” (615-16). He does so by positioning himself contiguously in relation to his world, as a “transitory Being” (850): one bound on either side by communion with nature, but one who is, in the living present, a finite and singular being of many others sharing in the life of the dwelling.

6. Conclusion – Wordsworth’s Extravagance

Modern ecological perception is founded upon the notion of difference, in which “Nature” itself is considered as an unstable complex of processes and relationships rather than a static object. When nature is considered as relation, theories of community are

important in forging an ecological world view. Wordsworth's poetic language aims to approach the natural world, to commune with it, but holds back in the knowledge that total communion is possible only in death. Through the maintenance of distance and respect for difference, Wordsworth's poetics approaches the formation of a community with nature, since community, as understood through Nancy, is itself founded upon the singularity of its components. Understanding nature as community reinstates the oikos as the centre of ecology.

The concept of home is essential to Wordsworth as he interrogates its possibilities throughout his work. While there are clearly relationships forged with specific places in his work, he is never completely able to settle and set down roots, even when he declares a spot, like Grasmere, "home." Rather, he hypothesizes a home through his indeterminate use of language. In doing so, he refrains from appropriating the natural into his own idiom. Despite his overtures to the materiality of nature, Wordsworth never truly gets past the human, always remaining outside. Far from egotism, this respect for distance constitutes Wordsworth's ecological sensitivity.

It is now a well-established philosophical stance that our ecological crises result from a tradition of appropriation by arrogant human ingenuity. When it obtained the means, through technological innovation, humanity gave itself free reign over the elements. As a corrective to this arrogance, environmental thinkers and ecocritics have focused upon nature's materiality in order to reassert its reality and to remind us of the material conditions of our existence—that we do indeed live in the world, one among many species. This remembrance has been a necessary move. Its empirical method, however, participates in the same principles of the materialism that, according to some,

have created the problem. Romanticism has been criticized for its cultural representation of nature as a symptom of anthropocentrism. Wordsworth's blending of the cultural and natural, however, reveals an ecological sensitivity. It avoids the arrogance of materialism in which the material fact is taken as absolute. Wordsworth's romanticizing offers ecology a mode of thought beyond the certainty of the material. In doing so, he anticipates modern ecological thought, in which the natural world is highly uncertain, in flux, and therefore never completely knowable.

As Wordsworth maintains in his discussion of Macpherson's Ossian, "In nature every thing is distinct, yet nothing is defined into absolute independent singleness" ("Essay" 207). Such is the nature of the *oikos*, where singular subjects are inevitably connected through their shared space but perform diverse roles in relation to the space and to each other. For Wordsworth, nature is not something to be translated, for the unbridgeable distance between the human and the natural precludes any such *trans* (across) movement. To posit such movement is necessarily to elide one for the purpose of the other. Rather, nature demands to be interpreted, a rhetorical play that occurs in the space between (*inter*) the two. It must be read rather than known, just as Wordsworth must dedicate rather than possess. The poetic devices that ecocritics have criticized are for Wordsworth the elements of ecological understanding. They are methods of approach rather than appropriation. Given the singularity and otherness of the natural world, the poetic imagination is a medium for communication within the ecological community. Hartman also points to the distinctness of Wordsworth's imagination in its reluctance to unite: "poetry, like the world, can only house an imagination which is a borderer, which will not disdain earthly things" (*Wordsworth's* 67). Wordsworth's imagination does not

disdain earthly things, nor does it join with them. It remains a borderer between worlds. As such, it escapes the arrogance of materialism and rationalism. It is cautious and mature, allowing space for the singular inhabitants of the oikos to maintain their difference and thereby enabling community with nature. This approach broadens the ecocritical horizon beyond the calls for immanence and reunion which have largely dominated its discourse of the past decades. Wordsworth's particular vision of the Romantic oikos addresses the integral role of reading in ecology.

The necessity to read is persistent for Wordsworth. Nature is a text that demands to be read and re-read, interpreted. Like the deferred dedication of "It was an April morning," the deferred deluge of the Arab dream, and the boy's relationship with Grasmere, the reading has no end; it is, to use Nancy's phrase, inoperative. In the fifth book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth has faith that something greater is in play, "[a] gracious spirit o'er this earth presides, / And o'er the heart of man" who directs "those / Who care not, know not, think not what they do" (491-92, 494-95). The spirit is imagination, and it directs those who are directionless, inspiring them not to work, but to play, to create; the result is art: "tales that charm away the wakeful night / In Araby," for instance, and "adventures endless, spun / By the dismantled warrior in old age, / Out of the bowels of those very schemes / In which his youth did first extravagate" (496-97, 500-3). To extravagate, which the *OED* defines as "to wander, stray outside limits," is key to Wordsworth's ecological approach.

Wordsworth's description of the imagination in Book Five might seem un- and even anti-ecological at times. Because of imagination "Our childhood sits, / Our simple childhood, sits upon a throne / That hath more power than all the elements" (507-9); to

the inspired one, “Earth crouches, the elements are potters’ clay, / Space like a heaven filled up with northern lights, / Here, nowhere, there, and everywhere at once” (531-33). Nevertheless, towards the end of the same book, he hails “the great Nature that exists in works / Of mighty Poets” (594):

Visionary power

Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
 Embodied in the mystery of words:
 There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
 Of shadowy things work endless changes there,
 As in a mansion like their proper home. (595-600)

Wordsworth’s “home” here is uncertain and unstable. It is found in both poetry and nature, the blending, or community, of the two. He is limited to neither, chooses neither one nor the other; rather, he is extravagant in his embrace of community. Wordsworth’s extravagance marks his unique interpretation of the Romantic oikos.

Chapter 3

John Clare's Restless Nature: Homeless at Home

A Peasant in his daily cares –
The Poet in his joy

– “The Peasant Poet” (15-16)

1. “Poet of Nature”

‘Poet of Nature’: the title has often been bestowed upon poets of pastoral, locodescriptive verse—those who write manifestly about ‘Nature.’ For the most part, it has been associated with Wordsworth; Shelley proclaims him “Poet of Nature!” at the beginning of his sonnet “To Wordsworth.” Ecocriticism, as we have discussed in the second chapter, questions the extent to which Wordsworth is truly deserving of such a title, however, given his supposed egotism. Increasingly in Romantic ecocriticism, the title belongs instead to John Clare.⁵⁴ Whereas Wordsworth used nature as a vehicle for his own imagination, it is held, Clare lovingly and humbly addresses nature head-on in all its irreducible material fact. While my reading of both poets differs significantly from this assertion, I do recognize a central difference in their engagements with nature.

Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime” respects the differences between self and other and gives him a base from which to wander, or extravagate, in the world both physically and imaginatively. Wordsworth’s experience of the Romantic oikos is extremely self-aware; Clare’s experience, however, is self-effacing. His wandering lacks a firm centre, and so

⁵⁴Before ecocriticism truly took shape as a field, Clare criticism connected his work to the land. John Barrell’s seminal work, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1972), painstakingly locates Clare within a tradition of British landscape writing while mapping out Clare’s own landscape materially, charting the changes around Helpston before and after the enclosure acts that Clare witnessed. Recent examples from the *John Clare Society Journal* include Simon Kövesi’s “Beyond the Language Wars: Towards a Green Edition of John Clare” (July 2007) and Siobhan Craft Brownson’s ““Waterflies with Tiny Wings’: Marking Nature in John Clare’s Poems” (July 2006). Morton has also paid special ecological attention to Clare in recent publications (see Works Cited).

the recognition of nature as uncertain is startling and, at times, deeply upsetting. This chapter traces Clare's challenges in understanding and finally celebrating the Romantic oikos.

Clare is the peasant poet: he names himself the "Northamptonshire peasant" on the title page of his first publication (McKusick 77). The details of his biography, which include a close proximity to nature and lived experience of the elements, privilege him ecocritically among Romantic poets for his perceived natural immediacy. Ecocritics praise Clare for his precise natural description and his invectives against enclosure which dramatically altered his landscape.⁵⁵ Such criticism has tended to focus too much, however, upon the material and political in Clare's work. James McKusick, often representative of this tendency, defines the environmental aesthetic thus: "Just as all politics is local, so too all ecology is local; and a true ecological writer must be 'rooted' in the landscape, instinctively attuned to the changes of the Earth and its inhabitants" (24). Understandably, then, McKusick hails Clare as "one of the first true ecological writers in the English-speaking world" (27): John Clare who worked the fields, described them meticulously, and, apart from the very occasional trip to London, lived his entire life within a hundred-mile radius of his birthplace of Helpston. Clare himself wrote that he "found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down" ("Sighing for Retirement" 15-16).

Such a poetic and self-reflexive statement about his art—that he transcribed his poetry from the fields—proves Clare's dedication to Romantic ideals and concerns:

⁵⁵Enclosure "came and trampled on the grave / Of labours rights and left the poor a slave" ("The Mores" 19-20); it "like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain" ("Remembrances" 67); it allowed "Each little tyrant with his little sign" to show that "where man claims earth glows no more divine" ("The Mores" 67, 68).

particularly, a dedication to playfully thinking through the relationship between art and nature. Romanticist ecocritics have not been as playful in their own thinking, however, often accepting such statements with too little question. In this chapter, I will take a different approach. I too hail Clare as an ecological poet, but for very different reasons, all predicated upon a different understanding of ecology through *oikos*—a home of uncommon ground constituted as a community of others. Clare's singular ecological sensitivity, therefore, lies not in his "rootedness" but, I will argue, in his placelessness: a placelessness recognized both through the uncertainty of nature and the uncertainty of nature's poetic representation. The further Clare's poetry takes him into nature, into the observation of its elements and processes, the more otherworldly, and other to himself, nature becomes. Frankly, any environmental aesthetic founded upon "rootedness" is unresponsive to the fluid and dynamic nature of modern ecological thought; and ecological criticism, if it is to remain relevant, must be responsive.

Materialist ecocriticism searches for the presence of material fact as an antidote to a perceived fall of humanity from nature; it searches for a remedy through a return to a lost unity. Clare feels this nostalgia as well. Almost in spite of himself, however, his poetry acknowledges that a return to nature is impossible and that nature itself is and remains radically other—and yet, home. Clare's disruptive experience of *oikos* develops through a series of startling recognitions of difference which I explore in this chapter: his destabilizing experience of the homelessness of birds, his imaginary home with his childhood love, his inability to find solace in the Christian promise of home, his own failed homecoming, and his final, joyful embrace of home's impossibility—his homelessness at home.

2. Nostalgia: a “poets visions of lifes early day”

Clare’s biography almost plays as large a role in his critical reception as his poetry, and so, though the trajectory of his life is well-known, it warrants a brief repeating here. Born in Helpston in 1793 to farm-labouring parents, Clare had little formal education.⁵⁶ His early verse is for the most part descriptive of the local landscape. In 1832, Clare left Helpston for nearby Northborough and a larger property for his growing family. Periodically suffering from ill health throughout his life, his mental health deteriorated markedly after the move. He was first institutionalized in 1837, then again in 1841 after a remarkable escape. Clare’s identity has been made so synonymous with Helpston that some have attributed his final mental instability to his move to Northborough.⁵⁷ Bate holds that “for Clare, the three miles might as well have been three hundred. He was going out of his knowledge, away from the parish of Helpston that had mapped the contours of his very being” (*John* 387). John Barrell goes so far as to say that Clare’s “knowledge was knowledge for him only in Helpston, and only in the language of Helpston”; “the knowledge that Clare has in Helpston he has only there—it is by its very nature incapable of being abstracted, and it is in its incapacity for being abstracted that the knowledge consists” (135, 131). Such sentiments would suggest that Clare, too, cannot be abstracted, that he is Clare only in Helpston and only in the language of Helpston—sentiments that would set oppressive limits upon his poetic

⁵⁶Clare’s own account of his early years can be found in “Sketches in the Life of John Clare,” in *John Clare’s Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Eric Robinson.

⁵⁷It is in fact a perception that began in Clare’s own time. His widow claims in his obituary that Clare’s love of Helpston was so strong that “his mental malady was increased by the grief he felt at being separated from it” (qtd. in Gorji 98).

license and dismiss his later work written elsewhere. John Clare makes such a gesture when explaining why most critics focus on the pre-asylum verse: “what is definitively Clare is primarily to be found in the poetry he wrote when he was still able to face life with courage, curiosity, and hope” (xi). Clare is a poet of home, it seems, in the traditional sense of *oikos* as a stable and secure relationship with place.

There has been a movement in recent years to complicate Clare’s perceived homeliness. Morton and Simon Kövesi destabilise Clare’s relationship with nature and bring it back into question.⁵⁸ Gary Harrison argues for Clare as a “poet of between places,” reading his productive placelessness as a political disorientation rooted in socio-economic hardship (“Hybridity” 149).⁵⁹ Paul Chirico (2007) questions Clare’s natural home by discussing nature’s prior textuality in his verse. Most recently, Alan Bewell (2011) reads Clare’s homelessness socio-politically as a result of enclosure, arguing that in response Clare’s “best poetry does not so much struggle for lost ground as stand upon it” (552). I too read Clare’s dislocation for its creative potential, but metaphorically as the site of a singularly ecological creativity: one that presents an experience of ecology as a restless and dynamic community. In my reading, Clare’s recognition of his homelessness leads him paradoxically not away from but closer to nature. His dislocation is not, in my interpretation, the result of a particular biographical or historical event; rather, it is the symptom of an ecological insight that participates in the difference found in nature, an insight enabled by the singularity of his historical moment.

⁵⁸ Morton reads Clare’s ecology deconstructively in both *Ecology Without Nature* (see note 8) and in “John Clare’s Dark Ecology” (see note 18); Simon Kövesi also addresses this concern in several publications, though most pertinent to this discussion is “John Clare’s ‘I’ and ‘Eye’: Egotism and Ecologism,” in *Green and Pleasant Land: English Culture and the Romantic Countryside*, edited by Amanda Gilroy.

⁵⁹ See also “Loss and Desire in the Poetry of John Clare,” *European Romantic Review*, 12.4 (2001), 457-76, in which Harrison reads Clare’s placelessness as an existential experience of Kristevan melancholy.

There was certainly a marked change in Clare's poetry after the move to Northborough, when its themes became more varied and often dark. The first poem he wrote about his move is titled after the movements of birds, "The Flitting": "I've left mine own old home of homes / Green fields and every pleasant place / The summer like a stranger comes / I pause & hardly know her face" (1-4). The poetry of the Northborough and asylum periods attests to a loss of home and a resulting instability in Clare's world. The tone of these later periods starkly contrasts the more confident tone often found in the Helpston period, such as in "Emmonsales Heath" in which "Creations steps ones wandering meets / Untouched by those of man / Things seem the same in such retreats / As when the world began" (25-28). Helpston seemed a paradise for Clare, a permanent and perfect source of stability. In Northborough, however, as "Decay A Ballad" laments, "Nature herself seems on the flitting" (4). Morton praises this later poetry, finding in it greater ecological potential than in the environmental minutiae of his earlier work (*Ecology* 197). He looks to Clare's much-anthologized "I Am"—"I am—yet what I am, none cares or knows" (1), in which he lives "like vapours tost / Into the nothingness of scorn and noise" (6-7)—as among his most ecologically aware, particularly in the concluding lines where "Clare wants us to stay in the mud, rather than pull ourselves out of it. If we read the last of 'I Am' literally, this is exactly where we are" ("John" 190). Clare's questioning of place is not confined to his later poetry, however; in his earlier poems, with their supposedly precise environmental description, dislocating questions erupt as Clare struggles to represent his locus.

On the surface, Clare's early natural description may be accurate for still life, but ecology understands nature as a process, fluid and changing; Clare's stylized nature is

not. As Sarah Houghton-Walker argues, for Clare, “the ideal is nature without Time” (141). Even in his early locodescription when he is presumably at “home” in Helpston, nature is already encountered nostalgically. As Broome has traced in *Fictive Domains* (2007), nostalgia is at its inception a homesickness; the term was coined in 1678 “to describe a homesickness so intense that it could cause physical illness or even death” (14). Stewart in *On Longing* (1984) locates nostalgia within “the myth of presence in Western metaphysics” (17), and defines it as “a sadness without an object” (23) for it never experiences the present moment but always “a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality” (23). Moreover, and intriguingly for Clare studies, Stewart relates nostalgia to the idea of nature, specifically the longing for access or a return to nature that is expressed throughout many literary texts especially during and since the Industrial Revolution: “The prevailing motif of nostalgia is the erasure of the gap between nature and culture ... The nostalgic’s utopia is prelapsarian” (23).

This Edenic construction of nature, hearkening back to a mythical origin before the Fall of signifier from signified, is precisely what one finds in Clare’s poetry. In his early verse, Clare’s descriptions of Helpston are often cloaked in Edenic language, recalling Paradise and its loss: “Oh happy Eden of those golden years / Which memory cherishes & use endears / Thou dear beloved spot may it be thine / To add a comfort to my life[s] decline” (“Helpstone” 163-66). This timeless nature troubles his ecocritical appeal, for it suggests that the Clare who faithfully describes the fields that form and compose his identity is also the very one who, in a sense, has composed the identity of those fields in the first place. Praise for his poetry based on his minute description and lived experience of nature ignores the crucial element of mediation. Clare may well have

known the number of eggs in a particular nest and the number of petals on a particular flower, but his denial of and anxiety about natural change defies the most basic tenet of ecology: process.⁶⁰

Throughout his work, Clare connects the very concept of truth with a permanent, timeless nature in which any change is necessarily false, as he affirms in *Child Harold*: “Nature thou truth of heaven if heaven be true / Falsehood may tell her ever changeing lie / But natures truth looks green in every view” (1168-70). The nature described here is itself false, as he is self-consciously aware. The conditional in the first of the lines disrupts the confidently indicative mood of the others: nature is the truth of heaven, *if* heaven be true. Clare has not convinced himself. His *home* is less certain than previously thought, or less than his poetry would have us (and perhaps him) believe: as Harrison contends, “Clare was doomed to an ontological sense of displacement, for his home was either behind him or before him; never did he, never could he, find his place in the world” (“Loss” 472). His home has always been a question. Clare’s uncertainty about his place in the world has great ecological implications. Despite his myriad attempts to find it, to access the signified through the signifier, his natural home is also a question. As his early bird poems testify, even when Clare was most at home he was already homeless.

⁶⁰Imlac’s dissertation upon poetry in Johnson’s *Rasselas* comes to mind, that it is not the poet’s job to “number the streaks of the tulip” (628). It may also recall Wordsworth’s 1815 “Preface,” in which the first “powers requisite for the production of poetry” are observation and description, “*i.e.*, the ability to observe with accuracy things as they are in themselves, and with fidelity to describe them, unmodified by any passion or feeling existing in the mind of the describer” (26). Wordsworth cautions, however, that these powers are to be employed “only in submission to necessity, and never for a continuance of time: as its exercise supposes all the higher qualities of the mind to be passive, and in a state of subjection to external objects” (26).

3. Flitting

The movement of birds, which Clare calls flitting, is a key trope in Clare's work. It is ecologically revealing in the contradiction between its source and significance: though adapted from the flights of birds that Clare observed first-hand in nature, it features in his poetry as a metaphor for his division from nature and the restlessness that follows from this troubling recognition. The "Bird Poems" are often also poems about bird nests—the concept of home is always central. Nearly all of them describe the making of and placing of nests by the myriad species of bird he encountered in Helpston. To the ecocritics' admiration, Clare does offer precise description that can only stem from close and reverent observation. Several times he describes himself as the patient and determined observer, as in "The Nightingale's Nest":

There have I hunted like a very boy
 Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns
 To find her nest & see her feed her young
 ...
 Ive nestled down
 & watched her while she sung. (12-14, 18-19)

The knowledge gained through this close observation, however, results in a tone of uncertainty throughout the series. The closer the observation, the more Clare becomes aware of how little he knows. The birds themselves often appear as precarious tricksters, fragile but wily spectres of nature. The opportunities to observe them, even for one living as near them as Clare, are stumbled upon by chance. He says of the Pettichap's nest, for instance, that

none may spy

It out save accident—& you & I
 Had surely passed it in our walk today
 Had chance not led us by it—nay e'en now
 Had not the old bird heard us trampling bye
 & fluttered out (“The Pettichaps Nest” 8-13)

The birds are deceitful by design.

“To the Snipe” has received ecocritical attention especially due to the presence throughout of the potential human element as a violator. Bridget Keegan reads the poem through this lens, suggesting that Clare may be self-conscious of his own intrusive presence (170). She therefore focuses upon images of sight as ecologically significant, holding that the eye is the vehicle for empirical thinking and the attitude of domination that can ensue. The snipe’s nest is not visible, and therefore free from the tyranny of the eye: “The nest *may* exist, hidden from view. Because it cannot be viewed, Clare calls the nest ‘mystic.’ The mystical is that which escapes rationalistic proof, the kind of empiricism that privileges the visual as the grounds for possessing knowledge and truth” (168). In the poem, however, Clare gives a different reason: the snipe’s nest is

Mystic indeed
 For isles that ocean make
 Are scarcely more secure for birds to build
 Then this flag hidden lake (25-28)

The nest may indeed be hidden, but it is “mystic” because of the singularity of its construction. The central image of the poem is the snipe’s singular ability to build its

nest in marshy waters, while the central crux of the poem is the bird's surprising safety on the least secure, least solid of grounds.

Clare calls the snipe a mystic for its ability to build a nest on the waters of the marsh, citing a "power divine / That heartens them to brave / The roughest tempest & at ease recline / On marshes or the wave" (49-52). The snipe's home is, in a sense, groundless; it has a liquid and therefore highly uncertain foundation. Mina Gorji points to this unstable sense of home, stating that in the poem "we find Clare working through his preoccupation with home and homelessness, trying out different forms and languages for expressing a sense of loss and displacement, and finding new ways of articulating his spiritual need for peace and sanctuary" (101). She notes that the uneven quatrain of the poem mirrors the uneven terrain of the snipe's nest (103). Gorji reads the poem as an expression of Clare's frustrated desire for stability, citing that it was likely written just after the move to Northborough. Therefore, her reading divides the terms whose tension forms the basis of the poem: the home belongs to the snipe, while the homelessness is entirely Clare's. In this reading, nature's instability is a projection of Clare's own uncertainty in relation to nature, while the snipe, on the other hand, "is perfectly suited to its environment": "This perfect fit between bird and place, this perfect at-homeness, is what Clare desires, and a sense of 'habitual love' seems to be achieved in the poem's concluding stanzas" (119). One must recall the mysticism of the snipe's "at-homeness," however, founded upon fluidity and flux. When speaking of the nightingale, Johanne Clare points to a tendency throughout the bird poems of a "stepping away from symbol and evocation, and then the falling back to the sturdy and reassuring object-world of leaves and grass" (182). "To the Snipe" complicates this tendency, since the snipe's nest

and its liquid location call into question how sturdy and reassuring the “object-world of leaves and grass” can be. I read the snipe’s nest not as a symbol of Clare’s desire for a stable home, but as a symbol of the impossibility of such a home at the heart of an ecological sense of oikos: a symbol of the instability of nature which confronts and unsettles Clare throughout the bird poems.

