

ROMANTIC DESCENT: POETRY AND THE AESTHETICS OF
DISAPPOINTMENT, 1790-1820

by

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ABSTRACT

Romantic Descent investigates disappointment as a minor, or non-cathartic, critical and aesthetic category in Romantic poetry and prose. Major aesthetic categories, long a focus of Romantic scholarship, have been understood to affirm individual self-cultivation and communal praxes of meaningful progress. However, recent work on affect has theorized alternative models for embodiment and relationality that have allowed new, radical and material, approaches to aesthetic phenomena. My dissertation critically intervenes in these developments by reconsidering Romanticism through its experimentation with disappointment as a negative aesthetic, and in so doing reveals a Romantic poetics of adjustment after the loss of an attachment to a self-affirming outcome or ideal future. Rather than start anew, such a poetics compels readers to persevere in encounters with difficulty, asking them to strive and struggle in ways both socially oriented and radically negative. Through close readings of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century philosophy, poetry, letters, and the occasional novel, this dissertation traces writers' mobilizations and responses to aesthetic disappointment in myriad formal and conceptual ways: falling figures (allegory and metaphor); structural recursion (repetition and tautology); metrical irregularities (what Coleridge calls "downfalls"); and stilted or bathetic stylistic conventions. Such "descents" I situate in light of significant intellectual, social and political changes occurring in the period, including British and German responses to the revolutions in France and Haiti; changing cultures of reading; the tensions between philosophical skepticism and the Swabian educational system; and stylistic developments in Romantic theatre. As these contexts suggest, aesthetic activations of disappointment emerge on scales both national and coterie, and what is at stake in this dissertation are the diverse and unexplored affective relations captured but not quite contained by these

writings. From Wordsworth's sympathetic sinking alongside the suffering of slaves; to Coleridge's projection of reading irregular meter as proprioceptive loss; Hölderlin's calculated formal downturns; Keats's affective reciprocity; and finally, Austen's ironic censure of interrupted novel readers, this dissertation reveals how the critical and aesthetic category of disappointment responds to the dissonant sense between hope and fear, striving and failure, movement and suspension, that permeates Romantic literature.

PREFACE

This dissertation is the original, independent work of the author, Carmen Faye Mathes.

A version of a portion of Chapter 4 has been published as “Let us not therefore go hurrying about”: Towards an Aesthetics of Passivity in Keats’s Poetics” in *European Romantic Review* 25.3 (May 2014): 309-318. Copyright © 2014 Taylor & Francis.

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Fig. 1 Hölderlin's "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones" [*Wechsel der Töne*] 124

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- BL* Coleridge, S.T. *Biographia Literaria, Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*. 2 vols. Eds. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate. Vol. 7 of *Collected Works*. 16 vols. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984. Print.
- JK Letters* Keats, John. *The Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958. Print.
- “Preface” Wordsworth, William and S.T. Coleridge. “1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.” *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*. Eds. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter. Peterborough: Broadview, 2008. Print.
- WW Letters* Wordsworth, William and Dorothy Wordsworth. *The Early Years: 1787-1805*. Vol. 1 of *Letters*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt. 2nd ed. 8 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1967. Print.

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For love and everything: to Collin, who first composed the deceptive cadence.

For all my grandparents

Introduction

Deceptive Cadence

A map of disappointments—that would be a revelation.

—Zadie Smith (2007)¹

I. New Engagements with History and the Affective Turn

In “Structures of Feeling,” Raymond Williams calls for a critical praxis beyond “‘world-view’ or ‘ideology,’” one that attends instead to “the characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132). For Williams, as for his inheritors, not least Fredric Jameson, feeling is synonymous with lived or *living* experience (Williams prefers the present tense) (132). The “structures of feeling” he envisions constitute mutually constructing, “interlocking” layers of private and social ways of being in the world, at the level of force (impulse, restraint) and quality (tone). This is a dynamic and historical vision, so that as the immediacy of one “structure of feeling” becomes “(as often happens) formalized, classified...built into institutions and formations,” a new affective structure, newly immediate, is already beginning to take shape (Williams 132).