The instability of nature is most provocatively experienced in “The Land Rail.” The land rail’s playfulness, singing as it flits from place to place so that none may track it, emphasizes the instability of nature, and throws into question the ecocritical desire for material fact. Wherever you think the land rail is, it is always elsewhere:

& now I hear it in the grass
That grows as sweet again
& let a minutes notice pass
And now tis in the grain (9-12)

Like Keats’ nightingale, Clare’s land rail is at first only heard and not seen; its incorporeal nature (as experienced by its auditor) throws its very existence into question:

Tis like a fancy every where
A sort of living doubt
We know t’is something but it ne’er
Will blab the secret out (13-16)

Clare’s close observation and meticulous description do not result in a knowledge of nature as material fact, but as “fancy,” or “living doubt.” Houghton-Walker, speaking of Clare’s religion, holds that “the most important ‘meaning’ for Clare is a surrender to the unknowability of the transcendent, which occurs with recognition of ignorance (or

acceptance of mystery) in the operation of the sublime, *through* his ‘acute observations’” (147). Clare’s acute observation of the land rail reveals its mystery and otherness. Johanne Clare maintains that “[t]he reason he was so fascinated by birds (in life and as a literary subject) is that they were so strangely, emphatically, unhumanly themselves” (174). The land rail’s home is equally strange; It is the bird “[t]hat lays without a nest” (52); “[i]n simple holds that birds will rake / When dusting in the ground / They drop their eggs of curious make” (53-55). It is a nestless bird, a bird that is homeless at home. The habits of birds defy an environmental aesthetic of rootedness and an environmental program of unity with nature. Rather, like the land rail, nature remains “[a] mystery still” (57).

Clare’s birds are not alone in their flitting: the spectre of Mary Joyce flitted before Clare throughout his life, and her presence in his work is as inconsistent and multiply determined as the bird flights above. Recognitions of distance and difference arise for Clare despite himself. It is clear throughout much of his work that he desperately desired a union with nature but that this union was never possible. Mary Joyce is the poetically ecological figure of desired impossibility. Like the birds, the figure of Mary reveals a fundamental disunity and dislocation. Given her deeply personal significance for Clare, however, the figure of Mary moves the experience of dislocation into a singularly affective realm. At first a childhood friend, in the asylum years, Mary reappears with enormous influence in his writing. During this time, Clare suffered many delusions;⁶¹ a poignant one was his invention of a second wife, Mary—or rather, a first wife, since he

⁶¹At times, he seems to have thought he was Byron, writing poems called *Don Juan* and *Child Harold*, though very different from Byron’s. At other times, he thought that he was a famous boxer or an Irish balladeer. In his biography, Bate questions the extent to which these personae were actually mental delusions for Clare.

counted his wife Martha Turner (also called Patty) as his second, considering Mary the original. At the end of a letter to Patty on 17 March 1841, in which every word is capitalized, he adds a cryptic postscript: “P.S. Give My Love To The Dear Boy Who Wrote To Me & To Her Who Is Never Forgotten” (*Letters* 644). After this letter, he began to write to Mary directly. In a strange letter possibly written during May of 1841, he writes to both wives, though he addresses it to Mary:

My dear Wife Mary

I might have said my first wife & first love & first every thing—but I shall never forget my second wife & second love for I loved her once as dearly as yourself—& almost do so now so I determined to keep you both forever—& when I write to you I am writing to her at the same time & in the same letter. (*Letters* 646)

Clare created very different identities for his wives and formed different relationships with them. The differences in his relationships with both are signaled in their origins. Clare met Patty as a young adult and was quickly pressured into marriage, since his “amorous intrigues and connections” with her “now began to disclose dangers which marriage alone could remedy” (“Sketches” 24). Patty, his earthly wife, is very much of the earth—flawed and changeable. His relationship with Mary is very different:

my first feelings of love was created at school even while a boy a young girl, I may say a child, won my affections not only by her face which I still think very handsome but by her meek modest and quiet disposition, the stillest and most good natured girl in the school her name was Mary and my regard for her lasted a long time after school days was over but it

was platonic affection, nothing else but love in idea for she knew nothing of my fondness for her (25)⁶²

Mary remains forever innocent, forever a child—sharply distinct from Patty’s worldliness. Bate ascribes some extremely anti-marriage stanzas of Clare’s *Don Juan* to the relationship with Patty, where “Marriage is nothing but a driveling hoax” and “the road to ruin” (25, 32). Mary, on the other hand, is the ideal, unearthly angel, synonymous with Clare’s ideal, unearthly nature. Clare continually conflates her with home and speaks of her in similar terms as he does Helpston. Both are multiply lost to him through flitting, whether hers or his own:

I had no home above my head

My home was love & Mary (*Child Harold* 98-99)

...

I’ve lost love home & Mary (115)

...

No home had I through all the year

But Marys honest love (940-41)

...

Her truth & heart my home (949)

Lines like these pose a serious challenge to the claim that Helpston was Clare’s only home. In his own words, Clare found his home elsewhere: an impossible elsewhere, for Clare thought of Mary in the same way he thought of nature—lost. Mary therefore became a part of his desire for reunion with nature. Helpston became his Eden, and Mary

⁶²The spaces within Clare’s texts, as well all other irregularities of his writing, are preserved from the source texts.

his prelapsarian Eve.

If Mary is of Paradise, Patty is of the fallen world that Clare knew and could not accept, the world of change and transience. In *Don Juan*, Clare associates change (or reality) with falsity, and so Patty, his fallen Eve, stands accused:

Milton sung Eden & the fall of man
 Not woman for the name implies a wh—e
 & they would make a ruin of his plan
 Falling so often they can fall no lower
 Tell me a worse delusion if you can
 For innocence – & I will sing no more
 Wherever mischief is tis womans brewing
 Created from manself – to be mans ruin. (9-16)

Mary and Patty are constructed inversely to each other. This double attitude toward women is a metaphor for his attitude toward the two manifestations of nature that divided Clare's existence. Patty, the dutiful but faulty wife, is aligned with the changing, material earth with which Clare cannot be satisfied. Mary represents the spirit of Nature that for Clare is eternal and unchanging. Patty may tell her ever changing lie, but Mary's truth looks green in every view. Patty is nature, while Mary is Nature.⁶³ This reverence for Mary and Nature complicates the perception of Clare's reverence for the material world founded upon his real, lived experience of it. While a real person for Clare in his childhood, as time went on the reality of Mary faded. Speaking of the asylum poems, Janet Todd points to "the gradual disappearance of the real woman" (14). Bate also notes

⁶³I use 'nature' to indicate either the material reality of the natural world or nature reconsidered critically; 'Nature' instead refers to the cultural spectre, invested with human significance.

that as early as 1832 Mary “is no longer—if she ever has been—a real person” (*John* 396). In the end, “Mary Joyce” is a figure of Clare’s imagination. As we have seen in the unfounded accusations of falsehood against Patty and the unprovoked diatribes against marriage, however, the “Patty” of Clare’s poetry is equally fictional. They are both his own constructions, as he perhaps admits across a stanza break in a revealing passage of *Don Juan*:

Mary & Martha both an evil omen
 Though both my own—they still belong to no man

But to our text again—& pray where is it. (197-99)

Supposedly returning to his main theme from a digression, the peculiar phrasing here and its placement admit another reading. Both Mary and Martha (Patty), while his, belong not to the world, but to the text. What that means, exactly, or where that is, is uncertain for Clare: “and pray where is it.” Martha and Mary, while founded in reality, become imaginative figurations for Clare, formed as bridges between himself and the world around him. Mary, so often hailed as his ideal home, is lost to him through separation to the point of death. Mary—the ideal, Nature, the dead, home—is always entirely other, elsewhere; it is this wife with whom Clare so dearly desires a union: “I sleep with thee, and wake with thee, / And yet thou art not there:— / I fill my arms, with thoughts of thee, / And press the common air” (“To Mary” 1-4). Throughout his institutionalization, this desire grows stronger, until Clare finally leaves the asylum in order to attempt a homecoming.

4. Biblical Paraphrases: The Promise of Home

Some of Clare's most ecologically revealing writings, those that most earnestly testify to his search for home, are often surprisingly those which turn away from his own locodescriptive tradition and explicitly engage a text. He is tantalized by the prospect of a future final reconciliation, an unmediated, uncompromised home: a hope he stores up for the hereafter, since the world he knew offered no such homecoming. His desire is eschatological, and so Clare aligns his personal longing for nature with his Christian longing for a reunion with God. In 1841—the year of his escape from the High Beech asylum, his long and thwarted walk home, and his re-institutionalization—Clare turned his hand to paraphrasing Bible passages.⁶⁴ Clare turned to the Bible when he was at his most dispossessed, his most homeless. Houghton-Walker offers the turmoil of 1841 to apologize for the poetic weakness of the paraphrases, which “do not show Clare at his best”: “That Clare writes at this highly emotional time is itself significant, and we should perhaps be lenient in consideration of the quality of the paraphrases, or at least bear the conditions of their construction in mind” (119). I agree that the singular intensity of the time of writing is significant, but not as an excuse for weak verse. Clare's upheaval in 1841 makes the biblical paraphrases exemplary texts in a discussion of Clare's ecology, his search for home, which his journey to Essex proves to have been an all-consuming quest at that time.

Ecocriticism, and ecological thinking generally, has a long-standing fascination toward the creation story of Genesis. Its phrasing and interpretations, and the resulting and diverging cosmologies that ensue, are the source of much debate, such as that over

⁶⁴1841 was a very prolific year for Clare generally. Tim Chilcott has put together an anthology of Clare's writing, both poetic and prose, for that year alone entitled *John Clare: The Living Year 1841*.

whether Genesis 1:28 advocates “dominion” or “stewardship.”⁶⁵ Given the tenor of so much of Clare’s nature poetry, an inclination toward Genesis, the story of a well-proportioned, planned creation and the perception of its goodness, would be understandable and even expected for Clare. Genesis also contains the story of Eden, the original union operative throughout so much of Clare’s thinking, representing both the original unity with nature and the unity between man and woman which he also desired with Mary and which acted as a trope for original unity in his poetry. In 1841, however, Clare does not look for an imaginative refuge and balm in the comforting story of Eden, nor even justification in the story of banishment from Eden. In his paraphrases, Clare skips the wonders and original unity of Genesis entirely and turns instead to the homelessness of Exodus.

The only paraphrase with a date attached, possibly Clare’s first paraphrase, was “written on April 30 1841” (qtd. in Robinson and Powell), according to his notes. Given the exodus he would embark upon just two months later, the passage is prophetic: “ISRAEL PASSING OVER THE RED SEA.” It is just two lines, taken from either Exodus 15:1 or 21:

the Lord He Has Triumphed His People Are Free

The Horse & The Tyrant Are Whelmed In The Sea.

A central thread of the exodus story is displacement. The people begin homeless at home as captives in a strange land. The beginning of their freedom, the exodus from Egypt, is also the beginning of forty years of a nomadic existence, wandering in the wilderness

⁶⁵Lynn White, Jr.’s “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (1967) and John Passmore’s *Man’s Responsibility for Nature* (1974) have been central to this debate. Jürgen Moltmann in *God in Creation* (1985) also offers an ecological reading of Genesis focusing upon the Sabbath as a day ordained for appreciation of and delight in creation, to recognize and reflect upon its goodness.

between Egypt and the promised land—a land which no one who left Egypt would reach.⁶⁶ While the brief passage of the paraphrase is a joyful celebration of freedom, the renown of the story carries with it the implication of further trials and an impossible homecoming.

Conversations within biblical scholarship about the role of nature (or lack thereof) in the Old Testament tend to focus on a possible definition of early Judaism as a historical religion, in contrast to the natural religions of its neighbours:

Whereas ancient Near Eastern societies functioned in the framework of ‘mythopoeic thought,’ in which subject and object—the realm of nature and the realm of humanity, or the natural world and the divine—were not distinguished from one another, biblical culture made the first move toward speculative thought, which stands behind modern science, by distinguishing God from nature and identifying history, not cosmic phenomena, as full of divine meaning and purpose. (Hiebert 7)

Despite this natural-historical divide, some root the development of Judaism as a historical religion in its early relationship with the natural world. Israel’s early culture, it is thought, was influenced by the pastoralism of nomadic shepherds. They later settled among the Canaanites and adopted their agricultural way of life: “According to this view, Israel’s consciousness of nature—even more, its central religious and cultural tenets—can only be understood in the context of desert nomadism. As Israel’s formative environment, the desert and the specialized pastoral nomadism connected with it left an

⁶⁶With two possible exceptions—Joshua and Caleb—none of those who left Egypt were permitted to reach the promised land (Joshua 5:4-6).

indelible stamp on all later generations” (Hiebert 9). Theodore Hiebert points to an interpretation of the Cain and Abel story based upon this view, where Abel, the shepherd, represents the nomadic Israelite while Cain is the sedentary farmer—recall that Cain’s offering of grain is refused, while Abel’s meat offering is accepted (39).⁶⁷ Hiebert complicates the idea of a division between nature and history in early Judaism, however, arguing that the distinction is more a symptom of later interpretations than anything endemic to the culture. He points to the indeterminate language of religious texts for support, like the uncertainty over the interpretation of “spirit”:

rûah, a widely used term, can be employed for the common wind, for the breath of human beings, and for the being of God. It moves so easily across the boundaries Idealists have drawn between spiritual and material that one is often at a loss to translate it in modern terms that rely so heavily on idealistic categories. In Genesis 1:2, where the *rûah elohîm*, ‘Spirit of God,’ hovers over the waters before creation, are we to understand it as the physical wind of God, or as the spiritual presence of God, or are these categories not operative or, on the other hand, interrelated in Israelite thought? (17)

God and nature may not be as radically separate in the Hebrew Bible as some have supposed.

Nevertheless, the thematic connection between nomadism and cosmology is provocative, whether or not it has credence in the particular instance of Judaic history. It opens the possibility of an understanding of nature framed within a nomadic context, one

⁶⁷ Hiebert finds this interpretation in Peter Ellis’ *The Yahwist: The Bible’s First Theologian*.

of movement and change without a static rootedness in place. The peculiar understanding of place that emerges from this narrative is one that contrasts the mythopoeic natural divinities of landed peoples. The *locus* of a people on the move is in flux, so the *genius* cannot rest. Through the polysemous language of the Hebrew Bible, Hiebert points to the idea that God can be of nature without being of a specific natural place or phenomenon. Regardless of the historical accuracy of Judaic nomadism, the nomadic movement of the Israelites (the forty years in the desert) is the narrative that has attracted Clare. Clare looked past the creation story of Genesis and the creator God to the exilic God of Exodus, with a nature already present and already foreign and other. The nature encountered by the wandering Israelites in the desert is already proleptically present in Clare's two-line paraphrase. It is far different from the pleasant nature of Eden, which Adam and Eve lightly gardened. Here, divinity works through humanity and nature to exact revenge and ensure flight for the Israelites. The parting of the Red Sea presents the (at least) double identity of nature as both beneficent and deadly. The waters part for the Israelites to allow them safe passage, then quickly converge to destroy the Egyptians. Unlike the *genius loci* of other, landed belief systems, the divinity of the homeless Israelites is unhomey—a transcendent God who like the weather is everywhere at once, natural without residing *in* nature. The natural world that the Israelites traverse, and to which Clare is so drawn, is therefore wholly mysterious and miraculous.

Clare's paraphrase of "Solomon's Prayer" engages this mysterious otherness of nature through the impossibility of a dwelling place for God. The passage addresses the construction of the temple at Jerusalem, a house for God among the people. Previously, the exilic God has also been wandering like the Israelites and, in this sense, homeless:

“the Lord hath made known / He would dwell in thick darkness with nature alone” (1-2). The construction of the temple is a call for God to finally dwell with his people in the land promised to them. Solomon says that he has “built an house where faith bows the knee / & built up a grand habitation for thee / & made thee a place for thy dwelling forever / There thy mercey may rest & thy love never sever” (3-6). It is a homecoming for God: an end to the nomadic life. As opposed to the former restless wandering, God would now be static, firmly fixed in place like the people of Israel: “Since the day that I brought forth my people from dread / From Egypt & bondage no city was named / In the tribes of all Israel no dwelling proclaimed / To build me an house that my name might be there / ... / But my name now shall dwell in fair Jerusalem” (14-17, 18). Solomon quickly questions this homecoming, however, with the recognition that the frame of the temple cannot possibly serve to contain God: “But will God in deed make his dwelling with men / On the earth will our prayers & petitions so gain thee / When the heaven of heavens hath not room to contain thee / How much less this temple which now I have built” (64-67). God is necessarily elsewhere. The temple cannot truly be a dwelling place in the usual sense of the term, but is instead a portal for communication: “Thou God of all Israel before thee I pray / That thy eyes may look over this house night & day / ... / Hear thou from thy dwelling place even in heaven / & hearing O Lord let our sins be forgiven” (73-74, 79-80). Solomon uses the same language, that of dwelling, for both the temple and for heaven. The temple is intended to be God’s home, but Solomon must acknowledge that God must instead be homeless, never fixed in place. Clare’s paraphrase choices tend to offer the promise of home, only to have it withdrawn.

In his paraphrase of Job, Clare engages the “thick darkness” in which God, in

Solomon's prayer, would dwell "with nature alone." He recreates Job as a sermon on nature's mystery. Job had absorbed Clare's attention in 1841; Clare wrote four distinct sections of Job that form a continuous narrative from chapters 38 to 41. Given Clare's biography, his attraction to Job is easily understandable. He felt himself punished throughout his life for having aspirations beyond his station. Who was John Clare to address the Muse?⁶⁸ He was ridiculed and often suffered ill health. He had lost the one he considered his first wife, and then lost the second through his institutionalization. What better character than Job to express these frustrations, who, guiltless, had nevertheless lost everything? Both seem at the whim of fortune while they yearn for certainty. Clare expresses an early love for Job in his "Sketches" (5). His was an upbringing accustomed to hardship:

In cases of extreeme poverty my father took me to labour with him and made me a light flail for threshing, learing me betimes the hardship which adam and Eve Inflicted upon their childern by their inexperienced misdeeds, incurring the perpetual curse from god of labouring for a livlihood, which the teeming earth is said to have produced of itself before, but use is second nature, at least it learns us patience. (3)

The virtue of patience is the end goal of this ancestral hardship, though a virtue unenthusiastically achieved. Patience is proverbially Job's virtue, as he endures his many tragedies with a stoic disposition expressed in the famous adage, "the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21).

⁶⁸When Clare addresses a muse, it is in humble, sometimes even apologetic tones, for he cannot reconcile his station in life with his poetic aspiration: "If love for thee in clowns be calld a crime / Forgive presumption—O thou queen of ryhme / Ive lovd thee long I cannot bid farwell ("To the Rural Muse [a]" 28-30).

Reading past the first chapter of Job, however, one finds him anything but patient. While at first Job has not “charged God foolishly” (1:22), by the third chapter, he begins to charge everything else, cursing his very birth: “Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?” (3:11). His so-called comforters, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, insist that Job must have sinned in order to deserve such punishment. God is just, they argue, and so Job’s hardship must be warranted. Job furiously disagrees: he knows, as the readers know, that he is in fact innocent. Job refutes his comforters’ arguments with a staunch maintenance of his innocence, coupled with a bitter lament for his state. The comforters presume to know the nature of God, into which schema Job cannot fit his experience. Clare could identify with Job’s misfortune. To paraphrase “the fine hebrew Poem of Job” (“Sketches” 5) would have perhaps been therapeutic: he could describe Job’s suffering, his many losses, perhaps inject some of Helpston to make it more personal. He could find strength in Job’s perseverance in his own innocence against his accusing comforters, and triumph in his final vindication by God’s concluding words.

But Clare does none of these things. He skips nearly all these episodes. Indeed, despite the parallels between their conditions, he barely mentions Job the character at all. The paraphrase consists entirely of God’s auto-theodicy. God self-justifies without any reference to Job’s specific situation, and does not condescend to weigh in on the debate between Job and his comforters. Rather, he chides them all for their presumption—the comforters for presuming to know the nature of God; Job, revealingly, for presuming to know the nature of himself. The very mystery of God is emphasized through the mystery of the world around them, which God has created. In doing so, God emphasizes their

nature as created and finite and therefore unable to know or attain certainty.

God speaks to Job “Out of the whirlwind & the darkening storm” (38:2),⁶⁹ giving a catalogue of natural phenomena the source and control of which Job cannot comprehend: “Where wast thou mortal when I formed & laid / ‘Foundations of the earth & sea – declare / ‘If thou hast understanding think & speak / ‘Who hath the measures laid & knowest thou / ‘Or who hath stretched the line upon its base / ‘Whereon are earths foundations fastened” (38:7-12). This mode of enquiry continues throughout the passage, detailing the mystery of the things of the earth and the sky and emphasizing the inability of Job and his comforters to comprehend them. God’s response reveals and restores the world around them as mystery. Like poetry, God’s speech “strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms” (Shelley “A Defence of Poetry” 505). This goal is achieved through reference to an origin. I read the origin operating here as it does according to Derrida, a firm, fixed centre that would ground existence and give the illusion of “a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude” (“Structure” 352). God’s speech in Job reaffirms Derrida’s

⁶⁹In the Bible, when God appears to humanity, it is in the guise of a natural phenomenon; moreover, the chosen phenomenon is usually singularly fleeting when it appears in nature. In Genesis, before the creation of humanity, God is not described but simply is and acts without mediating terms. Only after the appearance of humanity does God take forms, for biblically, this is the advent of relation. Therefore, after Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree and have clothed themselves, God arrives not as a visible form, but as an animated voice: Adam and Eve hear “the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (8). Voice is ephemeral, coterminous with the breath: God’s voice, however, can walk. Similarly, God appears to Moses in the form of a bush that burns but is not consumed (Exodus 3:2). God appears to the wandering Israelites as both a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to lead the way (Exodus 13:21)—again, ephemeral phenomena given a strange longevity. These phenomena are all vehicles for God to relate with humanity. It is often made clear that God is *not* the things themselves, but elsewhere, which is perhaps most eloquently expressed when God comes to Elijah: “behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: [12] And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice” (1 Kings 19: 11-2). God speaks through natural phenomena made more mysterious, in a way made unnatural, through their strange endurance, revealing God’s own mystery as being always elsewhere and other.

postulate that “the totality *has its center elsewhere*” (352). In fact, in Job, it is the centre itself that speaks, affirming itself to be elsewhere. God’s discussion of origins emphasizes their inaccessibility and incomprehensibility. The origin’s absence (whether the origin be God, truth, nature, etc.—the transcendental signified) refuses the comfort of certainty and “extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (354). Ecologically, this absence denies the possibility of certainty of the world around us, and the possibility of rest. The world, our home, is other to us, facing us and insisting upon us.

Clare’s paraphrase of Job concludes with the leviathan. Its description takes up the entire 41st chapter, and concludes Clare’s paraphrase, leaving out the 42nd chapter where Job and the comforters recognize their folly and are reconciled with God, and where Job’s good fortune is reinstated several-fold. Surprisingly, given Clare’s desire for union, Clare ignored this chapter, much like he ignored the earlier chapters of Job. Despite the similarities between them, Clare is not drawn to the story of Job, but to the poetry. The absorbing power of the natural description in Job is very similar to Clare’s own descriptive poetry, where images roll one over another in a joyful deluge. The writer of Job suffers from a similar vulnerability. The description of the leviathan, the last in a long list of natural wonders, comprises an entire chapter, a chapter with hardly a mention either of Job or God. Clare writes a second version of this chapter as well, with shorter lines. The wonder of the leviathan takes over the narrative as the writers (both Clare and the Job author) extol its dimensions and behaviours. At the beginning, it flows from the preceding narrative, addressed to Job as “thou”: “Canst thou with hooks Leviathan draw out / ... / Will he to thee a supplication make / ... / Will he with thee make covenant – or

thou / Make him for aye thy servant or thy slave” (41:1, 5, 7-8). Soon Job is forgotten, however, and an extended and joyful ekphrasis ensues:

His eyes are like the mornings bright and fair
 Out of his mouth breath comes like burning lamps
 & issuing sparks leap out as living fire
 His nostrils as a boiling chaldron smokes
 His breath is kindled coals – & terrors flames
 Come issuing from his mouth in terrors play
 In’s neck like to a mountain strength remains
 & sorrow before him is turned to joy. (35-42)

For both Clare and the writer of Job, the intense focus of the leviathan passage disrupts the composition. In Clare’s earlier verse, this disruptive focus defamiliarizes Helpston. Here, Clare’s home expands to include the universe, where the object of description is already unfamiliar and mythical. So wondrous is the leviathan that “sorrow before him turns to joy.” Given the obvious delight that both Clare and the Job writer take in creating this rolling, exuberant description, I read this line as a testament to the joy of difference and otherness. The leviathan’s appearance is monstrous; the preceding lines even call hellfire to mind. Its existence is so other to us, so uncommon, that it defies one’s ability to envision it. The verses here must swell and multiply paratactically in an effort to accommodate its description. The very fact of its existence, one so other to ourselves and so incomprehensible, is cause for jubilation. It is a testament to the other—that there is something beyond us and beside us and that we are not all. Figures like the leviathan disrupt the possibility of total communion and insist upon otherness.

At every turn, Clare's biblical paraphrase project resists his readers' expectations. Clare does not turn to the Bible for the comfort of a transcendental ideal. Instead of the Paradisaical home of Genesis, he looks to the wandering of Exodus; instead of the final absolution of Job, he looks to the unsettling description of the monstrous leviathan. In his verse, he does not accept the offered comfort. Clare's most powerful expression of resistance is when he confronts the ultimate consummation of the Christian faith: the New Jerusalem. While most of his biblical paraphrases were taken from the Old Testament, Clare turned toward the end of the project to two very specific and related passages of the New Testament. They are both apocalyptic visions from the beginning and end of the New Testament, the first from the Gospel of Matthew and the second two chapters from Revelation, including the very last lines of the Bible. At this point in the project, Clare engaged the Christian hope for reunion that had sustained him for so long. The vision offers much that would soothe Clare, primarily the hope for a restoration of an earth outside of time that is no longer affected by the change that necessarily destroys. Clare made some very telling alterations and additions, however, that indicate that this vision, in the end, did not satisfy. Clare could not leave the fallen earth and not look back.

Though Clare begins with Matthew, Revelation clearly absorbed his attention, given the amount of it he paraphrased. It is not a simple paraphrase, however; Clare's peculiar additions to the biblical text reveal his frustrated hopes for the promise of Revelation's vision. He begins with the vision of the new heaven and new earth, "For the first earth was fled with its deeds unforgiven" (3). Revelation does not offer a reformed, recovered earth like Clare desired; it is instead a radical break with the earth Clare knew

and loved despite its many flaws. The new earth, where God dwells with men beyond time, is eternally in bloom, with “all things made new” (23). It is an unchanging earth: “In no wise shall enter any thing to defile / & no abomination of evil come nigh / No wickedness working deception or guile / Nor any that forgeth or maketh a lie” (103-6). Falsehood cannot enter here to tell its ever changing lie; nature will be forever green. It is meant to be a joyful homecoming, with the names of the twelve once dispersed tribes written upon the foundations. Despite Clare’s longing for eternity, he cannot help but betray his hesitation before this ultimate reunion.

Clare followed the biblical text very closely, as he did in other paraphrases. He made several small additions to the text of Revelation, however, that are themselves very revealing. In his paraphrase, Clare follows the description of the New Jerusalem faithfully, offering an account of its architecture and riches. As he does so, he cannot help but draw comparisons with the old, fallen world. The fourth foundation of the New Jerusalem, for instance, “was an emerald green as the waves / Of the earth that was vanished with oceans & graves” (77-78). The twelfth foundation of amethyst was “blue / As violets that in the old fallen world grew” (83-84). The street of the city was paved with gold transparent as “the waves of a brook” (88). None of these natural comparisons are present in the biblical account—they are all Clare’s. He cannot help but think back to the natural wonders of the fallen world and the nature he so loved, though both should now be far surpassed in an eternal union. In the light of the New Jerusalem, Clare appears homesick. He cannot help but think, upon learning of the perishing of the fallen earth, that the fallen ocean that had now run dry “had rolled since the creation of man” (6)—again, Clare’s addition.

Clare's paraphrase of the New Jerusalem invites a comparison with another, more famous representation of the ultimate Christian destination: William Blake's *Jerusalem*. The two visions are quite different from one another in style and content. Being a paraphrase, of course, Clare's vision keeps much closer to the biblical text. Blake's vision, on the other hand, re-creates the Christian narrative in a radically new poetic mythology, in keeping with that most famous statement which is uttered by Los in the poem but which can be read as an encapsulation of Blake's poetics: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's" (1.20). While Blake's account of the New Jerusalem diverges most markedly from the vision of Revelation, the core project of reunion remains. The entire poem imaginatively narrates a series of movements (between the characters and their spectres and emanations) toward identity, culminating in the restoration of Jerusalem to Albion. While the style is extraordinarily different from the Bible, the substance, or the *telos*, is constant. While Clare's paraphrase varies only marginally from the biblical source text, his small alterations reveal an anxiety about the *telos* which make his version a distinct poetic vision. Clare resists the final reconciliation, the ultimate identity, that Blake embraces. The paraphrase project itself can be read as a statement of resistance to the dominant narrative and an insistence upon relation, since its mode of re-telling demands relation with an original text.

The twenty-second chapter of Revelation provides a fuller description of the New Jerusalem in all its stasis. It is always day, the sod is always fertile, and the trees are always in bloom. It sounds very much like Clare's ideal, according to Houghton-Walker's assessment and, indeed, according to many such indications throughout Clare's verse. And yet, the nostalgic comparisons he draws indicate a dissatisfaction now that he

is faced with the object of his desire. There is something about this vision, it seems, to which he cannot entirely subscribe. One possible point of contention might be the vision's urban sophistication—it is very much a city, paved with precious metals and jewels. In the fallen world, it would be considered a highly constructed, artificial place, though in the context of Revelation, being made by God, perhaps terms like artifice no longer hold. Nevertheless, it is a vision of a landscape entirely unfamiliar to Clare's rural experience, and virtually devoid of the unkempt and rugged landscape and its many varied dwellers that he holds so dear. Though in his early writing he cannot abide nature's flaws, in his later writing he cannot abide its perfection. He can find a home in neither.

Clare's paraphrase project concludes with a strange passion at Revelation's conclusion. At the end of the apocalyptic vision, Revelation, and therefore the Bible, ends with a severe warning:

To every man living I now testify
 That hears the words of this book – & yet doeth the sin
 To add any thing unto this prophecy
 God shall send him the plagues that are written therein
 & if any man take from this book – dealing strife
 God shall take out his part from the volume of life

& in the most holy city shall meet with no home (61-67)

The threatened consequence is significant, and would be especially so to Clare: to “meet with no home” (67). Clare certainly does not make any substantial change to the content

of the prophecy. We have, however, just witnessed him make several additions to the wording of the prophecy in his comparisons of the New Jerusalem with the fallen world. Depending upon how one reads this passage, in paraphrasing it, Clare might be said to be altering the very warning against alteration. These concluding lines from Revelation, with their threat of ultimate, eternal homelessness, clearly reflect Clare's frustrated desires in life. Dissatisfied with the changing, fallen world, Clare laid up his hopes for the next world. Yet here, at the vision of the end, we see him reluctant, hesitantly looking back upon the fallen world, like Lot's wife, with nostalgia for its beauty. Clare's similes bring the old world into the new. According to his own religion, however, according to the text he paraphrases, one cannot dwell in the New Jerusalem and look back. As Jesus says in Luke, and as Clare would have certainly known, "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (9:62). Even at this, the very end, Clare's paraphrase of Revelation reveals that his search for home does not end.

5. Homeless at Home

In 1841, the same year that he meditated upon home through his biblical paraphrases, Clare escaped from the High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest and began to walk eighty miles to Northborough. Speaking of "I Am," Siobhan Craft Brownson says that in his later years Clare reached the resolution "that in death he could finally, unambiguously, be part of nature" (63). In *Child Harold*, he hopes for a final reconciliation with Mary Joyce: "Mary thy name loved long still keeps me free / Till my lost life becomes a part of thee" (90-91). Unable to wait for death, Clare tried for a reconciliation, a homecoming, in life. This is Clare's final flitting. The walk home took

him four days with few provisions: at times, he ate grass by the roadside, according to his written account entitled “Journey out of Essex.”⁷⁰ Clare travelled expecting to find Mary at home. Of course, he did not find her there, since they were never married and she never lived there. A greater obstacle to their union was her death from fire years earlier (Bate *John* 457). His desire for a union with nature, symbolized in his imagined union with Mary, was a desire for a union in death in more ways than Clare realized, or at least consciously acknowledged. The following recounts his being discovered on the road and his arrival at Northborough, bewildering for Clare and no doubt heartbreaking for Patty:

bye and bye I passed Walton and soon reached Werrington and was making for the Beehive as fast as I could when a cart met me with a man and a woman and a boy in it when nearing me the woman jumped out and caught fast hold of my hands and wished me to get into the cart but I refused and thought her either drunk or mad but when I was told it was my second wife Patty I got in and was soon at Northborough but Mary was not there neither could I get any information about her further then the old story of her being dead six years ago which might be taken from a bran new old Newspaper printed a dozen years ago but I took no notice of the blarney having seen her myself about a twelvemonth ago alive and well and as young as ever— so here I am homeless at home and half gratified to feel that I can be happy any where (160)⁷¹

⁷⁰“on the third day I satisfied my hunger by eating the grass by the road side which seemed to taste something like bread I was hungry and eat heartily till I was satisfied and in fact the meal seemed to do me good” (159).

⁷¹He makes a similar statement in the letter to Mary accompanying the account in the same notebook:

Being “homeless at home” is Clare’s most profoundly ecological statement. The search for a lost home is unsuccessful; the reunion with a lost nature is denied him. It is noteworthy also that if Helpston is considered his home, Clare nevertheless walks to Northborough, the site of his first displacement. Home is always elsewhere, always other, and yet home nonetheless. And so Clare is “homeless at home and half gratified to feel that [he] can be happy any where.” This passage is a recognition of the contingent and relational quality of home, and what is ecologically empowering, a gratification in the face of this knowledge—or half-gratification, at least.

Where, then, is home? The question is of the utmost importance for ecological criticism for it addresses the very foundations of its theory. Much environmental thought has clung to the material fact of the earth in order to ground itself (and ourselves) against a tide of industrialism and relativism that diminishes nature and questions its existence, respectively. Thus Clare is fixed in the specific locus of Helpston while his verse is fixed in its descriptive mode. The difference between art and nature is variously elided and exaggerated by ecocriticism, for poetry obscures material nature at the same time that it offers an avenue for potential reunion with it. This line of thought participates in the two assumptions that for Stewart found the experience of nostalgia: “First, the assumption

My dear wife

I have written an account of my journey or rather escape from Essex for your amusement and hope it may divert your leisure hours – I would have told you before now that I got here to Northborough last friday night but not being able to see you or to hear where you was I soon began to feel homeless at home and shall bye and bye feel nearly hopeless but not so lonely as I did in Essex – for here I can see Glinton church and feeling that Mary is safe if not happy and I am gratified though my home is no home to me my hopes are not entirely hopeless while even the memory of Mary lives so near me God bless you My dear Mary Give my love to your dear and beautifull family and to your Mother – and believe me as I ever have been and ever shall be

My dearest Mary
Your affectionate Husband
John Clare (160-1)

that immediate lived experience is more 'real,' bearing within itself an authenticity which cannot be transferred to mediated experience; yet second, the assumption that the mediated experience known through language and the temporality of narrative can offer pattern and insight by virtue of its capacity for transcendence" (22-23). To remedy the loss of the natural world through the creation of a "linguistic analogue" (McKusick 88) is a task for which complete success is an impossibility. It demands a transgression or dissolution of the border between nature and culture that the task itself, and the desire that precipitates it, establishes and defends. Barrell, for instance, keen to keep Clare in Helpston, criticizes his early poetry for problems of authenticity, detecting other poetic voices like those of Thomson, Goldsmith, Gray, and Milton. When Clare thus consciously tries to orient himself within a literary tradition, Barrell charges that the poetry becomes "very confused" and "distort[ed]" (110). Nevertheless, he admits the fundamental problem that "[t]he diffusion of literacy and the availability to Clare of works of literature, which enabled him in the first place to conceive of becoming a poet, were also themselves of course part of the process of delocalisation" (188). The literary tradition made Clare's poetry possible at the same time that it drew Clare away from the supposed authentic site of his poetry—nature. While Bate also tends to read Clare through the land, he is at the same time sensitive to the peculiar placelessness of poetry; it is nevertheless "the place where he found his dwelling and reconciled himself to his own deprivation in the material world" (*John* 385). Poetry is a home that provides no shelter for Clare, however, since it is unable to reconcile the divergent worlds he longs to simultaneously inhabit. Clare may claim to have "found the poems in the fields, / And only wrote them down," but there was inevitably both loss and gain in the translation

from earth to text. His desire for a “language that is ever green” (“Pastoral Poetry” 13) puts him at odds with his own medium. As Bate contends, even if “‘poesy’s self’ was really nature, then Clare could not dwell there. He was a creature of language: though found in the fields, his poetry existed on the page” (*John* 385).

The painful division between nature and culture divided Clare’s sense of place as well as his sense of self. Bate holds that Clare “had derived his profoundest sense of personal identity from his immediate surroundings” (*John* 363). This “profoundest sense of personal identity” necessarily comes very much into question at a time when “Nature herself seems on the flitting.” If Clare’s identity was derived from nature, it would necessarily participate in the fluidity and uncertainty that he found there. Clare makes such a point in an ecologically intriguing letter to Eliza Emerson in 1830 (before the move to Northborough, notably) in which he discusses the arrogance and falsity of the first person pronoun:

that little personal pronoun ‘I’ is such a presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow that he thinks himself qualified for all company all places & all employments go where you will there he is swaggering & bouncing⁷² in the pulpit the parliament the bench aye every where even in this my letter he has intruded 5 several times already who can tell me where he is not or one of his family thats his brother or from how many pen points he is at this moment dropping into his ambitions on humble extances he is a sort of Deity over the rest of the alphabet being here there & everywhere {at one & the same time} he is a mighty vapour in

⁷² Mark Storey notes that there is a gap in the manuscript here.

grammer he grows in a pedantical nuisance & often an O would be a truer personification in philosophy a juggling gossip in oratory a consequential blusterer & in fashion a pretender to every thing. (*Letters* 504)

Kövesi reads this passage as a statement against egotism, seeing in it Clare's "desire to free himself of the shackles of his physical subject position" ("John" 81-82). Clare's letter may remind one of an 1818 letter by Keats, where he famously claims that "a Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity" (*Letters* 295). There is a similar sense here, especially given the resemblance, both orthographically and philosophically, between I and 1 and between O and 0 (zero). In this letter, Clare's sense of identity, like his sense of nature, is uncertain, flitting between presence and absence. In this passage, however, he expresses this uncertainty in linguistic and textual terms. Like Martha and Mary, Clare belongs to the text—but where is it? Clare desires to keep nature and culture separate in order to preserve the former against the corrupting influence of the latter, but finally comes to the at once painful and joyful knowledge that he is at the same time a creature of both. Clare aims to resolve this untenable situation in an attempt to create a third place in which to dwell, the place of natural poetry.

In "Pastoral Poesy," Clare tries to resolve his paradoxical poetic placelessness through a re-imagination of poetry beyond the purely verbal:

True poesy is not in words
 But images that thoughts express
 By which the simplest hearts are stirred

To elevated happiness. (1-4)

Poetry is not confined to words but is instead imagined as a communicative power, a non-verbal natural process. “Pastoral Poesy” abounds in imagery that is both natural and highly affective, like “[t]he wild flower neath the shepherds feet” that “[l]ooks up & gives him joy” (11, 12) and the “awthorn blossoms” that “soon as seen / Give may to every heart” (15-16). McKusick points to a pun throughout the poem that plays with both nature and culture, in which Clare spells “poesy” and “posy” the same way (88).⁷³ While natural entities have the capacity for poetry, Clare still considers it “a language” (9). For Clare, the union of language and nature should constitute poetry as “[a] language that is ever green” (13). However, the two are not united; a symptom of this disunion is that, for Clare, poetry is singularly thoughtless. Language and nature cannot be rationally reconciled, and so the imagined union inclines toward emotional communication. Although in poetry “[a]n image to the mind is brought,” the effect is upon one’s “happiness” which “enjoys / An easy thoughtlessness of thought / & meets excess of joys” (25, 26-28).

The experience of “joy” is tremendously important for Clare, and is particularly connected with nature. Bate points out that “joy” is the most common noun in Clare’s nature poetry (*John* 396). “Joy” appears throughout his series of bird poems: the nightingale’s “joys are ever green” (“The Nightingales Nest” 41); the robin sings with undertones “[s]o rich—joy almost choaks his little throat / With extacy & from his own heart flows / That joy himself & partner only knows” (“The Robins Nest” 73-75). Joy seems here an experience so overwhelming that it threatens annihilation; the expression

⁷³ Elsewhere, Clare also uses “ryhme” to mean both “rhyme” and “rime,” as in the poem “To the Rural.”

of joy almost chokes the robin's throat. We see this threat again in "The Moorehens Nest" where Clare addresses the power of poetry as "over powering sweet / That renders hearts that love thee all unmeet / For this rude world its trouble & its care / Loading the heart with joys it cannot bear" (1-4). Joy features in Clare's poetry as a transgressive experience, characterized by an excess of feeling that opens the individual toward an experience of the other. "Joy" is for Clare, as for the nightingale above, a "green" experience, much like Mary and nature's truth. It is ecological in the truest sense, opening the way to a sense of oikos. Clare takes the snipe as his teacher; witnessing its joy, Clare learns the way to his own: "Thine teaches me / Right feelings to employ / That in the dreariest places peace will be / A dweller & a joy" ("To the Snipe" 84-88). Joy gives ecological insight into the experience of nature as home, oikos. Such is the experience of Clare's joyful shepherd: "The world is in that little spot / With him—& all beside / Is nothing all a life forgot / In feelings satisfied" ("Pastoral Poesy" 29-32). The joyful shepherd sees "a World in a Grain of Sand" (Blake "Auguries of Innocence" 1). Joy is the ecological passion.

That joy tends toward an overflow of limits invites comparison with the theme of union with nature in death. As discussed above, Clare did entertain such thoughts. Though vertiginous, joy, however, does not ultimately end in death for Clare; joy *almost* chokes the robin's little throat. Difference remains. Joy springs from the difference between self and other, human and animal, world and earth. Poetically, it is the recognition of the abiding difference between language and nature. This remaining difference is essential to Adam Potkay's definition of joy as that which distinguishes it from ecstasy. Potkay defines joy as delight in the prospect of reunion: "Joy is what we

feel” when “what was lost is found; what was missing restored; what constrained is lifted; what we desire arrives; or what arrives satisfies a desire we hadn’t known we’d had”

(vii). In its particularly Romantic mode, “joy breaks down the boundaries between separate self and other, humanity and nature. It bestows a glorious we-mode upon the earth, making it seem like heaven” (1). Potkay also connects it with the oneness of the womb, “the original passion of infancy” (2)—the unity of an existence before time that Clare so idealized as both the beginning and end of life and “the utopia of biology and symbol united within the walled city of the maternal” for which the nostalgic longs (Stewart 23). As such, joy is “what we often speak of as unspeakable, a word that marks the limits of language as it gestures toward the undifferentiated unity before words were or after they shall cease to function as they familiarly do. Linked to a residual sense of un-individuated being, joy emerges as a vocal concern at those moments ... in which self comes to seem a burden” (Potkay 2). Although Potkay connects joy with original unity, it is ecstasy, which joy passes into at its limit, that he connects with death “or non-self” that “shadows life in the story of joy” (25). Ecstasy, *ek-stasis*, means being *out of place*. Joy occurs in place, radically uncertain though that place be: the present world. Ecstasy dissolves the self and its boundaries and therefore offers a temporary experience of unity otherwise experienced only in death; joy, on the other hand, maintains the tension between the two. Joy simultaneously maintains the boundaries of the self while opening the self toward relation with others and with the world in an ecological community: a community made possible through difference.

As we have seen, the narrative of a return to nature, rooted in the myth of a human Fall from an original union with nature, has been influential throughout the history of

environmental thought. Considering this desire for communion from the perspective of community theory complicates its apparent simplicity and reveals latent operative elements that are ecologically troubling. In this context, a desire for reunion with or return to nature seems essentially a desire for immanence or total identity, which Jean-Luc Nancy theorizes as a desire for death (12). The program is present throughout Clare's writing as he yearns for a return to a multiply determined and mythical origin, variously identified as Nature, Mary, childhood, Helpston, or home. Nancy associates immanence with both death and nature, for it is in death that the condition of immanence is realized: "decomposition leading back to nature" (12). That Clare's longing for nature is connected with a desire for death erupts sporadically throughout his verse, crystallizing metaphorically in his desire for Mary. In the asylum verse, the connection becomes more central and explicit. Poems like "I Am" and "An Invite to Eternity" present both a radical questioning of identity and a final equation of identity with death, the site of total identity. "An Invite to Eternity" is an invite to a "sad non-identity" (14), "[t]o live in death and be the same" (19), "[t]o join the living with the dead" (30). Clare's embrace of joy prevents his relationship with nature from collapsing into the identity of death. In Clare's poetry, joy is an affect of the oikos.

In Clare's poetry, as in Nancy's thought, joy does not lead to total union but to community. "Pastoral Poesy" gives way to the joyful and dizzying enumeration of the wonders around him. The special emphasis of this poem, however, is the communicative power of nature's inhabitants, "natures poesy" (74) that runs through all. Nature's poesy is described oxymoronicly: the hills and moors speak to Clare with "[a] silence that discourses more / Then any tongue can do" (39-40). Similarly, the "woods are resting in

their shade / Of social loneliness” (43-44). Clare focuses upon the peculiar community of nature; through its silent discourse and social loneliness it expresses itself “[t]o those of musing mind” (50). “The poet in his fitful glee / & fancys many moods” (53-54) perceives the movements and sounds of nature as meaningful expressions. The poet meets the sound of the wind “as some strange melody / & poem of the woods” (55-56) which first “sings & whistles in his mind” (57) and finally borders upon intelligible expression when it “talks aloud” (58). Clare’s poet in “Pastoral Poesy” is an auditor, or a reader, of nature. He is a singularity relating with others. He is not overcome with desire for union; he does not want to *be*, but to *be with*. The focus of the poem is upon communication with and wonder at the other.