As Kevis Goodman explains it, “[f]or Williams...‘ideas’ are after the fact” (*Georgic* 5). For Goodman “the fact” is affect, or what is known affectively, and her attention to the “cognitive noise” or “dissonance” in the “clash” between poetry and “rival media” finds history in and as that affective force (*Georgic* 6). This dissertation, which is about

¹ “How to Fail Better,” *The New Yorker Festival*, original staging, 2007.

disappointment as a Romantic critical and aesthetic category, encounters history in the “specific feelings, specific rhythms” and “specific kinds of sociality” given critical significance by Williams, which I examine in formal and conceptual disruptions of the sort that Goodman’s musical tropes clarify (Williams 132). “Deceptive cadence,” an unresolved conclusion to a musical movement or phrase, is my heuristic for this dissertation’s intervening claim that the affective experiences that lead to critical and aesthetic disappointment move along certain trajectories, specifically descending ones. As the composer’s formal tactic for developing intensity through suspense, deceptive cadence emphasizes the deliberate or “calculated” nature of aesthetic suspension without evacuating its disruptive, and therefore generative potential (Nancy, “Calculation” 44). The unresolved chord compels the listener to hang on, expectant, straining her ears—a form of negative intensity that prompts a further compulsion to endure, strive, or struggle, and one that makes it possible to ask, as Brian Massumi does, if “it is through the expectant suspension of that suspense that the new emerges?” (27).

In these chapters, formal and conceptual suspensions reveal a Romantic poetics of adjustment after the loss of an attachment to an ideal future or self-affirming outcome. Rather than turn away, as in Rei Terada’s work on phenomenology and dissatisfaction, or circulate endlessly, as in Sianne Ngai’s work on contemporary aesthetic categories, this poetics asks readers to persevere in encounters with difficulty, and to reorient or adapt. These social and perceptual reorientations, which are both deeply embodied and, often, gymnastic in their flexibility under pressure, make do with negative spaces. They expose the potential wedged between an interruption and the felt experience of a disappointment, and like John Keats’s strategic use of passivity to gauge a friendship’s strength, they forge

alternative relations by counter-affirmative means. In each of four chapters and a coda, I consider formal and conceptual elements that lead to aesthetic disappointment as the poetic enactment of such relational dynamics. In my first chapter, William Wordsworth's disruptive juxtapositions compel readers to "sink" sympathetically towards those who suffer; in a second chapter, about Samuel Taylor Coleridge's disappointed reading, the reader's relation to the text undergoes an embodied recalibration after being "tripped up" by irregular meter; in Chapter 3, Friedrich Hölderlin's tonal alternations generate a sense of disappointment as both perpetual and inevitable; for Keats, passive retreats take on a reciprocal dimension in Chapter 4, as the poet desires his writing to move readers and for readers to move him in turn; and finally, in Jane Austen's satirical account of the flustered female novel reader, the embodiment of interrupted reading comes to stand for a kind of literary engagement that lacks social poise, but a poise that Austen herself employs in her own literary-critical writings. Disappointment, then, describes an aesthetic neither of sublime revelation nor of rock-bottom despair, but of exposure to "the new" through the kinds of affective pressures that give rise to it—and within which the potential for radical maneuvers remains.

As I am poised, in this writing, on the far side of the "affective turn" in critical theory, what interpretations I offer of this moving potential are predicated on Romantic writers having experimented with the kinds of affects that lead to critical and aesthetic disappointment—but not the affect *of* disappointment—in their writings.² In making this

² This means that I have not turned my attention to some canonical poems that are presumed to be "about" disappointment, namely Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" and Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality."

distinction, I follow Massumi's lead in considering affects as visceral forces that circulate between and around bodies. This, as distinct from Silvan Tomkins's differentiated affects (where shame differs from disgust, joy, etc.), a model pursued in the seminal work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank. This distinction I maintain not least because, as Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank show, Tomkins's writings "bear the mark" of a "technological imagination" proper to 1940-1960 America, and thus betray an understanding of the "brain and mind" quite different from that of the Romantics (509). Much scholarship has explored Romantic theories of the mind, and I follow Goodman, Richard Sha, Miranda Burgess, Noel Jackson, and others in modeling my interpretations on eighteenth-century and Romantic theories of "nervous vibrations" and neoclassical discourses on the passions.³ This approach further differs from that of Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank, then, by considering such "affective elements of consciousness" as "impulse" and "restraint" to result from extrinsic, passionate forces, rather than basically internal, unconscious processes (Williams 132).