To this effect, Clare offers in the poem a vignette of domestic life—an elderly man at home. We meet him sitting on the threshold between inside and outside, where he seems happiest: “The old man full of leisure hours / Sits cutting at his door / Rude fancy sticks to tie his flowers” (81-83). Similarly, the fragrance of the “boxed edge borders” (89) that are “near his door / Hath been the comfort of his heart / For sixty years & more” (90-92). We quickly learn, however, that the man’s home is not his own, but is multiply divided between himself and others. In a telling example, “winters drifting showers” (94), the worst of nature’s elements from which the elderly couple shelters itself, are also companions. The sound of the driving rain against the “mossy thatch” (93) above “[t]o him & his old partner made / A music many hours / It patted to their hearts a joy” (95-97). Expressed here is no rush to erase the boundaries between the elderly couple and the elements. The boundaries are simultaneously sites of division and connection: the man sits at his door, and smells and sounds pass through. Here, music results when the

borders are encountered. Difference is a point of celebration.

The permeable boundaries of their home create a “humble comfort” (98): humble, I suggest, both in the sense of measured means of sufficiency and in the etymological sense of being near the earth.⁷⁴ Clare defines the elements that comprise this “humble comfort” as “nothing less / Then poesys power that gives to all / A cheerful blessedness” (102-4). The Romantic oikos in Clare’s poetry is the encounter of life’s boundaries between the self and the natural other. It is the ecological world of relation, where difference is maintained and celebrated. Relation makes dwelling possible, makes the world a home. Clare concludes the poem with the assurance that “poesy’s self’s a dwelling joy / Of humble quietness” (107-8). Poetry is defined through its relationship to home, but a home that defies containment. As in Wordsworth’s *Home at Grasmere*, the joy of dwelling is contingent upon the other dwellers. Clare’s poetic joy does not overcome the other dwellers, however; rather, it is a “biding joy” (109) that stays with the other over time, in the elderly man’s case “[f]or sixty years & more” (92), in co-existence of parallel lives. Joy makes possible the experience of community without a zeal for all-consuming union. Poetry’s dwelling joy travels through the world of others in wonder and respect. Abiding joy makes the world an abode.

This joyful poetic dwelling, this home, reappears in the last poem Clare ever wrote, “Birds Nests.”⁷⁵ Since it is a short poem, I quote it here in its entirety:

Tis Spring warm glows the South

⁷⁴ “OF. *umble, humble* (12th c. in Littré):—L. *humil-em* low, lowly, small, slight, mean, insignificant, base, f. *humus* ground, earth” (OED).

⁷⁵ Possibly composed just six months before he died. Bate describes the writing of the poem and the last months of Clare’s life in his biography (526-9). Clare died on the afternoon of 20 May 1864: “In his last years he had often said ‘I have lived too long’ and ‘I want to go home’” (529).

Chaffinchs carry the moss in his mouth
 To the filbert hedges all day long
 & charms the poet with his beautiful song
 The wind blows blea oer the sedgey fen
 But warm the sunshines by the little wood
 Where the old Cow at her leisure chews her cud. (1-7)

Despite the title, there is no bird nest in this poem, no home. One is perhaps suggested metonymically through the finch's action of carrying moss to the hedge, presumably in the process of creating a nest. Still, the bird only gets three lines out of seven, and those three also contain a hedge and a poet. The poem returns to the spirit of joyful cataloguing of his earlier work. It presents a series of associations; nature is set forth as relation between season, place, bird, hedge, poet, song, wind, fen, sun, wood, cow, and cud. There is no focal point or centre. The poet is given the central line, but he is introduced, ostensibly, as a subordinate clause to the bird, as he is affected by the bird's song. Barrell's study of Clare's syntax shows us that grammatical relationships, like subordination, are unimportant for Clare (156). Barrell indicates that Clare's rushed lines (achieved through the lack of punctuation), his disregard for the rules of grammar, and the multiplicity of images within his lines operate less semantically than musically (155). Such an understanding of Clare's method and effect would effectively link Clare with sound poetry, but Barrell retains a qualified importance for Clare's syntax. Clare does forge syntactical relationships, after all, but they are suppressed as much as possible in order to present the images "all as parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions" (157). Indeed, it

is unclear in the poem whether the chaffinch charms the poet with his beautiful song, or if, as in the first line's inverted subject-verb order of "warm glows the south," it is in the fact the poet who charms with his beautiful song.⁷⁶ The chaffinch is gendered male by "his mouth," so the *he* ("his") who grammatically possesses the "beautiful song" could be the chaffinch or the poet. Also, while Clare begins with "chaffinchs" plural, it quickly becomes singular in the same line.

In addition to his unstable grammar and punctuation, Clare's joyful description also resists a semblance of order. The bounds of one entity overflow into the next. It is not, as ecocriticism tends to hold, Clare's materially faithful description that privileges him as an ecological poet. Clare's description lacks a scientific method. Instead, his focus on the local and particular is so intense and involved that it disrupts his vision and defamiliarizes the object: "the things he describes ... are always becoming ... too striking, to take their place in an orderly, Claudian composition" (Barrell 136). Clare's intense focus disrupts itself and leads to a sense of uncertainty verging upon placelessness. The bird's nest, the home, is missing in the poem. Instead, the myriad others present in the poem compose the poem in their joyful, disordered relationships. Clare is an ecological poet not through his connection to the land, his rootedness, but his relation to nature as relation itself, a dwelling in nature as *oikos*. A fluid system, a process, a structure without a centre, ecology is, for Clare, the experience of poetic dwelling, of being "homeless at home," like the mystic bird that nests on water.

⁷⁶An uncertainty uncovered in conversation with J. Douglas Kneale.

Chapter 4

“The sensitive extension of the world”: Shelley’s ecological community from *Queen*

Mab to Prometheus Unbound

1. Shelley’s Paradoxical Ecology

Percy Bysshe Shelley stands out in this study, following discussions of Wordsworth and Clare. These last two have long been associated with nature. Even Clare, in whom critical interest is a more recent development, has been the subject of many ecocritical studies. Both Wordsworth and Clare are hailed as poets of nature and are, often, readily accepted as such. Shelley’s relationship to nature is more obviously in question. His work is less immediately amenable to an ecocritical reading. To date, there has been no book-length study of Shelley’s ecology.⁷⁷ This gap in the criticism is perhaps due in part to Shelley’s paradoxical relationship with nature, a paradox reflected in the divisiveness in the history of Shelley scholarship.

In his critical reception, Shelley appears variously as both ardent political reformer and spritely lyricist, Platonic idealist and radical empiricist. After decades of debate about Shelley’s place as one or the other, recent criticism complicates these binaries. In light of Romantic deconstruction, such as de Man’s reading of Shelley in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), criticism has become more comfortable with paradox and uncertainty; therefore, it need no longer be either/or, but a much more nuanced both/and in which Shelley’s idealism and materialism need not preclude one another.

⁷⁷The closest such book would be Morton’s *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste* (1994), but it focuses specifically upon Shelley’s diet and the politics of vegetarianism. The final chapter discusses Shelley’s role in ecocriticism.

Ecologically, Shelley manifests a capacity for paradox—Donald Davie calls it urbanity⁷⁸—making him unique among the Romantics like Wordsworth and Clare for his intellectual versatility. Through this paradoxical capability, Shelley appears as a “blithe spirit” (“Sky-Lark” 1) who is singularly capable of apprehending “the before unapprehended relations of things” (“Defence” 512).

Shelley’s poetics share in his paradoxical constitution, most poignantly summed up in his simultaneous earthliness and otherworldliness. Paradox is at the heart of Shelley’s conception of poetry as “at once the centre and circumference of knowledge” (531). The resulting plasticity of thought uniquely situates Shelley to create a cosmological vision of ecological community. Wordsworth and Clare tend to think community in microcosm first and then extrapolate it from the local to the global. Shelley’s ecological vision is cosmological from the start. His verse is rarely locodescriptive, and is rarely set in any identifiable place. When a place is specified, in “Mont Blanc” (1816), for instance, it is abstracted beyond any material recognition, to the point where one may wonder to what degree Mont Blanc itself is actually addressed in the poem: the “Ravine of Arve,” for instance, quickly becomes “Power in the likeness of the Arve” (12, 16). Shelley combines the earthly with the ethereal—the material processes of nature with the intangible, yet no less real, realms of intellect and affect—in order to render the common world uncommon and otherworldly. In his focus upon relation, between the earthly and ethereal, between human and non-human, and between self and other, he presents not an ecosystem as in Wordsworth or Clare, but a poetic

⁷⁸Davie discusses Shelley’s urbanity as his ability to address highly emotional and sublime subjects with a precise and highly constructed language. I connect this poetic urbanity with Shelley’s ability to combine the similarly disparate worlds of idealism and materialism.

vision of ecology itself.

Shelley's relationship with the natural world emerges in his poetry through natural images that are marked by otherworldliness and ethereality. Herbert E. Read sums up eloquently what he perceives as "the supreme type of Shelley's poetic utterance," in which "every image fades into air, every outline is dissolved in fire" (84). Shelley's tendency for abstraction would seem to put him at odds with materialist ecocriticism; however, he arrives at this abstraction through an intensely focused materialism. Shelley's consideration of material things, like Mont Blanc, ends up confronting their immateriality. His dissolving images are less true abstractions—moving away from the things themselves—than concretions—condensations that press inward until the material gives way beneath its own weight.

Shelley's figuration of ecological relation is strikingly human. Human relationships permeate his work, as a simple review of his titles attests: "Zeinab and Kathema" (1811), "Laon and Cythna" (1817), "Rosalind and Helen" (1818), "Julian and Maddalo" (1819). Human relationships form the core of his major works, such as the redemptive relationship between Prometheus and Asia in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and the tragic failure of relation between the Poet and the Arab maiden in "Alastor" (1816). Though the relationships take human form, they are not solely human in content; rather, they are also metaphors for ecological desires. The relationships are necessarily ecological, firstly, because ecology itself is relation; more specifically, they are ecological in their profound and expansive effects. In these works, human relation is the local and immediately accessible microcosm of a cosmologically ecological love. It represents the first encounter with an other: that first imaginative act of reaching out from the self to the

other. It thereby lays the foundation for the oikos. In Shelley's work, human relation represents the foundation of ethics: "The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own" ("Defence" 517). Therefore, for one to be "greatly good," one "must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own" (517). This empathy need not be confined to one's own species, nor is it so confined in the texts themselves. Two of Shelley's key visions of ideal reform—*Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*—are founded upon mutual empathy between all earthly things. In this chapter, I argue that these two visions form the poles between which Shelley's ecology unfolds.

Human relationships are integral to the realization of the oikos, the foundation of a community of others. *Queen Mab* (1813) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), written at opposite ends of Shelley's career, both incorporate this ideal and imaginatively manifest the growth of community from humanity outward. Prometheus' turn to sympathy, and his relationship with Asia, have effects of cosmological proportions; in the style of Revelation, it founds a heaven on earth. Prometheus' unbinding frees the entire earth from the bondage of custom and from intellectual and emotional famine, leading to a material difference in the earth's constitution. Earth's once "withered, old and icy frame" is rejuvenated, and the change affects its relations with those who share in its existence. All the "many children fair" of earth shall now "take / And interchange sweet nutriment" (3.3. 90, 95-96). It is a vision of ecological redemption founded upon relation.

Prometheus Unbound envisions the fulfillment of Queen Mab's prophecy: "O happy

Earth! reality of Heaven!” (9.1). Human affective relation, especially that between Prometheus and Asia, begins the revolution of the oikos.

Shelley is unique among the Romantics for his focus upon the ecological role of the human and upon the particularly sexual manifestation of this role. Sexual relationships are either conspicuously absent from or hidden in Wordsworth’s work.⁷⁹ Clare writes prolifically about sex in his later, institutionalized verse, but he often does so in his Byronic, satirical mode, where he seems to struggle with sex in frustrated, misogynist language. Unlike Wordsworth, sex occurs explicitly throughout Shelley’s work; unlike Clare, Shelley celebrates it as gift from nature, one with revolutionary potential. Sex performs multiply for Shelley as a very real interface between self and other, between physical and spiritual, and between human and non-human. Ecological joy, therefore, takes on very corporeal, earthly form.

In the visionary mode of the projects that bookend this chapter—*Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*—Shelley presents the interconnected world as other to itself. He offers a poetic realization of the unrealized potential of the present through a revelation of the world as relation, as a cosmological community of others. Shelley’s ecological community is the uncanny other of the world, an ideal with which he hopes it will relate. In this chapter, I will trace the development of Shelley’s vision of the Romantic oikos

⁷⁹This notion has a long tradition in Wordsworth criticism stretching back to his contemporaries. Hazlitt comments on Wordsworth’s “total disunion and divorce of the faculties of the mind from those of the body,” and notes that, “[f]rom the Lyrical Ballads, it does not appear that men eat or drink, marry or are given in marriage” (262). F.R. Leavis, claiming it a strength of Wordsworth, puts it most succinctly: “Sex . . . is virtually absent from Wordsworth’s poetry” (169). Jean H. Hagstrum traces the development of this perception in the third chapter of *The Romantic Body*, a perception he subsequently argues against. Nevertheless, apart from some passages of his earliest poetry, Wordsworth’s depiction of sexual relationships are often couched in abstracting imagery. Hagstrum himself, speaking about a passage of “Julia and Vaudracour,” must admit that the description of Wordsworth’s “ravished heart” is described in “fairly cool, structured, and not particularly inspired language” (81).

throughout his short but prodigious poetic life. I begin with a consideration of the beginnings of the oikos in *Queen Mab*, where Shelley's early interest in Lucretius creates a distinctly Epicurean vision of community. I then consider the transition from this early Epicurean vision to a more mature and philosophically complex vision of oikos, charting the course of Shelley's ecological thought throughout a series of key lyric poems: "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (1816), "Mont Blanc" (1816), "Alastor" (1816), and "The Cloud" (1820). In my reading, these works represent focused exercises in which Shelley thinks through his understanding of nature as both material presence and non-material question. These endeavours lead him away from the devoutly materialist conception of relation explored in *Queen Mab* and toward the mature vision of oikos presented in *Prometheus Unbound*, in which Shelley achieves his most complete representation of Romantic ecological community.

2. Relations of Things: The "first-beginnings" of Shelley's Oikos

"The everlasting universe of things" ("Mont Blanc" 1) and their "before unapprehended relations" ("Defence" 512) form the subject of much of Shelley's poetry and constitute, in part, his contribution to ecological thought. Shelley's materialism refuses to completely unite the human with the non-human. His specificity does not stop at such broad and, when closely considered, indefensible generalizations, however. He has a great regard for the specificity of things. In his regard for specificity, he takes a progressively ecological position that is foundational to a sense of oikos, or ecological community founded upon difference. The oikos supports the differences between things, but not a value hierarchy. Humanity, and each singular human, is part of the oikos as are

all other things in the universe of things.

Shelley's early admiration for Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (*The Nature of Things*, c. 50 BCE), and by extension Epicureanism, informed his initial regard for the things of the oikos.⁸⁰ Lucretius sets forth an entirely material perception and explanation of the universe. For Lucretius, virtually everything is material and perishable—the earth, the body, even the soul—because all things are composed of minute physical particles, the “first-beginnings,” or atoms. Atoms are everlasting because they cannot be divided; particular assortments of atoms, on the other hand, all come to an end as the atoms eventually disperse and form different configurations elsewhere (1.518-614). Understood through Lucretius, the universe of things, at its atomic level, is indeed everlasting. Though indestructibly material, the atomic level is nevertheless beyond humanity's sensible realm, unavailable to sensual perception. Atomism would therefore seem to contradict Shelley's belief that “nothing exists but as it is perceived” (“On Life” 506), itself an echo of Lucretius' statement that “what has seemed to these [the senses] at any given time to be true, is true” (4.499). Yet atomism derives from a devotion to the material, perceptible world. As with Clare's revelation of the homeless landrail's peculiar behaviour of laying eggs without a nest, Shelley's investigation into the present, material world recreates it as paradoxically otherworldly. Attention to atoms destabilizes the macroscopic world of sensible perception while maintaining its physical reality.

Humanity is no exception, being subject to the same universal laws of physical nature. In

⁸⁰Michael Vicario in *Shelley's Intellectual System and its Epicurean Background* (2007) discusses Shelley's reception of Lucretius as he appears in a nineteenth-century context, through the different editions available at the time and through Lucretius' influence upon thinkers whom Shelley admired. Paul Turner gives a succinct history of Shelley's familiarity with Lucretius in “Shelley and Lucretius” (1959).

Shelley's poetry, therefore, the human characters are described materially as well as psychically. The physicality of Shelley's subjects is often in the foreground, emphasizing humanity's egalitarian position as fellow thing amid the universe of things.

Queen Mab is Shelley's most explicitly Epicurean poem in which the unfolding of nature, synonymous with necessity at this point in Shelley's thinking, is extolled.⁸¹ It provides a record of Shelley's early ecological vision, which because of his Epicureanism is still, at this point, intensely material. Faithful to the Epicurean tradition even in its structure, the poem takes the form of the education of a student by an enlightened teacher, just as Lucretius addresses Memmius in *De Rerum Natura*, hoping to similarly educate the audience of the poem by proxy. *Queen Mab* is also very Epicurean in content; some of the ideas that Queen Mab relates to Ianthe are central to Lucretius' text as well, such as when she discusses the unfolding of nature without divine influence (*QM* 7.13-26, *DRN* 2.1090-92). However, while Queen Mab maintains that "There is no God! / Nature confirms the faith his death-groan sealed" (7.13-14), Lucretius acknowledges the existence of gods, though they do not live in the world and are blissfully uninvolved in the course of its history.⁸² It is Lucretius' atomism, however, that is the inspiration for the poem's physicality and dedication to the material present. Knowledge of atoms can

⁸¹Shelley describes "the doctrine of necessity" ("Notes" 260) in Note 12 to *Queen Mab*, VI.198 and opposes it to religion, which it would destroy. He defines religion as "the perception of relation in which we stand to the principle of the universe. But if the principle of the universe be not an organic being, the model and prototype of man, the relation between it and human beings is absolutely none" (261). Necessity replaces religion as a means of relation to the universe. Shelley's early Necessitarianism is indebted to his reading of d'Holbach, whose *Système de la Nature* he quotes in Note 11.

⁸²"it is impossible that you should believe . . . that any holy abode of the gods exist in any part of the world. For the nature of the gods, being thin and far removed from our senses, is hardly seen by the mind's intelligence; and since it eludes the touch and impact of the hands, it cannot possibly touch anything that we can touch" (5.146-52). Lucretius believes in gods, but they, like all things, are material, though made of atoms so thin and smooth that they are impervious to destruction.

present a scientific argument against human pride, the subject that occupies much of the poem. Through the permutations of atoms, humanity is reminded of its necessary and intimate relationship with the rest of existence. Since atoms are never destroyed, they must continuously join and divide in an everlasting act of creation; therefore, necessarily,

There's not one atom of yon earth
 But once was living man;
 Nor the minutest drop of rain,
 That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
 But flowed in human veins: (2.211-15)

In the Epicurean world of *Queen Mab*, nature is the palimpsest upon which atoms author history.⁸³

A fundamental difference between the atomisms of Shelley and Lucretius is that Lucretius' atoms are not living things, nor do they feel. There is no sensitivity at the atomic level (2.865-990). Shelley's atomic world, by contrast, is alive with sensation: "Every grain / Is sentient both in unity and part, / And the minutest atom comprehends / A world of loves and hatreds" (4.143-45). This universal sentience is another blow against humanity's pride:

How strange is human pride!
 I tell thee that those living things,
 To whom the fragile blade of grass,
 That springeth in the morn
 And perisheth ere noon,

⁸³Lucretius compares atoms with letters, since letters in different combinations form different words just as different configurations of atoms form different things (1.823-27, 2.1013-22).

Is an unbounded world;
 I tell thee that those viewless beings,
 Whose mansion is the smallest particle
 Of the impassive atmosphere,
 Think, feel and live like man; (2.225-34)

Shelley's conception of the universe is instinct with life and sensation.⁸⁴

Shelley's early atomic universe requires a materialistic understanding of the nature of things, including humans. His depiction of humans pays particular attention to their physical orientation in the world and their relationships with others through physical sensation. From his atomic knowledge, Shelley proclaims the materiality of humanity. As we shall see in "Mont Blanc" (1816), however, this intense focus upon the material reveals the material world in its uncanny otherness, at once familiar and strange. At the outset of *Queen Mab* in Canto I, Ianthe lays motionless, while the speaker wonders whether she is asleep or dead. The audience soon learns that she is in fact asleep, but this knowledge arises from the shadowy confusion between Ianthe as living thing and Ianthe as dead matter. She is described, both before and after the happy discovery of her living state, in a fashion that emphasizes her exquisite physicality. At several points her insides are nearly visible from without. Shelley describes her "peerless form" (12) in which "azure veins / ... steal like streams along a field of snow" (14-15). Her eyelids are nearly transparent: "Her dewy eyes are closed, / And on their lids, whose texture fine / Scarce hides the dark blue orbs beneath, / The baby Sleep is pillowed" (37-40). When Queen Mab first arrives, she is described in a similar fashion, though as a fairy her material

⁸⁴Denise Gigante in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009) and Sharon Ruston in *Shelley and Vitality* (2005) explore Shelley's sensitive world in relationship with organicism and vitalism.

constitution is even finer than Ianthe's. So insubstantial is she that "The broad and yellow moon / Shone dimly through her form" (79-80). The Fairy has a remarkably "thin and misty form" (109): "yon fibrous cloud, / That catches but the palest tinge of even, / And which the straining eye can hardly seize / When melting into eastern twilight's shadow, / Were scarce so thin, so slight" (94-98). They are both remarkable beings—Queen Mab as teacher and Ianthe as student—and so their remarkable qualities are manifested physically.

The slight, fine bodily composition of Queen Mab and Ianthe is reminiscent of Lucretius' description of the constitution of gods (5.146 and following). The comparison is appropriate given both characters' refined sensibilities. Queen Mab is already godlike in her privileged knowledge: "to me 'tis given / The wonders of the human world to keep" (1.167-68). She also has the ability "to rend / The veil of mortal frailty, that the spirit / Clothed in its changeless purity, may know / How soonest to accomplish the great end / For which it hath its being, and may taste / That peace, which in the end all life will share" (1.180-85). Ianthe is that pure spirit who has earned "the meed of virtue" (1.186); it is her "high reward" (2.65) to learn all that Queen Mab may reveal. Her spirit is therefore able to leave its already ethereal body and ascend with Queen Mab to a place beyond the world. In keeping with the poem's materialism, her spirit is "The perfect semblance of its bodily frame" (1.133). The characters' virtue is expressed in their fine physical constitutions. As we shall see, Shelley returns to this construction in *Prometheus Unbound*.

The spirit's education in *Queen Mab* is singularly affective. While Queen Mab is far from silent—her speech largely comprises the poem—the spirit's reception of the

words seems to take place through its (the spirit's) senses.⁸⁵ As it first rises from Ianthe's body, the spirit is made aware of its departure and new disembodied state as a "feeling," as indicated in the spirit's first words: "Do I dream? is this new feeling / But a visioned ghost of slumber?" (1.162-63). After the first course of Mab's lessons, the spirit's state is again described affectively: "The Spirit, / In extacy of admiration, felt / All knowledge of the past revived" (2.243-46). The culmination of the spirit's wonder at its new knowledge begins in Canto VI, and is among the most sensual passages of the poem:

All touch, all eye, all ear,
 The Spirit felt the Fairy's burning speech.
 O'er the thin texture of its frame,
 The varying periods painted changing glows,
 As on a summer even,
 When soul-enfolding music floats around,
 The stainless mirror of the lake
 Re-images the eastern gloom,
 Mingling convulsively its purple hues
 With the sunset's burnished gold. (6.1-10)

The import of the Fairy's speech is received through the spirit's senses; it is a sensitive, affective education. Ianthe's openness to sensitive reception, made possible by the fine constitution of her physical frame (both bodily and spiritually), is indicative in the poem of her virtue and morality. Ianthe's frame is a poetic representation of a new, naturalized

⁸⁵Ianthe's spirit is distinct from Ianthe herself, and is not assigned a gender in the poem. Shelley refers to it repeatedly as "it." See, for example, when it first rises from Ianthe's body in the first Canto: "Sudden arose / Ianthe's Soul; it stood / All beautiful in naked purity, / The perfect semblance of its bodily frame, / Instinct with inexpressible beauty and grace" (130-34).

humanity: a humanity that has regained and refined its sensual reality and embraced its thingness. Indeed, at the end of the Canto VI, the naturalization of humanity, the understanding of its relation with the things of nature, is revealed as the goal of Ianthe's (and by extension the audience's) sensitive education. When superstition is finally abandoned, the spirit of nature shall remain and take its rightful place:

A shrine is raised to thee,
Which, nor the tempest-breath of time,
Nor the interminable flood,
Over earth's slight pageant rolling,
Availeth to destroy,—

The sensitive extension of the world. (6.226-31)

“The sensitive extension of the world” is the goal of *Queen Mab*, and it begins with the sensitive reawakening of humanity.

This sensitive extension of the world is Shelley's conception of an ecological community. *Queen Mab* presents the possibility of this community in the present world, for Mab is adamant that “the eternal world / Contains at once the evil and the cure” (6.31-32). She therefore looks ahead with utopian hope: “How sweet a scene will earth become! / Of purest spirits, a pure dwelling-place, / Symphonious with the planetary spheres” (6.39-41); “O happy Earth!” which, unlike the abstract paradise of religious superstition, is the “reality of Heaven” (9.1). The change wrought in humans through their sensitive education affects the entire planet, as revealed in Mab's vision of the future in Canto VIII: “The habitable world is full of bliss” (8.58); “All things are recreated” (8.107). The changes that Mab forecasts are sweeping in scope, and usher in a new world

of peace and fertility.⁸⁶ The new world is achieved by earthly means—a reawakening of the senses, both physical and emotional (since the two are intimately linked in an atomist conception of the universe). It is also a particularly human means. Humanity has begun the change, and feels its effects in turn:

But chief, ambiguous man, he that can know
 More misery, and dream more joy than all;
 Whose keen sensations thrill within his breast
 To mingle with a loftier instinct there,
 Lending their power to pleasure and pain,
 Yet raising, sharpening, and refining each;
 Who stands amid the ever-varying world,
 The burthen or the glory of the earth;
 He chief perceives the change, his being notes
 The gradual renovation, and defines
 Each movement of its progress on his mind. (8.134-44)

This newly-founded intimate and reciprocal ecological relationship begins with humanity, or more specifically, with human relation. It starts with us because of our great capacity

⁸⁶The details of this ideal change as Shelley imagines them, it should be noted, would horrify today's ecological sensibility. Islands now spring up to make "[t]he desert of those ocean solitudes" friendly to humanity's adventures, so that "a toil-worn labourer leaps to shore, / To meet the kisses of the flowrets there" (8.96, 105-6). Worse again, now that such a threat is real and its consequences disastrous, the frozen poles melt, "Those wastes of frozen billows . . . are unloosed" (8.59-63), but in Shelley's imagination this event yields a new fertile realm of "spicy isles" and "heaven-breathing groves" that "melodize with man's blest nature" (8.64, 68, 69). Changes in landscape occur with similar changes in the natures of the animals, where the basilisk comes to lick a child's feet and the lion lies down with the lamb (8.86-7, 124-8). Such scenes are of course biblical in nature with much the same tone as Isaiah. Isaiah's own image of a redeemed earth is also ecologically troubling, both in Book 11 (from which Shelley draws his animal imagery) and in Book 40 with its changes in landscape: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (Isaiah 40:4). Shelley's use of such biblical imagery is a commentary upon the idea of heaven as achievable on earth.

for relation due to our remarkable capacity for sensitivity. Humans “can know / More misery, and dream more joy than all.” Because of this ability, humans have the potential to be at once “The burthen or the glory of the earth.”

While Mab and Ianthe’s relationship comprises most of the poem, the poem begins and ends with a different pair—Ianthe and Henry. In the beginning, Henry is with Ianthe as she sleeps. His is the “faithful bosom ... / Whose sleepless spirit waits to catch / Light, life and rapture from her smile” (1.28-30). Presumably, Henry spends the entire poem in the same place, waiting beside Ianthe’s body. He is not mentioned again until the conclusion, where he becomes part of Mab’s lesson. The very last words Mab speaks to Ianthe are instructive, and repeat the narrator’s earlier lines: “Go, happy one, and give that bosom joy / Whose sleepless spirit waits to catch / Light, life and rapture from thy smile” (9.209-11). Henry is finally named in the very last lines of the poem, after Ianthe’s soul and body are reunited: “She looked around in wonder and beheld / Henry, who kneeled in silence by her couch, / Watching her sleep with looks of speechless love, / And the bright beaming stars / That through the casement shone” (9.236-40). This final gesture of the poem, linking Henry with the stars above, links the present, earthly relationship between two people with the cosmic vision of the unfolding of nature just revealed by Mab.

The ideal earth of *Prometheus Unbound* also takes shape around the romantic pairing of its central characters, though as I shall discuss shortly, even while the vision is achieved in the drama the couple themselves are removed from the action. Since *Queen Mab* concludes with a vision of great things to come, unlike *Prometheus Unbound* in which they actually arrive, the poem therefore ends on a note of great potential energy,

hidden yet ready to grow from the seed of the present moment. In addition to looking ahead to *Prometheus Unbound*, it therefore also looks back to the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*. Having been cast out of Paradise, Adam and Eve “hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way” (12.648-49). Both relationships, each in their own tradition, begin the course of history. Both begin in transgression—Adam and Eve of divine law, Ianthe and Henry of social custom. Adam and Eve are exiled; they do not leave Eden by choice. Ianthe and Henry, on the other hand, are active transgressors, Promethean in their devotion to change for the good. The distinction is articulated by Blake, that “Active Evil is better than Passive Good” (453). Ianthe and Henry are the Satanic antitype of Adam and Eve, the parents of a regenerated humanity. In the Christian tradition, the sexual union of Adam and Eve begins the eventual redemption of humanity; since they are the original parents, their generation eventually produces salvation through Jesus.⁸⁷ Ianthe and Henry’s sexual relationship signifies a promise of redemption at the end of the poem as well, but as the vision imparted to Ianthe throughout suggests, this redemption does not hinge upon sexual reproduction.

Prometheus Unbound will take this notion a step further, since Prometheus and Asia are physically absent at the end of the drama. In *Queen Mab*, it is clear that the redemption of the world will not occur through the pair’s genetic offspring, but through the affective and physically present (because atomic) education that begins with them and spreads outward to affect the earth. Their relationship begins the sensitive extension of the world.

⁸⁷Therefore in *Paradise Lost* God says to the serpent, “Between thee and the woman I will put / Enmity, and between thine and her seed; / Her seed shall bruise thy head, thou bruise his heel” (10.179-81), referring to Genesis 3:15, which Milton interprets as foreshadowing the triumph of Jesus who “rising from his grave / Spoiled principalities and powers, triumphed / In open show, and with ascension bright / Captivity led captive through the air, / The realm itself of Satan long usurped, / Whom he shall tread at last under our feet” (10.185-90).

Despite the material basis of relation in the atomic world, there is already in *Queen Mab* the kernel of a more complex investigation. Throughout his poetic life, Shelley moves further away from a sheerly material conception of relation to discover a paradoxical materiality that strengthens and expands his ecological understanding into a vision of oikos: ecology as community.

3. Paradoxical Materiality

Shelley's desire for a rejuvenated earth is clear from an early age, as *Queen Mab* demonstrates, and remains with him throughout his life. The figures of rejuvenation, however, and the ideas of the earth that requires rejuvenation transform as Shelley grows as both poet and thinker. The intensely materialist conception of Lucretius' Epicureanism is ultimately unsatisfying. In *Queen Mab*, Shelley is already complicating the atomic necessity of the Epicurean philosophy through his insistence upon dynamic relation leading to change: the sensitive extension of the world. The sensitive extension of the world features quite differently when he revisits it in *Prometheus Unbound*. In the years between these two visions, Shelley refines his ecological perception through shorter lyrical works. These works are concentrated exercises in which he poetically explores his philosophical position.

Shelley's complex philosophy, informed by diverse and seemingly incompatible schools of thought, has been long contested.⁸⁸ It can be argued, however, that throughout

⁸⁸James Notopoulos in *The Platonism of Shelley* (1949), C.E. Pulos in *The Deep Truth* (1954), Lloyd Abbey in *Destroyer and Preserver* (1979), and others have debated Shelley's position, at different points of his life, on the spectrum between Platonism and skepticism, both of which undeniably influenced Shelley's thought. Vicario's more recent contribution (2007), explores Shelley's epicureanism as constructed through the influence of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Vicario's Introduction offers a solid history of the philosophical debate in Shelley criticism.

his life Shelley's interest in Plato and Platonism increased, complicating his earlier (though not necessarily superseded) skepticism. In 1818, Shelley translated Plato's *Symposium*. In her preface to her edition of Shelley's *Works*, Mary Shelley makes a statement that could refute Shelley's skepticism: "Shelley resembled Plato; both taking more delight in the abstract and the ideal than in the special and the tangible" ("Preface" vii).⁸⁹ A shift in philosophical orientation can certainly be seen between *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound*, the latter having begun in 1818, the same year of Shelley's *Symposium* translation.

The shift between the two visionary texts is particularly visible when considering the central agent of each. *Queen Mab* features the very talkative Fairy Queen, who offers a complete lesson in the material progress of history to her protégé Ianthe. Mab's counterpart in *Prometheus Unbound* is Demogorgon, a formless and reclusive spirit who, though his role is unclear, seems central to the plot's unfolding. He is nearly silent, speaking minimally in esoteric half-riddles. In the second act, Asia gives him the opportunity to teach as Mab teaches Ianthe, to explain existence and the process of history. Here, however, the student's words dominate the exchange, as the teacher Demogorgon holds that "a voice / Is wanting" (2.4.115-16). Asia has to provide her own answer, which is itself riddled with questions (2.4.32-109). The more mature Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound* seems more open to empty space, the non-material, than the younger author of *Queen Mab*. Critics have noticed this trajectory in Shelley's career and have thus suggested a philosophical development from early skepticism to late idealism. Like the false binaries between Shelley the social reformer and Shelley the lyricist, this

⁸⁹At the same time, Mary Shelley here reinforces the division between skepticism and idealism that continues to haunt Shelley criticism.

philosophical binary does not withstand close scrutiny. In this project, the binary condenses into Shelley's necessity to grapple with divergent approaches to existence, generally grouped under the headings of materialism and idealism: in other words, his simultaneous earthliness and otherworldliness. Shelley does not counter the material with the spiritual or vice versa. Rather, he thinks the two together in order to reveal an other materiality: to strip "the veil of familiarity" ("Defence" 533) and confront materiality itself as other.

While Shelley's materialist and idealist strains have been traced through the influences of Plato, Hume, and others, I think the simultaneity of the doctrines in Shelley's thought, or his "refusal to commit himself to either" (Stempel 118), anticipates the moral philosophy of the later century; namely, that of Nietzsche.⁹⁰ James Bieri states in his biography of Shelley that, "[a]nticipating Nietzsche and Freud, Shelley used Necessity to attack notions of good and evil" (274). In *Queen Mab*, Shelley equates "Necessity" with the the "Spirit of Nature," using the terms in apposition to each other: "Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power, / Necessity! thou mother of the world!" (6.197-98). Shelley considers necessity a natural force, one capable of correcting the fallacies associated with "the God of human error" (6.199). Nietzsche takes up a similar idea: nature as a restorative to morality. I read Nietzsche in this chapter largely through his work in *The Gay Science*. "Gay Science," though now archaic, refers to the "art of poetry" (*OED*), and this is the sense from which Nietzsche begins his work of that title. In *Ecce Homo*, he refers to the "Provençal concept of a *gaya scienza*" that denotes a

⁹⁰The connection between Shelley and Nietzsche has received less attention. Tilottama Rajan discusses it in *The Dark Interpreter* (1980) and in *The Supplement of Reading* (1990). Mark Sandy offers a book-length study in *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (2005).

“unity of *singer, knight, and free spirit*” when speaking about a poem in which “you dance over morality” (123). In section 276 of *The Gay Science*, entitled “*For the new year*,” Nietzsche aligns this poetic spirit with concepts of truth, beauty, and necessity: “I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who makes things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love from now on!” (4.276). Throughout *The Gay Science* Nietzsche gives devoted attention to the world of things, the world of material fact. Therefore, the famous statement that “God is dead” in section 108 can be read as a statement against the desire for transcendence, or something beyond the actual to which the actual can appeal for justification and meaning. It can therefore be read as an affirmative statement that this world, the here and now, is enough.

For Clément Rosset (1988), this affirmation is expressed by the thought experiment of the eternal return in section 341 of *The Gay Science*. In this experiment, we are asked to imagine being told that we are to live this life over and over again eternally, with each minute detail, “every pain and every joy” (194) recurring forever. We are asked how we would respond to such a promise: “Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth...?” (194). Nietzsche presents another possibility, however: “*to long for nothing more fervently* than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal” (194-95). Rosset reads this response as not just an affirmation of one’s own individual life: “In the yes tested by the eternal return is tested also the idea of an eternity affecting the whole of what is approved by this yes: the world, life, the self, existence in general” (67). It is also an affirmation of the world as is, the here and now. It is a yes-saying to reality; such is Nietzsche’s hope for his new year’s resolution: “some day I want only to

be a Yes-sayer!” (157). Shelley’s similarly integrative and exuberant thought, constituted through his paradoxical ability to think through the material and the ideal simultaneously, makes him a poet of relation, and therefore, as this project argues, a poet of ecology.

Shelley’s paradoxical materialism is explicitly developed in the sister poems written during the summer of 1816—“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Mont Blanc.” They were both written while visiting unfamiliar landscapes: “Hymn” while visiting Byron near Lake Geneva; “Mont Blanc” during a tour of the Chamonix Valley. The pair share a complex relationship, but are united in their reference to an “unseen Power” (“Hymn” 1). This power is the ostensible subject of the first poem, intellectual beauty itself. The power referred to in “Mont Blanc” is unnamed, but it is also unseen, given that, as editors have commented, Shelley’s view of the mountain is limited; the summit and the great activity that Shelley posits there are inaccessible to his senses, and so he presents an imaginative construction. They differ in that “Hymn” takes this unseen power, and Shelley’s devotion to it, as its subject, while “Mont Blanc” discusses the power simultaneously with its depiction of the incommensurable, undeniable materiality of the mountain. Despite their different approaches, both poems express a devotion to the material present. I will begin with a discussion of “Hymn” and return to “Mont Blanc” in the next section.

The affirmation of the real, or all that constitutes current existence, is the process of growth described in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” Shelley describes a youthful desire for communication with a transcendent realm through the figures of spirits. His search is unsuccessful:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped

Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
 Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.

I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed ... (49-53)

In his search for the otherworldly, he is blind to the world, passing by “listening chamber, cave and ruin, / And starlight wood” unnoticed. He seeks unsuccessfully: “I was not heard—I saw them not—” (54). His quest to communicate with transcendence fails because, by definition, it cannot communicate with him. The search is not in vain, however, for it leads him to an unexpected presence. The episode is much like Wordsworth’s Boy from Winander playing with the owls in the fifth book of *The Prelude*; when the owls are silent, the world around the boy impresses itself upon him. Similarly, in the disappointing silence of unresponsive transcendence, the natural world makes itself known to the youthful Shelley as an unexpected gift:

When musing deeply on the lot
 Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing
 All vital things that wake to bring
 News of buds and blossoming,—
 Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;

I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy! (55-60)

He turns from his “[h]opes of high talk with the departed dead” to a meditation upon “life.” The meditation leads to a sudden, joyful recognition of the present, material world of nature. It is the story of Shelley’s initial yes-saying to the world: “I vowed that I would dedicate my powers / To thee and thine—have I not kept my vow?” (61-62).

Shelley consecrates himself to the real, material world around him, however, while at the same time consecrating himself to the non-material; in fact, the two are equated in the poem. The “thee” that Shelley addresses throughout is “Intellectual Beauty,” the spirit he celebrates in the hymn. Like Clare’s experience of the startling strangeness of once familiar birds, Shelley’s attention to the material world reveals its mysterious otherness. The figurative language that Shelley draws upon to image the mysterious “unseen Power” is all taken from the no less mysterious natural world, the world of sense experience. Close attention reveals this world not as firm fact, but as fleeting and inconstant. The glimpse of this revelation disrupts the more confident materialism of *Queen Mab* and leads Shelley to the close considerations of the lyric poems. In “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” the “unseen Power” visits

This various world with as inconstant wing
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—
 Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,
 It visits with inconstant glance
 Each human heart and countenance;
 Like hues and harmonies of evening,—
 Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—
 Like memory of music fled,— (3-10)

The natural world is “various,” as are the images used to describe it. Shelley draws attention to the ephemeral and mutable nature of the everyday. Winds, moonbeams, showers, the colours and sounds of the transitional time of evening, clouds, starlight: all of these are as “inconstant” as the “wing” and “glance” of the power itself. Shelley also

seamlessly includes in the list of nature's transience the changeable nature of humanity: "each human heart and countenance" and "memory of music fled." Experience of the sensible realm yields no concrete knowledge, for "all we hear and all we see" are "[d]oubt, chance, and mutability" (30, 31). Here, Shelley follows a similar trajectory as Clare, whose close observation of nature unexpectedly results in less certain knowledge rather than more. Shelley's consideration of the material realm reveals an experience with intellectual, non-material beauty.

Shelley's understanding of the material realm is connected with his interest in scientific experiment.⁹¹ Mary Shelley was among the earliest to comment upon it, reporting in the introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* that he and Byron talked about "the nature of the principle of life" and "the experiments of Dr. Darwin" (356-57). Similarly, in her "Note on *Queen Mab*," she says of Shelley that "the phenomena of Nature were his favourite study. He loved to inquire into their causes, and was addicted to pursuits of natural philosophy and chemistry, as far as they could be carried on, as an amusement" (39). His well-attested scientific interest and the focused attention he devoted to nature resulted in an understanding of nature as unstable.

This instability is represented in the ephemeral images of nature in "Hymn" above, but receive a more specifically scientific treatment in "The Cloud" (published with *Prometheus Unbound*, 1820). Here, Shelley describes in very stylized, mythopoetic

⁹¹His scientific interest has inspired several studies, which taken together highlight its versatility and energy. Critical studies include Carl Grabo's *A Newton Among Poets: Shelley's Use of Science in Prometheus Unbound* (1930), Sharon Ruston's *Shelley and Vitality* (2005), and most recently Denise Gigante's *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009). Shorter studies include Daniel Stempel's "A Rude Idealism: Models of Nature and History in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*" (1988) and Eric Gidal's "'O Happy Earth! Reality of Heaven!': Melancholy and Utopia in Romantic Climatology" (2008).

terms the life-cycle of a cloud as it relates with and affects the world around it.⁹²

Following early nineteenth-century studies of clouds such as Luke Howard's *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (1803) and Thomas Ignatius Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phaenomena* (1813), which built upon Howard's cloud classifications, there was a period of great artistic interest in the representation of clouds, most famously seen in John Constable's cloud studies.⁹³ The new attention devoted to clouds as things in themselves, inspired by Howard's work, affects the language and imagery of Shelley's "The Cloud." As Thornes maps out, the different stanzas of the poem are closely aligned with descriptions of different cloud formations first delineated by Howard: cumulostratus, the only one of Howard's definitions to not survive, is the only one left out of Shelley's poem (*John* 190-91).

The cloud emerges in Shelley's poem (as it does in Constable's sketches) as a problem of representation. The Romantic period marks the cloud's emergent identity as a thing in itself, yet one that is impossibly ephemeral, transient, and mutable. In the early 1800s, the cloud emerges as a thing from the general atmosphere to challenge the very

⁹²D.G. King-Hele charts some of the scientific accuracy of Shelley's cloud representation in "Shelley and Science" (1992) and in *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (1960). I am less interested in the specific science of Shelley's portrayal than in his participation within the changing perception of clouds in the scientific and artistic communities of his time. King-Hele notes the advancements and influence of Luke Howard in this respect (*Shelley* 219). Howard's *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds* (1803) sets out a classification and nomenclature for different cloud formations as well as hypotheses about their construction and dissipation. What is most remarkable about the text is the contribution it makes to atmospheric science: it is among the first texts to treat clouds as things in themselves. Previously, scientists tended to speak of clouds as variations of the skyscape. In Howard's texts, they are no longer merely aspects of "the countenance of the sky" (1), as was previously held, but distinct formations worthy of study.

⁹³Louis Hawes points out that John Constable was familiar with Forster's *Researches*, the first chapter of which includes an overview of Howard's terminology (346). Constable's famous cloud studies were completed mostly between 1820 and 1822, in which he endeavours to represent the changing of the clouds over time on a single canvas. Canadian poet Lisa Robertson has studied Constable's cloud sketches and the influence of Howard, Forster, and others upon the art of the Romantic period, incorporating the effects into her own poetry in *The Weather* (2001). An account of her study can be found in "The Weather: A Report on Sincerity."

definition of *thing*. In the material world, the cloud stands out as singularly non-material, yet its undeniable existence, once recognized, and its very palpable and real-world effects, as demonstrated in the water cycle, testify to its necessity. Howard witnesses the necessity of the cloud in its relation to the things of the earth as a testament to the existence of a benevolent creator, that in the cloud's life-sustaining function in relation to the things of earth "we may discover the wisdom and goodness of the Creator and Preserver of all things" (14). Shelley stops well short of such an overtly religious statement. In "The Cloud," he is less interested in the ultimate cause or end than in the cloud's immediate, transient existence, its transformations, and its living relation with the world. He describes the cloud as it changes in different regions and climates and as it participates in different weather systems, such as "fresh showers" (1), "lashing hail" (9), "snow" (13), and "Lightning" (18). Each of the cloud's actions, however, is transitive, occurring in relation with other things. The "fresh showers" it brings are "for the thirsting flowers" (1), and taken "[f]rom the seas and the streams" (2). From the first two lines, the cloud is part of a community. The *thingness* of the cloud is expressed in its interactions and effects but also in giving the cloud a distinct voice through the first-person perspective of the poem. Though the cloud is demarcated as a thing, these demarcations, when considered closely as they are in the poem, become very indistinct. The boundaries between the cloud itself and the others with which it relates throughout the water cycle are extremely porous. The others in the cloud's relationships are sometimes found to be clouds themselves, but in different stages of the life-cycle. Clouds are, after all, as Howard maintains, "various forms of suspended water" in the atmosphere (2). Reading the first lines again with this idea in mind reveals closer relationships than

previously suspected: “I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers, / From the seas and from the streams” (1-2). The “I,” the “showers,” and the “seas and streams” are all different forms of the same substance. The same could also be said for “thirsting flowers” which take the water up to become part of their constitutions. The water cycle does not just affect water; it is a fundamental life process. A consideration of this cycle, the metamorphoses of water, reveals the porous nature of the boundaries between self and other. As Queen Mab maintains, “[t]here’s not one atom of yon earth / But once was living man; / Nor the minutest drop of rain, / That hangeth in its thinnest cloud, / But flowed in human veins” (2.211-15).