In keeping with such a model, affect theory after Massumi offers a conception of the affections based on the thought of the seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza, which treats "human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies" (*Ethics* III Pref). Spinoza's theory of "conatus," or striving to persist in being, is not structured like the unconscious, but is rather a desire to maintain "kinetic poise" (Levinson, "Romancing" 397). Massumi, by way of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, defines this kind of affect as an "intensity" that is essentially synesthetic; both

³ I also follow Adela Pinch by treating the eighteenth-century and Romantic vocabulary of "the passions" as interchangeable with affects and feelings, unless otherwise specified.

virtual and visceral, Massumi's affect theoretical framework foregrounds the contingency and corporeality of "experience couched in matter in its most literal sense" (4). Since, as Marjorie Levinson has shown, it is possible to locate Spinoza's influence in canonical Romantic poetry, engaging strains of affect theory that bear Spinozist legacies means choosing a historically apposite lens through which to consider Romanticism's affective dimensions.⁴

In so doing, I am not alone. Following Levinson, Romanticists have injected Spinoza into a period long thought of as dominated by the empiricism of John Locke and David Hume, the liberalism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the moral philosophy of Adam Smith. This sea-change has led to affect-oriented interventions in works by Burgess, David Collings, Jacques Khalip, Goodman, Yoon Sun Lee, Celeste Langan, Jonathan Mulrooney, Thomas Pfau, Rei Terada, and others, who have explored the Romantics' sense of history as mediated by energetic ebbs and flows, untraceable passions and embodied forms of relationality. While disappointment is an emotion, the "personal property of a thinking, feeling body," the affects that give rise to it are transsubjective (Burgess, "Moved" 290). To this end, a wide range of contemporary affect theory also influences my work, from Massumi to Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Teresa Brennan, Lawrence Grossberg, Judith Halberstam, Kathleen Stewart, and especially Lawrence Shapiro's defense of embodied cognition. These works I draw together with recent

⁴ The historian Jonathan Israel's work has critically revealed Spinoza's influence to be much more pervasive during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than previously considered. See *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (2010), *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790* (2011), and *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (2014).

investigations of Romantic sense perception in order to theorize and historicize the affective descents that lead to felt disappointment, and that allow for disappointment to develop as a Romantic critical and aesthetic category.⁵

Like a deceptive cadence, such descents are the refusal of poetic expression to neatly resolve. “Romantic descent” describes the struggle to express, in poetry and poetic language, the attenuation of an affective force after the interruption of an attachment to an expectation, ideal, or conviction. This argument takes its most obvious form in the claim that the loss of the utopic ideals “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*” in the face of revolutionary violence in France, the Reign of Terror and its aftermaths, is discernable in British and German Romanticism as moments of formal and conceptual irresolution. Beginning with the regicide of Louis XVI in 1793, this dissertation recognizes the revolution’s powerful effects on those who witnessed it, and on what writings were produced. At the same time, and as Mary Favret has emphasized, Romanticism is shaped not only by the French revolution, but by a more enduring wartime as well. For those far from the action—across the English Channel or on the other side of the Alps—the experience of distanced and mediated wartime, which began for Britain with the American Revolutionary War in 1775, extended beyond the chronological bounds of what is traditionally called the Romantic period. This dissertation builds on these developments by recognizing the responsiveness of the aesthetics of disappointment to a complexly global and mediated