The transmutations of a cloud’s ephemeral identity throw into question the status of the cloud as a thing at all. Its relations with others are so intimate as to question the existence of the boundaries between them. The cloud, then, challenges the limits of representation. This difficulty is apparent throughout Shelley’s poem. Davie points out that Shelley’s metaphorical language is strained in “The Cloud,” citing the confusing relationship between the cloud and lightning in the second stanza:

Sublime on the towers of my skiey bowers,
 Lightning my pilot sits;
 In a cavern under is fettered the thunder,
 It struggles and howls at fits;
 Over Earth and Ocean, with gentle motion,
 This pilot is guiding me,
 Lured by the love of the genii that move
 In the depths of the purple sea;

Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,
 Over the lakes and the plains,
 Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,
 The spirit he loves remains;
 And I all the while bask in Heaven's blue smile,
 Whilst he is dissolving in rains. (17-30)

There are two principle characters in this stanza, the speaking cloud and the lightning, called the pilot of the cloud. Towards the end of the stanza, however, these identities become confused: "Wherever he dream ... The spirit he loves remains." Presumably, "he" is the pilot. Davie rightly sees a problem in these lines; "he" cannot be lightning when "he is dissolving in rains" (136). Dividing the cloud between the physical cloud and the ideal cloud that remains throughout the cycle, Davie concludes that Shelley "means to say ... that the ideal cloud continues to bask while the actual cloud dissolves in rains; but in fact he says that the cloud, ideal or actual, rides high, while the lightning dissolves. And this is lunacy" (136). It seems to me that the scientific problem of lightning dissolving could be addressed by reading "dissolves" as "expends itself in the storm," but the greater issue here is the problem of identity in the last lines between lightning, the ideal cloud (the cloud that remains), and the actual cloud.

The confusion of identities in "The Cloud" is an indication of the larger issue of identity itself when considered ecologically. Thinking the water cycle demands an extrapolation of thought beyond present conceptions. In order for the cloud to remain the speaker throughout the poem as it charts its own course throughout the cycle, cycling between different cloud formations, Shelley must invent a split identity for it between

ideal and actual. No single cloud can maintain itself throughout the cycle, for the cycle demands its continual dissolution. The “I” in the poem, therefore, is a different “I” from stanza to stanza. The cloud speaker’s consistent identity is a narrative illusion that slips in instances like the above, instances in which the cloud must relate with other forms of itself. The poem is in this regard the narrative equivalent of one of Constable’s cloud studies, where Constable struggles to represent the changing clouds on a single, static canvas. The ephemeral materiality of the cloud challenges both the bounds of representation and the meaning of identity.

In the last stanza, Shelley directly addresses the problem of identity that has been straining the poem’s language throughout:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
 And the nursling of the Sky;
 I pass through the pores, of the oceans and shores;
 I change, but I cannot die—
 For after the rain, when with never a stain
 The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
 And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams,
 Build up the blue dome of Air—
 I silently laugh, at my own cenotaph,
 And out of the caverns of rain,
 Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
 I arise, and unbuild it again.— (73-84)

The “I” in these lines carries throughout the water-cycle and narrates its own demise and

rebirth. It is not an ideal cloud, as Davie maintains (136); rather, it is the actual, scientifically accurate cloud poetically described. The particular cloud condenses and precipitates, but the movement of the water molecules throughout the cycle, and more accurately the cycle itself, is never-ending: it changes, but it cannot die. Shelley speaks to its paradoxical permanence in the juxtaposition of life and death: “Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb” (83). The statement is both poetically poignant and materially accurate. The formation of the new cloud is a birth, but the infant cloud is a vapour, a presence hardly there. It is a complexity best addressed in the word “unbuild” of the next line. The cloud unbuilds its own cenotaph, which is presumably the clear sky, “the blue dome of Air” (84). It unbuilds the blue sky by condensing to become part of it, which at the same time undoes its clarity. Unbuilding is a negative form of creation, juxtaposing life and death in its process.⁹⁴ The cloud unbuilds not only the blue sky, but itself as well, since its evaporation into the sky is necessarily also an unbuilding of its liquid form into other forms.

The cloud’s constant transformation, undoing itself as it forms, challenges its representation in the poem. It is not, however, solely an artistic concern arising from the desire to represent the cloud poetically. For Shelley, this transformation is intrinsic to reality itself. We are for the most part blissfully shielded from the wonder of life by our familiarity with it; nevertheless life is, like the cloud, “at once so certain and so unfathomable” (“On Life” 505). The cloud of Shelley’s poem is a microcosm of the ephemeral transformation that occurs throughout existence, including the human world.

⁹⁴Steven Goldsmith in *Unbuilding Jerusalem* (1993) uses the term “unbuilding” to discuss Romantic representations of apocalypse, specifically indicating “resistance to formal apocalypse in romantic literature” (23).

Just as the cloud is also the rain, seas, and stream, “[t]he words, *I, you, they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of one mind” (“On Life” 508).⁹⁵ These transformations are ecological; as such, they do not keep to their separate biological kingdoms. As human differentiations become harder to maintain when considered closely, so too do the differentiations between human and non-human. The once clear distinctions between mind and nature become untenable. Therefore, Shelley challenges the solidity of the distinction between thought and thing, since a thing is, for Shelley, an object of thought, “that is, any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with an apprehension of distinction”: “The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects” (“On Life” 508). In the manuscript of “On Life” (1819), according to an editor’s note, Shelley uses the terms interchangeably, at one point writing “things” above the word “thoughts” and leaving both uncanceled (508). This relation, if not identity, of thought and thing is also revealed in the repetition of imagery between this essay and “A Defence of Poetry” (1821). Speaking of the human spirit of perseverance throughout transition, Shelley expands his focus to witness it in “all life and being”: “Each is at once the centre and the circumference” (507). Similarly, in the “Defence,” poetry is “at once the centre and circumference of knowledge” (531). Given such language, the poet becomes indistinguishable from the poem. This attention to the

⁹⁵John Clare makes a similar expression of fluid identity, as discussed in the second chapter. It is similarly based upon the illusory nature of pronouns: “that little personal pronoun ‘I’ is such a presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow that he thinks himself qualified for all company all places & all employments” (*Letters* 504).

details of the world burns away “the mist of familiarity” (“On Life” 505),⁹⁶ and reveals to us “the wonder of our being” (“On Life” 505). The result is a dizzying experience where words try but fail to “penetrate the mystery of our being” (506). It is the realm of the sublime: “We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know” (508).

4. The Affective Sublime

Shelley’s outstanding experiment with the sublime is “Mont Blanc” (1816). It is at once a testament both to Shelley’s materialism and to his idealism; its confrontation of the mountain’s incommensurable materiality leads to an engagement with its spiritual non-materiality: the mountain is both thing and thought. This confluence of the material and the intellectual begins in the first two lines: “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind” (1-2). It is important to note here that, contrary to conventional assumptions about the Romantic ego, the mind is not necessarily supreme in this relationship. It is instead penetrated by the material universe of things.

“Mont Blanc” can be read through the dual movement of the Kantian sublime. Ecocritically speaking, the Kantian sublime is a troubling experience, however. It begins with an unsettling and humbling experience of greatness, often found in the natural world, that overwhelms the senses to such a degree that the annihilation of the experiencing subject is threatened. The second movement, however, entails the pleasure of the realization that whatever confronts the senses with an intimation of infinity is necessarily lesser than the mind that receives the intimation: “[t]hat is sublime which

⁹⁶Alternately, “it strips away the veil of familiarity” or “purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity” (“Defence” 533).

even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses” (*Judgment* 134). What begins with humility before nature ends with an anthropocentric reaffirmation of the magnificence of the human mind. Kant is careful throughout his discussion of the sublime to maintain that the sublime is not found in nature: “we express ourselves on the whole incorrectly if we call some object of nature sublime ... for what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does not allow of sensible presentation” (*Judgment* 129). The sublime, as Kant describes it, is therefore a startling experience of an unaccountable material other and a striving to reincorporate that other into the self and, finally, to reassert human domination.

More recent criticism, however, re-reads the sublime as an ecologically sensitive experience.⁹⁷ Anne-Lise François (2008) outlines a different idea of sublimity that moves away from the goal-oriented approaches of conventional notions of the sublime. She seeks “to identify an alternative to the aesthetics of sublimity ... and to retrieve the ‘noninstrumental’ from the concept of infinite, never-to-be-satisfied ethical responsibility found in the romantic sublime’s postmodern heirs” (xvii). In a similar vein, Louise Economides (2005) criticizes what she calls “the anthropocentric sublime,” in which “nature is represented as something that essentially gratifies human needs (either as a foil for the imagination or something that functions analogously to the Book of God) and is denied a material autonomy beyond human desire or use value. As such,” she argues,

⁹⁷Christopher Hitt in “Toward an Ecological Sublime” describes the history of this critical counter-narrative as it interrogates the quest for dominance associated with the Romantic sublime, citing critics like Paul de Man and Frances Ferguson (603-4).

“this mode of sublimity can hardly provide an ethical grounding for more responsible environmental praxis” (89). Similarly, Christopher Hitt (1999), while recognizing its anthropocentric problems, argues for the ecological possibility inherent in the sublime.

Both Economides and Hitt read the ecological sublime differently, but both take issue with the second movement of the Kantian sublime in which the original shock of nature is absorbed in the greater marvel of the human mind. Hitt maintains that we can preserve the sublime in ecological discourse by preserving the “positive aspects of the conventional sublime while identifying and critiquing its negative aspects” (607). He supports Neil Evernden’s formulation in which nature remains beyond conceptualization “neither as an object nor as a ‘wider self’ but as a mysterious, alien ‘divine chaos’” (613). Though Hitt maintains otherwise (609), this notion of sublimity looks very much like Kant’s sublime with the second movement removed. Hitt therefore appeals to Peter Reed’s approach, heavily influenced by Martin Buber, in which “[w]e are seized by the relationship: we cannot think about it as we would an object. It is here, now, and while it lasts, there is only now. Since we have no time to ourselves to think about the relationship, there is never any question of doubting its reality” (613-14). How this relationship is constituted beyond any conceptualization is unclear. Also, while this approach preserves the otherness of nature, it seems to do so through an apotheosis of nature which mirrors the apotheosis of the human that Hitt criticizes in the Kantian sublime (608). Economides’ ecological sublime offers substantiation for the religiously inexplicable and transcendent “relationship” of Hitt’s notion. Like François, she formulates a sublime that is not a means to an end but a “form of communication” that “does not seek to unify mind and nature under the sign of a subject who transcends

materiality,” but instead “delineates the mystery of materiality itself” (90). Economides sees this material sublime in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc.”

From its first lines, “Mont Blanc” is a deluge of varied and sometimes incompatible images as Shelley conjures just some of the “things” of “[t]he everlasting universe of things” (1). The poetic language employed is overwhelming, itself creating a sublime experience for the reader which mirrors that of the speaker before the mountain. In this sense, it partakes of the Longinian sublime in which skillful artistic representation produces the sublime effect in the audience.⁹⁸ The different sections of the poem address different perspectives upon the universe and its relationship with the human mind. Each section, amid its cacophony of rushing images, attempts to conceptualize the mountain and form a relationship with it. Each fails, however, and so the attempts reach no conclusion, proliferating into further sections. In the end, the sheer materiality of the mountain can neither be resolved nor appropriated. Amid the rush of imagery that “fades into air” and dissolves “in fire” (Read 84), the mountain asserts itself, rising up to interrupt the verse in short, arresting phrases of undeniable and unaccountable presence.⁹⁹

The first such interruption occurs in the second section of the poem:

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—

⁹⁸“the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language” (2); “a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time” (3).

⁹⁹The following interpretation is opposite to that of Frances Ferguson in “Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’: What the Mountain Said” (1993). Ferguson argues that “Shelley seems to be almost defiantly trying to think of the mountain (and the entire landscape connected with it) as a brute physical existence” (336) in opposition to the tradition of the etching of symbolic meaning onto the mountain, as seen in Coleridge’s “Hymn.” Shelley fails, she says, arguing “that the poem insists, most importantly, on the inability of one’s resting in such irony as it exhibits its own repeated failures to let Mont Blanc be merely a blank, merely a mass of stone” (336). Most of “Mont Blanc” is given over to such symbolic etching, however, which leads me to believe that this project, and not its overthrow, is the ostensible goal. I argue that the materiality of the mountain asserts itself against these attempts at symbolic appropriation.

Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,
 Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
 Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
 Where Power in the likeness of the Arve comes down
 From the ice gulphs that gird his secret throne,
 Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
 Of lightning through the tempest;—thou dost lie (12-19)

The rush of elaborately-wrought imagery overflows into the following lines, but the “thou dost lie” stands in sharp contrast to the long, convoluted phrases that come before and after. After all the descriptive terms—the “dark, deep Ravine,” the “many-coloured, many-voiced vale,” with “pines, and crags, and caverns,” “Fast cloud shadows and sunbeams”—and after the majestic comparison with “lightning through the tempest,” the stark necessity of the mountain supersedes with arresting simplicity: “thou dost lie.” It does so again at the very end of the section. Here, Shelley tries to integrate himself into the scene in the manner of Wordsworth with reference to “[m]y own, my human mind, which passively / Now renders and receives fast influencings, / Holding an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around” (37-40). He appeals to art as a mediator, hoping to unite the disparate worlds “[i]n the still cave of the witch Poesy” (44). In the concluding line, however, despite all attempts at mediation, the fact of the mountain remains: “thou art there!” (48).

Shelley’s unusually short, simple statements register the startling recognitions of the mountain’s materiality, rising up to interrupt the fluid poetry of the lines. There are similar moments in the poem when he recognizes his own position in relation to the

mountain, again expressed in the starkest, simplest of terms. After some tumultuous lines that question the difference between sleep and death and bring reality itself into question, inviting comparison with the confusion of materiality and spirituality which begins *Queen Mab*, Shelley affirms one indicative statement of presence: “I look on high” (52). The questioning then continues: “Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / The veil of life and death? or do I lie / In dream” (53-55). Even when “the very spirit fails, / Driven like a homeless cloud” (57-58), even amid “the infinite sky” (60), the fact of his existence as perceiving subject and the fact of his perception remain. For all the uncertainty, he yet looks on high, and “Mont Blanc appears” (61).

Such statements of perception, of seeing and being seen, are of real concern for Shelley considering his often stated belief that “nothing exists but as it is perceived” (“On Life” 506).¹⁰⁰ These perceptions are just that, however, as the materiality to which they testify is mute to the questioning mind. Shelley questions the world before him, trying to fix it as a concept: “Is this the scene / Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young / Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea / Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?” (71-74). The response is no response; it is sudden, brief, and non-negotiable: “None can reply” (75).¹⁰¹ Shelley cannot conceptualize the looming materiality before him, for it resists his attempts to confine it within his reason. Despite the mountain’s inaccessibility, the reality of its effect upon him is irrefutable. He can characterize it only through its effect upon him as a “power”: “the power is there” (127).

¹⁰⁰He repeats the statement, word for word, in the same essay (508); in the “Defence,” he maintains again that “[a]ll things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient” (533).

¹⁰¹The lack of response to his questions is also a commentary upon Coleridge’s religious interpretation of the scene in “Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny,” in which his own series of questions (36-57) draw a certain and resounding response from nature itself: “GOD!” (58).

The mountain's silence throughout "Mont Blanc" is key to Economides' understanding of the sublimity of materiality. She identifies silence as an "aspect of sublimity that may be ironically 'useful' to ecological thinking" (89). The material sublime is founded upon silence as an insurmountable barrier between the human and the natural: "[w]ithin the permanent barrier of language, the sublime can articulate the horizon between communication systems and the world as material presence outside communication systems" (90). In its silence, the material world preserves itself beyond the reach of human appropriation. The material sublime therefore avoids the ecological problem of the second anthropocentric moment of the Kantian sublime. It also avoids the overtly religious transcendence of Hitt's ecological sublime. The material is not, Economides asserts, simply Kant's sublime minus the second moment, however, for the gap between humanity and nature does not remain in incomprehensible meaninglessness. The second moment of the material sublime is a recognition of "the fortuitousness of this gap by virtue of the fact that it permits an excess of meaning potential in the world, so that even nature's embodied silence can signify something quite profound" (108). This "meaning potential" is addressed in Shelley's concluding question: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings, / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-44). Economides reads this not as a rhetorical question, but as an open and earnest one.

To read the final question (and the poem itself) rhetorically can correspond to reading it through the Kantian sublime; critics have assumed that the question implies a supremacy of the "human mind's imaginings" (143) over the mountain, "and earth, and stars, and sea" (142) as that which gives the natural world meaning. Frances Ferguson

(1993) concludes that “[w]ith this question, he [Shelley] reminds the mountain that it needs him” (342). Reiman and Powers, in the notes to their edition of “Mont Blanc,” also interpret a Kantian superiority: “The very power of the imagination to realize the Power of nature, so remote and foreign to all mortal experience, illustrates the supremacy of that imagination over the *silence* and *solitude* that threaten it” (93 n3).¹⁰² Aaron Dunckel takes issue with this reading while maintaining the threat itself: “Silence and solitude are threatening as potentially vacant, not potentially deadly” (209). In both interpretations the threat remains and is resolved rationally in the Kantian fashion. The power of the human mind proves itself the greater strength and nullifies the external threat, absorbing it into a conceptual schema as a support for the mind’s own superior sublimity.

I am convinced neither that the silence threatens nor that the threat it presents (if any) is so resolved. The poem ends in a question: whether we read it rhetorically or earnestly, it remains a question, and therefore ends the poem on a note of uncertainty very unlike the conclusion achieved in the Kantian sublime. In the preceding line that introduces the question, Shelley again appeals to the strength of the universe of “things” as paramount: it is “The secret strength of things” (139), he asserts, “Which governs thought” (140), and “the infinite dome / Of heaven is as a law” (140-41). The final indicative statements of the poem assert the materiality of nature over the human mind. Apart from the Kantian schema, there is little reason to read the question that immediately follows as a rhetorical assertion of the human mind’s superiority.

¹⁰²This note occurs in the 1977 edition of *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, edited by Reiman and Powers.

Economides seems to agree, reading the poem as a progression from light to darkness¹⁰³ “starting with a speaker who initially has confidence in the mind’s ability to hold ‘unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around’ (39-40), but ending with a section where silence reigns over a domain that is inaccessible to human beings” (107). In these lines, however, Economides seems to think in a manner similar to those who think the poem through Kant: she observes the first moment of apprehension, and denies the second moment of rational resolution. For Economides, the mountain remains entirely inaccessible, since its silence forms a “permanent barrier” (90) between itself and the human mind’s imaginings. The mountain is undeniably there, and yet the mind does not succeed in thinking it in its entirety or absorbing it into itself as evidence of its own superior grandeur. “Mont Blanc,” therefore, fails to achieve the anthropocentric second moment of the Kantian sublime.

Throughout Shelley’s work, silence is powerfully and paradoxically communicative and productive, even eloquent; it is also particularly an attribute of nature. Nature’s silent eloquence as expressed in “Mont Blanc” is a recurring motif for Shelley as early as *Queen Mab*, in which the foundations of the idea are laid. In *Queen Mab*, nature’s silent eloquence first occurs in the second canto while the Spirit of Ianthe and the Fairy leave earth’s realm and view the universe from a divine perspective. The scene is sublime: “There, as far as the remotest line / That bounds imagination’s flight, / Countless and unending orbs / In mazy motion intermingled” (2.71-74). It is during the experience of the sublime, when the rational mind fails, that paradox is experienced and nature’s silent eloquence is heard. Therefore, wilderness is harmonious, and silence is

¹⁰³It is a trajectory unlike that of Coleridge’s “Hymn,” which moves in the opposite direction.

eloquent: “The circling systems formed / A wilderness of harmony; / Each with undeviating aim, / In eloquent silence, through the depths of space / Pursued its wondrous way” (2.78-82).

Queen Mab presents Ianthe’s education in the history and future of humanity, its folly and potential. The Fairy continually directs Ianthe’s attention to nature’s example as teacher. Nature’s silent eloquence is therefore instructive, often telling a meaningful story that counters the noise of human speech. As Economides suggests, humanity is outside nature’s communication system: “The universe, / In nature’s silent eloquence, declares / That all fulfill the works of love and joy, / All but the outcast man” (3.197-99). The image of the “speaking quietude” (3) of the night with which Canto IV begins contrasts the description of humanity’s meaningless sound and fury with which the canto ends. The tyrant, Shelley says,

has invented lying words and modes,
Empty and vain as his own coreless heart;
Evasive meanings, nothings of much sound,
To lure the heedless victim to the toils
Spread round the valley of its paradise (4.232-36)

Shelley continues to discuss the “falshood” (238) of “priest, conqueror, or prince” (237). It is a powerful image, invoking the Fall so prevalent throughout environmental discourse. Avoiding any notion of god or devil, Shelley’s Fall is entirely human. It results from a failure of communication. Humanity fails to heed nature’s silent eloquence, hearing instead its own familiar but inflated noise. Shelley seems to participate here in the nature-human binary of much environmental discourse, where

nature is privileged above the human as the source of truth. Indeed, both John Clare and Shelley seem to locate truth in nature; while for Clare nature's truth is ever green (*Child Harold* 1170), for Shelley, it is silent. While Shelley seems to refer to a natural truth beyond human discourse, he does not try to import any value into nature's uncanny language. It is silent, yet eloquent in its very silence. It is a language without words that means only negatively, in contrast to the arrogance of positive human communication. Nature's silence underscores human language and interrupts it in the meaningful space between words. Shelley's notion of "silent eloquence" focuses our attention upon the space between.

The negative communication of nature's silent eloquence, begun in *Queen Mab*, is also present in "Mont Blanc." Therefore, while nature is silent throughout—while "None can reply" (75) to Shelley's questions—"The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild, / So solemn, that man may be / But for such faith with nature reconciled" (76-79). Nature's "mysterious tongue," it seems, effectively teaches reverent uncertainty, either in the form of "awful doubt" or a faith so humble and unassuming as to have no form for its belief. The last line of the phrase is contentious. Does "But for such faith" mean "only for such faith" or "except for such faith"? Manuscript variations seem to support the first interpretation, that only *through* such faith could humanity be reconciled with nature.¹⁰⁴ This interpretation would also seem the most environmentally friendly, in the conventional sense of environmental in which reconciliation between humanity and nature is the ultimate goal. It is not, however, the most ecological. Ecologically, we can productively read "but" as "except": *except* for

¹⁰⁴See Reiman and Powers' editorial notes.

such faith, humanity may be reconciled with nature. It is now the mild faith, or the awful doubt, that keeps humanity and nature separate.

It is an intriguing reading in a Kantian context. To this point, among the torrent of associations that Shelley attempts, the sublime materiality of the mountain has threatened the perceiving subject's very existence. The third section of the poem, which contains the passage in question, begins with the sublime uncertainty of the subject about his existence when faced with the mountain: "Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / The veil of life and death?" (53-54). Nature's incommensurable materiality begins to threaten the subject's annihilation—the first moment of the Kantian sublime. It is a moment that verges upon total reconciliation with nature in death, or in terms of human relation, the total communion warned against by Nancy and Blanchot. The mountain's mysterious tongue is incomprehensible; it sustains and emphasizes the separation between itself and the human mind that tries to perceive and conceive of it. Again, this point was begun years earlier by the Fairy in *Queen Mab*. The "Spirit of Nature" that the Fairy addresses is impartial to humanity, "Because thou hast not human sense, / Because thou art not human mind" (6.218-19). Preserving its otherness, nature therefore teaches difference, and cautions against an urge to join with it, which would require the death of the subject referred to in the beginning of the section. It is clear in "Mont Blanc" that the mountain cannot be subsumed by the human mind. The alternative, if resolution is to be achieved, is for the human mind to join the mountain. "Mont Blanc" resists the second moment of the Kantian sublime because, faced with nature's materiality, this moment entails a resolution that is terribly absolute. Kant would call it monstrous (136).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵The "monstrous" is that which "by its magnitude annihilates the end which its concept constitutes" (136).

Mont Blanc has a mysterious voice, however, to wordlessly “repeal” such “Large codes of fraud and woe” (80, 81). But how does it wordlessly perform this action, the teaching of “awful doubt” or humble faith that would respect its otherness? Nature’s “mysterious tongue” (76) and active “voice” (80) suggest that some manner of relationship is possible beyond the moments of the Kantian sublime, resulting neither in the identity of the second moment (in which the other is subsumed) nor ending in the first moment of sheer inaccessibility. The sublimity of “Mont Blanc” does not undo, but alters Kant’s second moment. The experience remains incomprehensible for it cannot be assimilated by the rational mind. It does not remain meaningless, however, for the mountain’s materiality does reach the perceiving subject, teaching it both doubt and faith. The mountain speaks in a mysterious tongue “not understood / By all, but which the wise, and great, and good / Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel” (81-83). Though the mountain speaks to all, only “the wise, and great, and good” can elicit meaning from the silence. This meaning is not confined to the rational, however. Shelley puts the act of interpretation on the same line, literally and figuratively, with feeling.

Kant’s sublime begins in the turmoil of an emotional response—fear—and resolves itself rationally through the superior power of the human mind. In “Mont Blanc,” Shelley’s initial moment is similar to Kant’s, but the second moment does not resolve rationally: rather, it is an affective resolution that remains in the affective realm. Therefore, the perceiving subject does not understand the mountain, but feels it; nature’s silent eloquence is felt and not heard. Here we see the kernel of affective relation first presented in *Queen Mab* begin to bear poetic fruit. This affective sublime is a negative experience—the mountain’s mysterious voice can repeal codes of fraud and woe but

offers no positive concept to replace them. Like Shelley's understanding of philosophy in "On Life" (1819), the affective sublime "establishes no new truth" (507). Instead, the mountain's voice repeals fraud and woe, just as philosophy "destroys error, and the roots of error" (507). Like philosophy, the affective sublime "leaves ... a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation" (507). Mont Blanc's silent eloquence offers a negative correction of humanity's "nothings of much sound" (*Queen Mab* 4.234).

Following this discussion of philosophy's education in "On Life," so similar to the experience of the sublime presented in "Mont Blanc," Shelley gives a description of an experience that is again very like that of the affective sublime. He calls it "reverie":

Let us recollect our sensations as children.¹⁰⁶ What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves ... We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. And these are states which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life. (507)

The experience of Mont Blanc certainly triggers "an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life." Indeed, the sublime begins in the "intense apprehension" of the

¹⁰⁶Shelley here continues the Romantic tradition of privileging the perception of the child as somehow closer to nature, common to both Clare and Wordsworth as well: "The child is father of the man."

vertiginous horizon between the self and non-self. The moment veers toward a complete dissolution of the self in the face of the incomprehensible, as if the self “were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed” into the self. Reverie, like Shelley’s sublime, is characterized by feeling: they “*feel* as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe” and are “*conscious* of no distinction” [emphases mine]. Those who cease to experience reverie have had their ability to feel blunted: “they become mechanical and habitual agents. Their feelings and their reasonings are the combined result of a multitude of entangled thoughts, of a series of what are called impressions, blunted by reiteration” (507-8). The shock of the sublime allows passage into a feeling of oneness with the natural world, which keeps alive the ability to feel. More particularly, it keeps alive the ability to feel a relationship with the world, the ability to relate.

Reverie, like the sublime, verges on a state of union. It is important to note, however, that reverie, like the sublime, is also a temporally limited state: reverie constitutes “states” plural “which precede or accompany or follow an unusually intense and vivid apprehension of life” (507). They are necessarily transient experiences. Shelley is not advocating absolute union, just as he does not advocate a life of total feeling at the expense of reason.¹⁰⁷ The affective sublime and the state of reverie constitute fleeting moments of ecstasy, feelings of dissolution, that become joy. I follow Adam Potkay’s definitions of and distinction between ecstasy and joy, wherein ecstasy tends toward union while joy is necessarily tangential and incomplete (3, 25). In joy, the

¹⁰⁷Those who lack reverie have both “[t]heir feelings and their reasonings” blunted (507). The balance between feeling and reason parallels the balance he articulates in his “Defence” between imagination and reason (510-11).

difference between self and other is respected, while the relation between the two is keenly felt. The transitory experience accesses a sustaining apprehension of “the before unapprehended relations of things” (“Defence” 512). As for Clare and Wordsworth, joy is an enormously important as well as ecological idea for Shelley. It attains its most thorough and effective expression in *Prometheus Unbound*. Having thought through his paradoxical material through lyric works like “The Cloud,” “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” and “Mont Blanc,” Shelley figures joy in *Prometheus Unbound* as a simultaneously spiritual and intensely material experience, one which idealistically embraces the materiality of the universe of things. Joy is Shelley’s key figure for ecological relation.

5. The Joy of the Clinamen

That sexual relationships are foundational in Shelley’s thought is clear as early as the romantic relationship between Ianthe and Henry that begins and ends *Queen Mab*. We see a similar notion, for instance, in “The Sensitive-Plant” (published with *Prometheus Unbound*, 1820). The unisexual sensitive plant is alone, but desires relationships with others: “But none ever trembled and panted with bliss / In the garden, the field or the wilderness, / Like a doe in the noontide with love’s sweet want / As the companionless Sensitive-plant” (1.9-12). The plant is companionless in a garden of companionships between other plants. Shelley’s descriptions of these relationships are extremely sexualized: “For each one was interpenetrated / With the light and the odour its neighbour shed / Like young lovers, whom youth and love make dear, / Wrapt and filled by their mutual atmosphere” (1.66-69). The sensitive-plant is incapable of participating

materially in such a relationship, but does so spiritually: “It loves—even like Love—its deep heart is full—” (1.76).

Shelley presents a negative example of this relational ability in “Alastor” (1816). The Poet of “Alastor” is of the same fine constitution as Ianthe, which in Shelley’s atomist language indicates that he has the same sympathetic potential. He is “A lovely youth” (55), “his wild eyes” are “soft orbs” (63, 64). So mild is he, that “the doves and squirrels would partake / From his innocuous hand his bloodless food, / Lured by the gentle meaning of his looks” (100-2). His form is more graceful than the antelope (103-6). Though he could at one time relate with nature, this capacity is now wasted upon a monomaniacal search for the ideal image of himself. He travels through scenes of relation like those that surround the sensitive-plant, where ivies “twine their tendrils with the wedded boughs / Uniting their close union” (444-45) and where “One darkest glen / Sends from its woods of musk-rose, twined with jasmine / A soul-dissolving odour, to invite / To some more lovely mystery” (451-54). The Poet does not heed the invitation. Oblivious to the relationships all around him, in his narcissism he sees only himself: “His eyes beheld / Their own wan light through the reflected lines / Of his thin hair” (469-71). The narcissus, those “yellow flowers” who “For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes, / Reflected in the crystal calm” (406-7) act as a foil for the Poet. When he sees them he is drawn towards them, and for a moment is even tempted to abandon his solitude: “The Poet longed / To deck with their bright hues his withered hair, / But on his heart its solitude returned, / And he forbore” (412-15). He refuses relation even with the narcissus plant, which in its mythological significance would be his kindred spirit.

The affective climax of “Alastor” is the Poet’s rejection of the Arab maiden.

Though the poem is filled with images of natural relationships, Shelley once again places a human relationship at the centre. The Poet meets an Arab maiden who attends to him with love, bringing him food and matting to comfort him. Together, they parallel Ianthe and Henry: like Henry, the Arab maiden “watched his nightly sleep, / Sleepless herself, to gaze upon his lips / Parted in slumber” (134-36). The Poet, however, is insensible to her love. It is after this meeting that he dreams of the “veiled maid” who bears an uncanny resemblance to himself, with a voice “like the voice of his own soul / Heard in the calm of thought” (153-54). She too is a poet (161). It becomes clear, however, that she is merely a spectre, an idealized image of himself. She is therefore wholly unattainable. He dreams of total union with her, of folding “his frame in her dissolving arms” (187), but awakes to find himself alone: “His wan eyes / Gaze on the empty scene as vacantly / As ocean’s moon looks on the moon in heaven” (200-2). Shelley is clear that the veiled maid is sent in retribution: “The spirit of sweet human love has sent / A vision to the sleep of him who spurned / Her choicest gifts” (203-5).

The Poet is not content with earthly relation, the vicissitudes of which make it necessarily fall short of absolute union. He longs for the “dissolving arms” of a spectral love, rather than the real relationship offered by the Arab maiden. The desire for union quickly reveals itself as a desire for death:¹⁰⁸

Lost, lost, for ever lost,
 In the wide pathless desart of dim sleep,
 That beautiful shape! Does the dark gate of death
 Conduct to thy mysterious paradise,

¹⁰⁸It is a narrative that parallels John Clare’s tragic real-life quest for the spectral Mary Joyce, discussed in Chapter 3.

O Sleep! Does the bright arch of rainbow clouds,
 And pendent mountains seen in the calm lake,
 Lead only to a black and watery depth,
 While death's blue vault, with loathliest vapours hung,
 Where every shade which the foul grave exhales
 Hides its dead eye from the detested day,
 Conduct, O Sleep, to thy delightful realms? (209-19)

The poem now follows the Poet on his quest for death, hoping to find in it a blessed union withheld by the material reality of life: “‘Vision and Love!’ / The Poet cried aloud, ‘I have beheld / The path of thy departure. Sleep and death / Shall not divide us long!’” (366-69). He is dissatisfied with division and difference and yearns for total union, an impossible state for the living since life is founded upon difference. As Lucretius warns, “to yoke mortal with immortal, and to think that they can be partners in feeling and act upon each other, is folly” (3.800-2). The poet is dissatisfied with transience and searches for immanence, which he finally realizes is only possible in death. The distinction between the two is represented in the poem by the two different forms of relationship offered to the Poet. The Arab maiden offers an earthly, physical relationship best characterized by the sexual act—necessarily transient and incomplete. The veiled maid offers an otherworldly, total, permanent oneness. The Arab maid offers joy; the veiled maid offers ecstasy.¹⁰⁹

Shelley is committed to joy as the affect of relation. His materialism, understood

¹⁰⁹This aspect of the narrative also parallels John Clare's biography. He faced similar competing desires represented by his two Marys, and, like the Poet of “Alastor,” found the angelic Mary the more desirable.

through Lucretius' Epicureanism, reveals the nature of the relationality at the centre of his ecological thought. Shelley inherits from Lucretius the belief that relation occurs at all levels of existence, beginning with the atomic. The relationships between atoms, the connections they form and sever, constitute the basis of all things. In order to make these connections, the atoms must be able to move. In order for atoms to move, there must be a place to which they can move, an unoccupied space which they can occupy. Therefore, Lucretius argues that the movement of atoms (and therefore the existence of all things) is predicated upon the existence of void (1.329-39). Void makes possible the existence of difference and different things by preventing all things from collapsing into immobile oneness: "we discern before our eyes . . . many things moving in many ways and various manners, which, if there were no void, would not so much lack altogether their restless motion, as never would have been in any way produced at all, since matter would have been everywhere quiescent packed in one solid mass" (1.340-45); "if void be taken from things, all are condensed together and all become one mass" (1.660-62) Like Shelley's philosophy, then, and like Mont Blanc's eloquence, life itself also depends upon leaving a vacancy ("On Life" 507).¹¹⁰

Void is the stage of the universe whereon the atoms perform the history of things, the negative that makes the positive possible. This notion was first glimpsed in *Queen Mab*, and Shelley returns to confirm it in *Prometheus Unbound*. When the Spirit of the Hour hails the vision of the newly redeemed world in which "the impalpable thin air / And the all-circling sunlight were transformed / As if the sense of love dissolved in them / Had folded itself round the sphered world" (3.100-3), a vision very much akin to

¹¹⁰Lucretius' void also reveals the materiality of Shelley's concept of philosophy; both are founded upon void.

Queen Mab's, it ends with an image of "The loftiest star of unascended Heaven / Pinnacled dim in the intense inane" (3.203-4). *Inane* is the Latin word for void in the Epicurean tradition, and in *De Rerum Natura*. An Epicurean reading of "Alastor," then, considers the Poet weary of the perpetual movement and relation between atoms and void. He desires to escape the void and the difference it maintains, and yearns to join the stasis of the solid mass that results in its absence. Death is the reality of this immanent union.

The relationships between atoms in the void present a logical problem for Lucretius. As physical things, atoms must adhere to physical laws, like the law of gravity—atoms must all fall straight downward. If atoms fall downward, how is it that they ever connect? Lucretius is certain that they fall at the same speed; therefore it cannot be that faster falling atoms crash into slower ones beneath them (2.225-42). This is a serious problem, for it is the connections between atoms that make all things possible. Lucretius' solution to this problem is the *clinamen*, the atomic swerve:

while the first bodies are being carried downwards by their own weight in a straight line through the void, at times quite uncertain and uncertain places, they swerve a little from their course, just so much as you might call a change of motion. For if they were not apt to incline, all would fall downwards like raindrops through the profound void, no collision would take place and no blow would be caused among the first-beginnings: thus nature would never have produced anything. (2.217-24)

The indeterminacy of the *clinamen*, the uncertainty of its time and place, is the site of free will in the Epicurean universe: "what keeps the mind itself from having necessity within it in all actions, and from being as it were mastered and forced to endure and to suffer, is

the minute swerving of the first-beginnings at no fixed place and at no fixed time” (2.289-93).

The clinamen is therefore the source of freedom from material necessity, allowing for hope and change; in other words, it is the basis of ethics—the cornerstone of Shelley’s thinking—in the same sense that Jean-Luc Nancy has thought the clinamen ethically as well, at the macroscopic level of community. Translating Lucretius’ atomic cosmology into the relationships of the things of the world, Nancy begins his critique of communal thought through the ages by an explicit rebuke of the tendency to think community as solely *human*. It is this anthropocentric tendency that has crippled much community (and I would add, ecological) thought. The problem is that “there is no form of communist opposition ... that has not been or is not still profoundly subjugated to the goal of a *human* community” (2). The result is therefore communion and not community, since all terms are translated into one, the human. Communion is “[a]n absolute immanence of man to man—a humanism” (2): “it is precisely the immanence of man to man, or it is *man*, taken absolutely, considered as the immanent being par excellence, that constitutes the stumbling block to a thinking of community” (3).

In thinking community through Lucretius, Nancy considers the individual an atom. As we see in *De Rerum Natura*, individual atoms affect nothing on their own. Such would be the atoms that fall straight down and never touch, and therefore create nothing in nature. Similarly, the individual on its own is nothing, and can create nothing: “the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death” (3). If the individual, like the atom, is indivisible and entirely single, it is the very image of immanence and oneness. Immanence, for Nancy, is associated with death, as death

brings about the conditions of immanence, “decomposition leading back to nature” (12).

There can be no community in death, therefore, but “only the continuous identity of atoms” (12).

Community for Nancy is founded upon the *clinamen*, that which brings the individuals (atoms) together in relation. The *clinamen* is the foundation of the ecological world, the *oikos*: “one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a *clinamen*. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other. Community is at least the *clinamen* of the ‘individual’” (3-4). For Nancy, this macroscopic *clinamen* is what inclines people towards and away from each other and brings individuals into community, in which process they are no longer individuals, but singularities (6). Singularity marks the relationship between atoms through the *clinamen* as it maintains the difference between them, preserving the connection formed, the community, from becoming immanent communion. The *clinamen* introduces a playfulness which the immanence of communion cannot accommodate. As in Lucretius, the uncertainty of the *clinamen*’s time and place, the indeterminacy of the conditions of its existence, is a profoundly important aspect of relation. For Lucretius, it is the site of free will; for Nancy, it is the source of community’s incommensurability, that which makes it resistant to social programming and therefore beyond totalitarian grasp: “there is no theory, ethics, politics, or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisaging this *clinamen*, this declination or decline of the individual within the community” (4).

6. Joyful Oikos

The clinamen, the playful swerve on both microscopic and macroscopic levels, is extremely important for Shelley's poetry. Heeding the demands of their very physical atomic bases, Shelley's characters incline towards each other to form an affective community. It is playfully affective because these inclinations are inexplicable within the laws of nature; they are instead transgressions in excess of the laws. In Lucretius' and Nancy's thinking, the clinamen occurs as an exception—an inexplicable excess that defies the laws of nature (like gravity, in Lucretius' text)—yet one necessary for nature's unfolding. On the level of the human, it is emotion that attracts and repels. For Shelley, these emotions are still very much a part of the earthly, material realm. In his poetry, the key manifestation of the clinamen is sexual love. In *Queen Mab*, Henry inclines toward Ianthe, kneeling next to her and "Watching her sleep with looks of speechless love" (9.238). In "Alastor," the Arab maiden inclines toward the Poet, but he, like the individual atom in the absence of the clinamen, falls straight down to the ground of immanence found in death. The most profound inclination in Shelley's work, however, is the love between Prometheus and Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Asia is not present in the opening act, yet even in his physical bonds Prometheus inclines toward her, thinking on the woods through which he "wandered once / With Asia, drinking life from her loved eyes" (1.122-23). Asia is identified throughout as the embodiment of love. Prometheus calls her such explicitly: "I feel / Most vain all hope but love, and thou art far, / Asia!" (1.807-9). Moreover, she is specifically linked with physical love when Panthea tells the story of Asia's origin which is very similar to Aphrodite's origin story. Like Aphrodite, Asia too arises on a shell:

—The Nereids tell

That on the day when the clear hyaline
 Was cloven at thy uprise, and thou didst stand
 Within a veined shell, which floated on
 Over the calm floor of the chrystal sea,
 Among the Aegean isles, and by the shores
 Which bear thy name, love, like the atmosphere
 Of the sun's fire filling the living world,
 Burst from thee (2.5.20-28)

This comparison with the sensuous image of Aphrodite riding a shell invokes a comparison with the specifically sexual love which Aphrodite governs, but sexual and spiritual love (*eros* and *agape*) are interconnected for Shelley. Just lines after the invocation of Aphrodite, Asia is associated with spiritual love as well. Panthea tells her that “the whole world . . . seeks thy sympathy. / Hearest thou not the sounds i' the air which speak the love / Of all articulate beings? Feelest thou not / The inanimate winds enamoured of thee?” (2.5.34-37). These two aspects of love are united in Panthea's speech and in Asia's constitution.

The relationship between Prometheus and Asia is central to the poem's unfolding since their love is the embodiment of the redeeming power of love that begins the regeneration of the world. As in *Queen Mab*, the love between two humans begins the change. Asia is to Prometheus as Henry is to Ianthe, sometimes explicitly so. As Henry watches over Ianthe, so Asia sleeplessly watches Prometheus: “Hast thou forgotten one,” says Panthea to Prometheus, “ who watches thee / The cold dark night, and never sleeps

but when / The shadow of thy spirit falls on her?" (1.821-23). Unlike Ianthe and Henry, however, the relationship between Prometheus and Asia is often explicitly sexual in Shelley's description. Prometheus bound calls out to Asia as the one "who when my being overflowed / Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine / Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust" (1.809-11).

The sexual imagery is not confined to this central relationship, however. It also occurs between Prometheus and Panthea, between the sisters Asia and Panthea, and between the sisters Panthea and Ione. Sexuality and sexual love, especially after Prometheus' unbinding, permeate the world of *Prometheus Unbound*. Asia, alone at the beginning of Act II, calls out to Panthea with sensual yearning: "At sunrise thou shouldst come, sweet sister mine ... / Too long desired, too long delaying, come! ..." (2.1.14-15). When Panthea does come shortly after, she explains to Asia what made her tarry:

erewhile I slept
 under the glaucous caverns of old Ocean,
 Within the dim bowers of green and purple moss;
 Our young Ione's soft and milky arms
 Locked then as now behind my dark moist hair
 While my shut eyes and cheek were pressed within
 The folded depth of her life-breathing bosom ... (43-49)

She then relates a dream she has about Prometheus while asleep in her sister's arms, again replete with sexually suggestive imagery:

I saw not—heard not—moved not—only felt
 His presence flow and mingle through my blood

Till it became his life and his grew mine
 And I was thus absorbed—until it past
 And like vapours when the sun sinks down,
 And tremulous as they, in the deep night
 My being was condensed. (2.1.79-86)

Sexual love is the primary mode of relation in *Prometheus Unbound*, and joy is its affect.

Joy's source in the poem is often a sexually-described encounter, but of the characters of the poem, it is most often associated with Prometheus. His love (manifested in relation with Asia and others) is the source of change in the drama, affecting all things of the world. Prometheus is called joy by his mother, the Earth. At this early point in the poem, however—before Prometheus' declaration of pity, before his renunciation of the curse, and before his unbinding—joy belongs in the past tense. The Earth remembers Prometheus' birth; joy ran through her "stony veins" and spread to infuse all things, "to the last fibre of the loftiest tree," "as blood within a living frame, / When thou didst from her bosom, like a cloud / Of glory, arise, a spirit of keen joy!" (1.152, 153, 156-58). In the present tense, joy is perverted in the service of terror and pain. In the first act, joy belongs to the Furies, they who "close upon Shipwreck and Famine's track / Sit chattering with joy on the floodless wrack" (1.501-2). The Chorus of Furies describes the failure of the Christian message and its perversion by those who claim to follow it with fiendish glee: "Joy, Joy, Joy!" (1.560). After Prometheus recalls the curse and loves his enemy, joy begins to be reclaimed.

The reclamation of joy begins the renewal of earth. Again, joy is considered an earthly affect as it was in the Earth's memory during the first act. At Prometheus'

unbinding in Act III, joy too is unbound from its captivity in the service of Jupiter's reign.

Joy enters the present and returns to the Earth, entering through Prometheus' kiss:

I hear—I feel—

Thy lips are on me, and their touch runs down

Even to the adamantine central gloom

Along these marble nerves—'tis life, 'tis joy,

And through my withered, old and icy frame

The warmth of an immortal youth shoots down

Circling. (3.3.84-90)

Joy, it seems, is sexually transmitted: it begins with a kiss, and proceeds to the “shooting” of Prometheus' “warmth” down through the earth's bodily “frame.”