⁵ By contrast, Laura Quinney has argued for a Romantic poetics of disappointment that hinges on a psychological perspective more interested in questions of interiority and drives, in which disappointment means utter hopelessness, a mental state in which “esteem for the self is...seriously compromised” (1). Her study allows disappointment to encapsulate other psychological states, like melancholy and gloominess, and although I recognize that Quinney makes of disappointment a means to investigate more deeply unsettled notions of Romantic psychic life, my approach differs significantly.

history by, for instance, positioning Wordsworth's early poems in relation to the slave trade, both trans-Atlantic and along the Mediterranean coast, as well as Haitian Independence. Because such confrontations as slave revolts in Saint Domingue were violent, interruptive, but also, for those at a remove, mediated and seemingly perpetual, this wartime experience takes up residence in "the wanderings of the mind, the interruptions and lapses—of time, knowledge and feeling—that compose the everyday" (Favret 4).

Like Ian Baucom's positioning of the Atlantic slave trade, and particularly the *Zong* incident, as a locus for the emergence of an identifiably modern, Romantic moment, the everydayness of war at a distance that Favret describes resists what has been taken to be Romanticism's dominant context and cause. In those "interruptions and lapses" still discernible in Romantic poetry, Baucom, Favret, and others have begun to tease out the threads of alternative Romantic histories. As this dissertation is motivated by a similar interest in that history which emerges from disruption or deferral, it responds most directly to formulations of the links between history and affect by Pfau, Goodman, and Favret; each of *Romantic Moods*, *Georgic Modernity*, and *War at a Distance* offer ways of thinking about history as dynamic and contingent that exceed the bounds of each individual monograph's research agenda. Heeding Goodman's appeal, after Jameson, for "a revised historicist method that reserves a place at the table for sensation and affect," my argument engages with conversations about the affective qualities that are produced through the mediated sense of one's place in history, and what affective residues persist in poetry (56).

In “Romantic Poetry: The State of the Art,” Levinson calls the conceptualization of history as dynamic and unstable a critical break within Romantic scholarship, which had, up until a quarter-century ago now, largely concerned itself with the illumination, and later the deconstruction, of Kantian principles. Levinson, prescient in 1993, observes that this newly abstract and contingent history has begun to replace philosophy as the interpretive frame through which literary scholars engage notions like subjectivity and agency. By recasting the idea of history from “order” to “disorder” (or from a clear cause to a contingent one), this work has unsettled Kant’s categorical imperative, that universal fundament of moral necessity, as prior approaches had not (185). To “think” history in this way, Levinson contends,

as a dynamic but uncoordinated and nonlinear field of contradiction and contingency through which power consolidates itself, in often self-vexing ways, or to imagine history as an excess precipitated by social processes of making and ordering, a formation necessarily invisible, obscure, or transcendent to those whose world of action and cognition is defined by those processes, is to do something deep and damaging to the Kantian account. A perhaps simpler way to formulate this effect is to say that history, in all its diverse and unpredictable ways of thwarting or embarrassing individual, authorial and collective intention... oppose[s] from within, often by fracturing, the centered, totalizing, and rational subject, the subject of philosophy (185)

Levinson’s spatial metaphor, the “field” of history, unfolds a new kind of challenge, that of thinking beyond the environs that pattern our thinking, or the thinking of those we study, “a thoroughly paradoxical effort to reach outside the systems enabling that effort” (186).

Making “thought,” rather than history, “the dynamically materializing agent in our acts of knowing,” Levinson’s project, then as now, pries open how we think we know, rather than what (186).

Such thought might imagine history as atmospheric. For Pfau, history is manifest in the “fundamental psychological climate” or “psycho-historical mood” that permeates given periods within European Romanticism (*Romantic Moods* 6). In terms that seem coherent with Adela Pinch’s important explication of “extravagant” mobile feelings in eighteenth-century and Romantic philosophic and literary texts, and supported by Jean-Luc Nancy’s account of the “methexic” (contagious) qualities of sound, Pfau’s “moods” are affects that circulate in and between subjects, unsettling discrete subjectivities in discrete historical moments even as they—trauma, paranoia and melancholy—make possible the identification of Romanticism as an “epoch” (6). Tracing these moods in the “larger patterns of rhetorical behavior, both in imaginative and discursive writing,” Pfau argues that they distinguish the Romantic from other historical moments without the imposition of traditional historiographical methods of periodization, and yet still leave room for historical referents. The “drastic” territorial reorganization of Germany in 1803 by Napoleon Bonaparte, and the subsequent Prussian reform after 1806, are for Pfau two major moments of political renegotiations that inform his identification of “trauma,” for instance, in late German Romantic literature (*Romantic Moods* 226-227). Pfau suggests that history, like Kant’s aggressive reverberations of sound, is an affective impingement, one that syncopates with, or even directs, the psychological states of Romantic subjects, and is therefore legible in their writings.

This dissertation follows Pfau's lead in risking an approach to Romantic history embedded in subtle and often non-discursive textual phenomena. It also follows closely Goodman's idea that "moments of excess and dissonance [can serve] as records of an otherwise unknowable history," a claim that has been taken up to great consequence by Favret (9). For, implicit in my identification of Romantic descent as poetic irresolution is its—frustrated, suspended, interrupted—movement towards resolution, generating from the outset a tension between pleasure and its loss, openness and closure, or between that which is dynamic and potentially excessive, and that which is stable and accounted for. In order to consider these oscillations, and ask what excess emerges from them, I borrow Goodman's phrase "affective dissonance" as an index for historical situatedness that can expose history even in writing that attempts to "narrate or contain" it; for, as Goodman explains, "something else—an affective residue—will out" (36, 9). One particular register of history that seeps out of Romantic poetry, this dissertation argues, is signaled by the affective descents that lead to the aesthetics of disappointment.

II. Confrontations with Disruption: Romantic Aesthetics

In the Romantic period, aesthetics emerged as part of the core curriculum for personal development, a facet of human experience part and parcel with walking the countryside, traveling abroad, tasting food and drink, visiting galleries and museums, recalling a lover's face. Diverging from Plato's doubts over the educational value of many art forms, German and British Romantic theories of judgment, free play, self-cultivation (*Bildung*), and social improvement pivot on questions of freedom and morality, asking how aesthetic experiences might ethically orient subjects (Eagleton 20). By the early nineteenth

century, aesthetics was a firmly entrenched philosophical school of thought, the *raison d'être* for many a work of art and art critic, and the aim of humanist educators in Britain and on the continent (Eagleton 20). Both inspired by and critical of these developments, aesthetic theory after Pierre Bourdieu has been concerned with the socially- and economically determined “interestedness” that unavoidably influences judgments about art. Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) and subsequent investigations set their sights on revealing what art makes available for society as imbricated with issues of class and politics. Romantic scholarship has been at the forefront of these developments, with Levinson’s works of the 1980s and 90s, and Jerome McGann’s *Romantic Ideology* (1983), challenging the ways in which Romanticists approached, and continue to approach, the historical conditions and contexts that shaped Romantic literature and aesthetic thought.

In the decades that followed, aesthetic theory sought to shift away from Bourdieu, and works by Charles Altieri, Elaine Scarry, Isobel Armstrong, and Peter de Bolla have defended the value of aesthetic experience in and for itself. Within this group of scholars, Altieri is notable for returning to pre-Kantian theories of the aesthetic (the Longinian sublime, Plotinus’s excess, and neoclassical passions) because such a move allows Altieri to set the stage for affect-based investigations that privilege embodiment over moral improvement. For the Romantics, in a period of prodigious experimentation and invention, when natural philosophy and the humanities were studied in concert, what Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten dubbed in 1735 the “science of what is sensed and imagined” would not have seemed a contradiction in terms, but rather a site for experimentation (39f). Even as Kantian models were growing in influence, aesthetics allowed thinkers to engage theories of cognition and the body with the imaginative

apprehension of sensuous experience in alternative or non-standard ways—Ann Radcliffe’s distinction between horror and terror, for instance. Recently, Ngai’s work on “our” aesthetic categories: the zany, the cute, and the interesting—the last of which she grounds in Friedrich Schlegel’s ideas of novelty—exemplifies the breadth of aesthetic phenomena, as does recent work by Forest Pyle on radical aesthetics, in which he explores such aesthetics as “weakness” in the poetry of Keats.

On the surface, the ways in which the Romantics engaged disappointment in critical and aesthetic discourses are interesting because “being disappointed” so often was treated as both minor and *a priori*: at once not too terribly serious and, like a Kantian judgment of the beautiful, innately true. In Romantic responses to newly published works, disappointed reading often meant a light judgment about the tension between what the publisher advertised and what the work delivered, but a judgment not antithetical to the work’s other pleasing or compelling qualities. This might explain why, broadly speaking, Romantic judgments about critical disappointment often appear neither psychically defeating nor even very private, since claims about having been disappointed circulated during the period alongside the disappointing works themselves. In Romantic review culture, critical disappointment brings private assessments to bear on public opinion in negative or unenthusiastic ways, but insofar as readers’ disappointments might lead to disputes, they can also lead to justifications for the continued reading of something imperfect or experimental, as Austen’s letters reveal. In keeping open possibilities for renewed pleasure or other types of experience, the critical and aesthetic category of disappointment suggests that one power of negative affective experience is to expose readers to breaks in the status quo and to activate other kinds of affects in its wake.

While such a summary might seem to suggest that eighteenth-century discourses of taste (what a reader expects of a good poem) are unavoidable for this discussion, I do not take up such concerns in a sustained way. Much scholarship has investigated taste and much has already been said about its embodied dimensions.⁶ Moreover, taste is bound up with issues of class, and this is not a dissertation about discovering the hidden social hierarchies in picturesque views. Such work is important; pointing out those “social processes of making and ordering,” which are often elided, reveals much about history and the production of poetry, and thus these issues remain an undercurrent in all of my chapters (Levinson, “State of the Art” 185). However, I have turned my attention to formal and conceptual descents, and the unique perspectives they offer on affective experiences often hidden in plain sight—even in aesthetic accounts that seek *a priori* or universal principles. Rather than an intellectual history, this dissertation offers sustained investigations of moments of disruption, in which history is an emergent and often unexpected sensation.

The etymologies of disappointment proper to the period corroborate this approach. Along with its contemporary meaning, which is to “frustrate... expectation or desire” (2a), the verb “to disappoint,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, comes from “to undo the appointment of; ... to dispossess, deprive” or else to “break off (what has been appointed or fixed)” (1, 3). By the *OED*’s record, to be disappointed could have

⁶ See Walter Jackson Bate’s *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (1945); Terry Eagleton’s *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990); Peter De Bolla’s “Toward the Materiality of Aesthetic Experience” (2002); Denise Gigante’s *Taste: a Literary History* (2005); Timothy Morton’s *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: the Body and the Natural World* (1994), *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (2000), and *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite* (Ed. 2004); Brian Rejack’s “*Blackwood’s Magazine* and the ‘Schooling’ of Taste” (2013).

signaled a demotion, from approbation to indifference, perhaps, as well as the feeling of dismay that went with it. The 1799 portable version of Samuel Johnson's Dictionary defines disappointment as the "defeat of hopes; miscarriage of expectations" and this definition is cross-referenced with "a balk" (*Johnson's* 64). A balk, which is, as a noun, "a great beam or rafter; a ridge of unploughed land," can also be used as a verb, which means "to disappoint" (19). By today's standards, "to balk" can refer to stopping up short, a development that the *OED's* eighteenth-century definition goes some way to trace. By these records, Romantic and pre-Romantic usages of disappointment were bound up with notions of disruption—but whether of the land, a position, or an expectation could have remained unclear. To be disappointed may have signaled the loss of hope, but it could also have referred to the interruption of an expected structure, such as the regular rhyme and cadence of poetry.

As a minor aesthetic category in an era captivated by major ones, disappointment itself is hardly distinguished; yet affective descents—irresolution, a sense of downwardness or free fall—are discernable as undercurrents in many well-known aesthetic treatises. Moreover, the affects that lead to disappointment often appear in parts of the text that have been considered departures from larger arguments, like Kant's digression on music.⁷ Such an experience as we might find, for instance, in David Hume's surprising portrayal of the affective descent felt by the viewer of an unbalanced painting:

There is no rule in painting more reasonable than that of ballancing [sic] the figures, and placing them with the greatest exactness on their proper centers of

⁷ Music, Kant writes, "occupies the lowest place among the beautiful arts...because it merely plays with sensations" (*Judgment* 206).

gravity. A figure, which is not justly ballanced, is disagreeable; and that because it conveys the ideas of its fall, of harm, and of pain: Which ideas are painful, when by sympathy they acquire any degree of force and vivacity (235)

The aesthetic consequence of this off-kilter image is a proleptic engagement with the figure's potential for downwardness. What discomforts the viewer is not, by Hume's account, the unbalanced figure *per se* but the viewer's projection of a fall and painful landing. That this aesthetically disagreeable experience turns on the "force and vivacity" superadded by sympathy binds the scene's affective dimension within the categories of feeling that, as Pinch has pointed out, trouble Hume because they are both transsubjective and intensely private (9).

What work has been done on such philosophical departures into the territory of affective descents—which often, also, dissent from the main point—have been integral to the project of a critically destabilized history that I outlined above. In Pinch's reading of this passage from Hume, which she calls "a significant interruption" to the larger aims of the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), her analysis leads directly to one of her most crucial assertions: that for Hume, "the force of gravity truly is inescapable from the force of sympathy" (38, 44). Gesturing towards some of the (personal, nationalistic) forces at work in and upon Hume's thought, Pinch goes some way to exposing the philosopher's "vertigo and distress" as an excess, or the felt register of Hume's situation as outsider: a Scottish expat in England and, during the writing of the *Treatise*, in France (27, 44). The philosopher's "self-dispersal" into the text, by way of continually changing pronouns, relays this affective residue onward; Pinch argues that it allows "readers, author, and

characters all [to] fall in with each other, seemingly sharing and producing each other's feelings" (44).⁸

What has received little attention, then, is the question of whether or not these digressions into irresolution and descent were translated into poetry or other literary genres, as was clearly the case with categories like the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque. By naming this aesthetic disappointment, my dissertation seeks, for the first time, both to trace and to theorize downwardness and disruption in poetry as aesthetically motivated. Aesthetics treatments of the sublime, especially, tend to contain key meditations on the felt experience of irresolution in response to aesthetic stimulation—both Burke and Kant ask questions about the embodied apprehension of sound and its judgment as aesthetic or non-aesthetic, raising related concerns about the aesthetic potential of affects such as expectation, interruption, and surprise. However, scholarship has allowed these digressions to remain subsumed under that major category, and has therefore allowed them to remain sublime ones. Like the unfulfilled expectations that characterize a deceptive cadence, both Burke and Kant describe the anticipation of aural resolution as an interplay of bodily and cerebral stimulation that is weaker than sublime overawe—an affective and therefore distributed, rather than local, instance of embodied cognition.

⁸ Similar revelations are present in Frances Ferguson's investigations of Burke's aesthetics—which many have considered juvenilia that diverges from the later works—and in considerations of Kant's digression from Pfau and others, which explore confrontations with disruption as sites where the feeling of history exceeds the bounds of its logical containment or narration (*Moods* 37). Ferguson investigates Burke's "sublime and the bathos of experience" (37).

III. Romantic Descents in Poetry and Prose

As a critical and aesthetic category, disappointment emerges in these chapters in writings expressive of the loss of affirmative attachments. My first chapter, titled “‘The Most Unhappy Man of Men’: Wordsworth and Negative Intensity” takes as a point of departure two opposing figures of descent in the poet’s early thought: the man who has “fallen” from moral authority, in the unpublished and polemical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), and the “sunk mind” of the sympathetic listener in *Descriptive Sketches* (1793). I