While joy is sexual in *Prometheus Unbound*, it is at the same time an explicitly ethical experience. This relationship between sex, joy, and ethics in *Prometheus Unbound* is similar to Jacques Lacan's later notion of *jouissance* as articulated primarily in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959-60). Early in Lacan's career, *jouissance* seems to simply mean sexual pleasure, in keeping with the French root of the word (orgasm). Later, the term develops into something more complex—the pleasure associated with an insatiable drive and, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, one that takes on particularly ethical significance.¹¹¹ At this point, Lacan defines *jouissance* through its relationship with Freud's pleasure principle, the innate mechanism that aims for homeostasis. Freud considers pleasure to be freedom from excitement; therefore, the pleasure principle is in effect a constancy principle, one that aims to reduce tension (either positive or negative)

¹¹¹Daniel Evans in “From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance” traces the permutations of the term in Lacan's thought throughout his career.

which is understood as unpleasurable (*Beyond 1*). Thus understood, the pleasure principle would seem to tend towards death, since in death is found the ultimate stasis of the inanimate state.¹¹² It is an economic principle, weighing different costs and benefits in order to balance the psychological budget. Lacan finds an example of the economy of the pleasure principle in Kant. In *The Critique of Practical Reason*,¹¹³ Kant offers a tale of a man who is given the opportunity to sleep with the woman he desires. Should he accept, however, he would be hanged immediately afterwards. According to Kant, there is little doubt that the man would refuse (30). Freud's pleasure principle dictates that the man refuse; *jouissance* would be found in the unreasonable acceptance of this fate, to judge, against the pleasure principle, that the gallows is worth the pleasure that precedes it. *Jouissance* therefore exists beyond the pleasure principle as an excess that it cannot accommodate.

Perhaps Lacan's most striking example, certainly the one with most resonance for *Prometheus Unbound*, is in his reading of the Christian commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," the same message that the Furies use to taunt Prometheus in Act I. For Lacan, the commandment is a striking example of an unreasonable, excessive love, one which horrified Freud in its utter neglect of economy (Lacan 185-86). For Freud, love must be rationed in a balanced give and take partnership. Lacan summarizes Freud's position, and its problem, thus: "he tells us the most sensitive and reasonable things about what is worth sharing the good that is our love with. But what escapes him is perhaps the fact that precisely because we take that path we miss the opening on to

¹¹²The pleasure principle is therefore potentially dangerous. The ego wards off death in its goal of self-preservation, replacing the pleasure principle with the reality principle (5-6).

¹¹³Lacan attributes it to *The Critique of Pure Reason* (108).

jouissance” (186). Freud would seem to advocate a utilitarian, economical love that, for Lacan, becomes sickening. Lacan summarizes the economic position as follows:

My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism, altruism of the kind that is situated on the level of the useful ... That is how I spend my life, by cashing in my time in a dollar zone, ruble zone or any other zone, in my neighbor’s time, when all the neighbors are maintained equally at the marginal level of reality of my own existence. Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that everyone is sick, that civilization has its discontents. (187)

Lacan sees in this economical perspective the resistance to “love thy neighbour as thyself” which is synonymous with the resistance to *jouissance* (194). To love thy neighbour, regardless of whether the neighbor merits or deserves it, is in excess of all reasonable behaviour, leading the way to great pleasure as well as great pain. Since *jouissance* is beyond the pleasure principle and counter to the interests of the ego, it is therefore ethical (Evans 7).

Prometheus Unbound can be read as a dramatization of *jouissance*, unveiling throughout the performance its ethical and particularly ecological import. The drama begins economically enough: Prometheus has cursed Jupiter and is punished accordingly. He demonstrates the appropriate amount of anger and hatred in response to the pain of his torture. Prometheus’ inexplicable pity, however, upsets the economic balance. We are unprepared for it; it comes out of nowhere since Jupiter has done nothing to deserve it. Yet Prometheus, the “spirit of keen joy” (1.158), pities nonetheless.

The narrative to this point is remarkably close to Lacan’s reading. Prometheus’

pity seems to be the catalyst that begins the fall of Jupiter. Prometheus' *jouissance* in loving his neighbour, in this case his very undeserving torturer, is a radically ethical gesture. Similarly inexplicable yet thoroughly ethical is his renunciation of the curse he has uttered: "It doth repent me: words are quick and vain; / Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine. / I wish no living thing to suffer pain" (1.303-5). Prometheus' *jouissance* is expressed in stark contrast to the joy of the Furies who come to torture him. It is in excess of their economy. Upon learning of Prometheus' pity, the Fury can make nothing of it, and vanishes: "Thou pitiest them? I speak no more!" (1.634). Jupiter's reign is toppled by this excess.

Jouissance, as Lacan has suggested, is detrimental to society (Evans 11); we see in Nancy, however, that it is integral to community. Communism fails, according to Nancy, by making work the basis of community; community members are thereby made workers (2). Community must instead be "inoperative." As we see in *Prometheus Unbound*, *jouissance* is impossible to be made to work or be made into a work. In the face of it, the Fury, for instance, can only vanish, leaving his intended work undone. Nancy cites ecstasy as that which cannot be made to work. Potkay's distinction between ecstasy and joy, in which ecstasy merges with union while joy maintains difference (3, 25), is carried out in Lacan's definition as well. *Jouissance* is necessarily incomplete as "the paradoxical satisfaction which is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire" (Evans 5). In joy, unlike in ecstasy, total completion or total union is impossible; difference remains. I therefore read joy as that which denies total union and makes it impossible.

While *jouissance* can lead to death (as in Kant's example), it does not, like the

pleasure principle, desire the stasis of death. Rather, Lacan says that “[t]he death drive, insofar, as it is then a destruction drive, has to be beyond the instinct to return to the state of equilibrium of the inanimate sphere” (212). It is a “[w]ill to destruction” that is also a “[w]ill to make a fresh start”; “it challenges everything that exists. But it is also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again.” While not productive as Nancy warns against, *jouissance* is nevertheless creative. It is a distinction borne out in *Prometheus Unbound*. In his *jouissance*, Prometheus does not yearn for the stasis of death: “Peace is in the grave— / ... / I am a God and cannot find it there— / Nor would I seek it” (1.638-41). It is a creative force, destructive of Jupiter’s society, but creative of ecological community.

Like the development of *jouissance* in Lacan’s thought, joy in *Prometheus Unbound* remains inherently sexual throughout. It is also inherently ethical and ecological. The relationship between these three aspects is dramatized in the relationship between the Earth, Prometheus and Asia, and the Spirit of the Earth. Prometheus hails the Earth as his mother, and is in turn hailed by her as son. After the Earth’s rejuvenation through Prometheus’ kiss, the Spirit of the Earth rises up from her in the form of a winged child. While the Earth itself is old, its spirit is made young. This young Spirit of the Earth, emblematic of the renewed, redeemed Earth, hails Asia, or Love, joyfully as its mother: “Mother, dearest Mother! / May I then talk with thee as I was wont? / May I then hide mine eyes in thy soft arms / After thy looks have made them tired of joy?” (3.4.24-27). Love, then, is the mother of the newly young earth. The childish Spirit of the Earth innocently draws attention to the sexual nature of the relationship between Prometheus and Asia. Asia points to the time when the Spirit’s “chaste Sister / Who guides the frozen and inconstant moon” will love him (3.4.86-87): “What, as Asia loves Prometheus?”

(3.4.90). Asia responds almost embarrassedly: “Peace, Wanton—thou art yet not old enough” (3.4.91). It is a strange and complex family tree, and one infused throughout with joy.

The joyful sexual encounter between Prometheus and Asia begins the renewal of the earth and all things that compose it. The renewal that has been prophesied in *Queen Mab* through Ianthe and Henry—the sensitive extension of the world—is performed in *Prometheus Unbound* between Prometheus and Asia. The encounter occurs in Act 4. It is coyly and peculiarly enacted, as Prometheus and Asia are absent in the act. The preceding scene begins with Prometheus, Asia, Panthea, Ione, and the Spirit of the Earth all in attendance. Act 4 begins with just Panthea and Ione. The Spirit of the Earth is later accounted for, seen in Panthea’s vision sleeping peacefully, dreaming, appropriately, of love (4.268). The Voice of Unseen Spirits that wakes Panthea and Ione asks twice “But where are ye?” (4.47, 55). The question is possibly addressed to the Hours who arrive shortly after, but it could as easily be addressed to Prometheus and Asia, given their conspicuous absence.

I read Act 4 as the consummation of Prometheus and Asia’s relationship, the sex act long desired by them and long delayed. While it happens offstage, it is narrated by the poetic though still very sexual intercourse of the Earth and Moon. In *Perverse Romanticism* (2009), Richard Sha shows how this culmination of the drama is displaced, transferred from Prometheus and Asia to the Earth and Moon. Sha discusses Shelley’s interest in sibling incest, as seen in “Laon and Cythna,” as “an ideal form of love”: ideal because it is “disinterested” and selfless (7). Shelley’s problem, as Sha defines it, is to “make the immediacy of sexual passion disinterested without emptying it of passion” (7).

In “Laon and Cythna,” the siblings “remain passionate despite having grown up together but he is careful to direct their disinterest outwardly. Laon and Cythna fight for the social revolution of others” (Sha 10). In *Prometheus Unbound*, however, it is the other way around. The revolution does not serve the longevity of the passion; rather, the passion fuels the revolution. Displacing the drama’s climactic expression of passion displaces the focus of the act from the central figures in order to broaden its significance and effect. It is a similar movement to that found in *Queen Mab* where the passion is displaced from Ianthe and Henry (and any notion of salvation through their procreation¹¹⁴) to their affective influence upon the world. In the passionate climax of *Prometheus Unbound*, the passion no longer, if ever, belongs to Prometheus and Asia. Its transference to the cosmos, to the Earth and Moon, dramatizes the extension of joy to the oikos, emphasizing its truly ecological potential.

In the passion’s performance, the Earth is the first to vocalize: “The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness, / The boundless, overflowing bursting gladness, / The vapourous exultation, not to be confined!” (4.319-21). The Moon responds in kind: “Some Spirit is darted like a beam from thee / Which penetrates my frozen frame / And passes with the warmth of flame— / With love and odour and deep melody / Through me, through me!” (4.327-31). At one point, the Moon is described in a position very similar to Asia and to Henry of *Queen Mab* before her. Just as Asia could only sleep when Prometheus’ shadow fell on her (1.821-23), so too is the Moon only still within the Earth’s shadow: “when thy shadow falls on me / Them am I mute and still,—by thee / Covered; of thy love, Orb most beautiful, / Full, oh, too full!—” (4.453-56). Their

¹¹⁴Richard Sha also notes that Shelley was skeptical about reproduction as the purpose of sex (29).

intercourse continues for several pages, until finally the Earth utters the concluding lines that comprise the climax: “O gentle Moon, thy chrystal accents pierce / The caverns of my Pride’s deep Universe, / Charming the tyger Joy, whose tramlings fierce / Made wounds, which need thy balm” (4.499-502). The love between Prometheus and Asia is dramatically, poetically narrated as the love between Earth and Moon. And appropriately so, since their love begins nature’s renewal as a community. Joy is the ecological affect, making possible the sensitive extension of the world, and therefore the foundation of the world as oikos.

Prometheus’ joy is his unbinding, since joy is an excess that cannot be bound. It is an earthly affect, passionately dedicated to the present in its physicality. Joy makes possible relationship without union, community without communion. It is a living affect, maintaining difference as it plays, like Nancy’s community, before “the night of immanence” (19) while refusing to join it. Therefore, *Prometheus Unbound* does not end in perfect completion, but with a call for continued struggle and vigilance. Demogorgon calls for continued *jouissance*, the joy of continued suffering and love: “To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite; / To forgive wrongs darker than Death or Night / To defy Power which seems Omnipotent; / To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (4.570-74). It is unreasonable and uneconomical in its excess. The things of nature, especially the inanimate things that cannot communicate rationally with us, cannot begin to merit or deserve our love, nor can we begin to expect the pleasure of our love’s reward. Pleasure is economical; joy is ecological. Prometheus and Asia, whose love and joy overflows to fill the world, are appropriately absent from this last act, while Demogorgon, the amorphous non-presence, is appropriately the last to

speak. Like Prometheus, the oikos is now unbound. Therefore, its “deep truth is imageless” (2.4.116). Demogorgon’s speech is the representation of the joy that resounds throughout the oikos in the wake of Prometheus and Asia’s union, signaling its pain, pleasure, and ethical responsibility—a joyful ethics. Joy is the excess that overflows the individual into the community, making possible the sensitive extension of the world. In *Prometheus Unbound* and throughout Shelley’s work, joy is the ecological passion at the foundation of the oikos.

Conclusion

Bate begins *Romantic Ecology* somewhat ecomimetically, as Morton would call it. He situates his moment of writing, in 1989, among the news headlines of the day. Two of them concern the politics of the Soviet Union and Germany; the third concerns “a scientific report supporting the hypothesis that there are links between freak weather conditions and global warming” (1). As I conclude this study at the beginning of 2013, I could make a similar claim. The year 2012, it has been reported, was among the 10 hottest years on record, “rising above the long-term average for the 36th year in a row”; “‘The planet is out of balance and therefore we can predict with confidence that the next decade is going to be warmer,’ James Hansen, a NASA climate scientist, said” (Goldenberg). Also in 2012, the Arctic sea ice cover dropped “to 1.32m square miles, the lowest value ever recorded” (Goldenberg). One of the last environmental headlines of 2012, dated 31 December, read “Kyoto Climate Change Treaty Sputters to a Sorry End”: “The controversial and ineffective Kyoto Protocol’s first stage comes to an end today, leaving the world with 58 per cent more greenhouse gases than in 1990, as opposed to the five per cent reduction its signatories sought” (Paris). While some steps have been made and while environmental issues receive increasing attention in public discourse, it is easy to get discouraged when one considers the grave challenges we still face.

Ecocriticism is a crucially important field in our state of ecological emergency, for it illumines the relationship between nature and art. I have taken a different tack in this study than many ecocritics, yet I believe we are united in our fundamental belief that art can change the world. Bate concludes *The Song of the Earth* (2000) with an affirmation of this idea: “If mortals dwell in that they save the earth and if poetry is the original

admission of dwelling, then poetry is the place where we save the earth” (283).

Ecocriticism argues that the fate of the earth must not and thankfully does not rest solely in the hands of government and business. Gary Snyder makes the point eloquently in “Mother Earth: Her Whales.” While “Brazil says ‘sovereign use of Natural Resources’” (8) and “Japan quibbles for words on / what kinds of whales they can kill” (20-21), Snyder asks how either could “Speak for the green of the leaf? Speak for the soil?” (57). They cannot. Ecocritics argue, however, that poets can. More importantly, they speak *for nature to us*.

On this point, however, I disagree with much ecocriticism to date. As discussed in the first chapter with reference to Lyotard’s notion of the differend, I am uncomfortable with the idea of speaking for. I read in much ecocriticism a too easy and ultimately uncritical tendency to conflate language with nature. I read a presumption to know what nature is and what we are in relation to it. This presumption is founded upon the narrative of a return to nature that has guided environmental thought for centuries. In ecocriticism, it takes the form of a desire for the signified through the signifier, reading literature for its translation of the physical earth. Ecocriticism attempts this return despite the theoretical advances of the last decades. As Morton claims, ecocriticism “consciously blocks its ears to all intellectual developments of the last thirty years” (*Ecology* 20). It is particularly willfully deaf to post-structuralist approaches. Ecocriticism positions itself against post-structural theory because, in its environmental urgency, it holds true to a firm telos: the recovery of and reunion with the natural world. It is a goal which post-structuralism, with its regard for difference, necessarily throws into question. Much ecocriticism seems to desire solidity in language, words concretized into things.

Canadian poet Jan Zwicky admits the same desire in “The Geology of Norway” when she describes the “solid inner core” of the earth, “Fifteen hundred miles across, iron alloy” (42, 43). “That’s what I wanted,” she writes, “words made of that: language / that could bend light” (46, 47-48):

I wanted language
to hold me still, to be a rock,
I wanted to become a rock myself. I thought
if I could find, and say,
the perfect word, I’d nail
mind to the world, and find
release. (80-86)

Zwicky, however, turns aside from the goal, looking ahead at the end of the poem to the reality of union with nature, a time when “the slow cacophony of magma / cools and locks the continents in place. / Then weather, light, / and gravity / will be the only things that move” (115-19): “And will they understand? / Will they have a name for us?” (120-21). Much ecocriticism, it seems, makes no such turn, so focused is it upon the goal of union.

I have attempted throughout this study to call the environmental return narrative into question and to offer a different, more playful approach, one that is ecological instead of environmental. I look to Romantic poetry to articulate this approach because Romantic poetry led me to the approach in the first place. Like ecocriticism, Romanticism believes in an intimate relationship between poetry and nature, most succinctly expressed in Schiller’s thesis that modern poets “are the guardians of nature”

(106). Romantic thinkers configure that relationship very differently, however. I read in Romantic poetry and thought an exuberance that much ecocriticism tends to lack. In its quest for redress and reunion, much environmental thought takes a conservative, even economic approach as it works towards focused goals. It is important work, but it does not suffice to address our ecological situation. Particularly, it cannot address the artistic nature of our relationship with the world. Throughout this study, I have looked to Romanticism as the root of modern ecological consciousness, re-reading it in order to reveal new, much-needed modes of ecological thought.

Throughout my study of Romantic poets as different from each other as Wordsworth, Clare, and Shelley, the common thread that emerges is their uneconomic sensitivity towards the world, characterized by some form of imaginative excess. For each poet, this capacity for excess is what makes relation with the other possible. Wordsworth's extravagant self-consciousness, the development of which is traced throughout *The Prelude*, enables him to recognize and respect the boundaries between the self and other. Thus, he is able to relate with the natural other even when faced with the uncertainty and instability he finds there. Clare's excess, on the contrary, is marked by wild self-abandonment in the face of nature. His recognition of nature's uncertainty, therefore, is more bittersweet, throwing him into intense doubt. Nature is other for Clare despite his strong desire to find a home within it. Clare's homelessness, in the end, is at once elegiac and joyful. I ended this project with Shelley because his ecological orientation includes aspects of Wordsworth's and Clare's diverse positions. Shelley's ecology participates in the extremes that characterize his philosophy. At times both self-conscious and self-abandoning, in this study, Shelley offers the most eloquent and

comprehensive representation of an ecological community in *Prometheus Unbound*. In each case, these poets offer diverse ways of relating with the world ecologically which enlighten our current ecological situation. In each case, they present key insights that are often lacking in environmental approaches but which are necessary for creative thinking required by our ecological situation: concepts like play, daring, and passion. These imaginative excesses are uneconomic; they are not commensurable with the orderly running (nomos) of the oikos. Rather, in their attention to logos, or communication, they make possible a truly ecological existence through community with others.

To help articulate the Romantic oikos, or the Romantic understanding of ecology as community, and to demonstrate its surprising modernity, I have called upon post-structuralist theory, especially the community theory of Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy's notion of community as a constant, unending activity between singularities founded upon difference offers a compelling counterpoint to the environmental program of reunion with nature. I have used it to both criticize the program of reunion, unveiling it as a program of communion or identity, and to offer an alternative and creative way of thinking ecologically, a way that began to be articulated in the Romantic period. Nancy's community presents a mode of relation in which others are neither entirely separate nor condensed into a unity. Community theory offers ecological thought a method of thinking relation without reducing it to simply self and other, categories which in environmental terms become human and nature. Community cannot be reduced to such a binary, but entails the participation of countless others. Considered ecologically, this resistance to binary thinking enables us to think beyond the return narrative of humanity toward nature. It emphasizes humanity's, and each singular

human's, status as member among countless members of a community while reserving a distinction and importance for each member, simultaneously humbling and exalting each. Most importantly, it opens the conventional narrative to new approaches and new interpretations—new ways of configuring ourselves in the world.

During the Industrial Revolution, the Romantics witnessed the growth of industrial mentality as it was manifested in the treatment of nature as resource to be used for profit and its emphasis upon work as the means of making nature into profit. Deeply disturbed by what they saw and felt happening around them, the Romantics fight the new system in their poetry. Wordsworth denounces the “late and soon, / Getting and spending” of industrial society (“The World is Too Much with Us” 1-2). Clare writes many invectives against the encroaching enclosure he witnessed around Helpston, perhaps most eloquently in “The Lament of Swordy Well.” Shelley’s *Queen Mab* gives a lengthy speech against the evil of commerce, “beneath whose poison-breathing shade / No solitary virtue dares to spring” (5. 44-45), lamenting that “All things are sold: the very light of heaven / Is venal” (5. 177-78). The Romantics countered the industrial mentality and its obsession with economy, profit, and work. Instead of society, they desired community. I have read a modern theoretical articulation of this Romantic assertion in Nancy’s *community*. *Community for Nancy* is similarly opposed to work, being fundamentally a-teleological in its processes. Thinking ecology as community, as I argue that the Romantics did, allows us to think freely without being fixed into a specific, goal-oriented direction. It is not work, therefore, but play. It is a crucial performance, for our manifold ecological crises demand that we respond creatively.

The Romantic *oikos* as it is presented by Wordsworth, Clare, and Shelley

imagines ecology as a community. It offers a necessary alternative to the environmental narrative of return which desires a goal of communion or identity. The Romantics testify to the uncertainty of nature in their poetry and respect it in their presentations of ecological relation. Ecology is relation, and our ecological problems are essentially failures of relation. We are called upon to consider how we might relate with the other (both human and natural) ethically. Our relationship with nature as it stands now is dominated by economic principles, cost and benefit, give and take. As we witness each day, these principles are inadequate to address our ecological situation. We are in the peculiar situation of having to relate with those with whom we cannot rationally communicate. We have to reach out while expecting nothing in return. It is an excessive, uneconomic gesture. The Romantics respond instead with passion, in its dual sense of suffering and ardent love. Throughout numerous Romantic texts, joy is the passion which makes relation possible. Therefore, in this project, I have posited joy as the ecological passion. Joy is in excess of the economic transaction, reaching beyond the self towards the other while respecting difference. Moreover, as Nietzsche and Rosset contend, joy is devoted to the present moment, the here and now. It is easy to become overwhelmed when considering our ecological situation. It is easy to become melancholic, as Morton points out. The Romantic oikos, however, presents us with another possibility: to look forward with joy despite what appear insurmountable odds. Demogorgon concludes *Prometheus Unbound* with such an excessive gesture: “to hope, till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (4. 573-74). This excess characterizes the Romantic oikos, and it is what required of us today: to engage the world joyfully.

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“John Clare’s Biblical Paraphrases.” Christianity and Literature Study Group at ACCUTE Conference, Wilfred Laurier University / University of Waterloo, ON. 27 May 2012.

“Strange Dwelling in ‘Home at Grasmere.’” Wordsworth Summer Conference, Grasmere, UK. 8 August 2011.

“Joyful Ecology in Wordsworth and Clare.” “Romanticism and Evolution” Conference, Western University, ON. 12 May 2011.

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“The Eco-poetics of Lisa Robertson in *The Weather*.” ACCUTE Conference, Concordia University, QC. 28 May 2010.

“Being ‘Homeless at Home’: The Ecology of John Clare’s Flitting.” Department of English Colloquium Series, Western University, ON. 4 March 2010.

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Associations:

Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)
 Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of
 English (ACCUTE)
 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR)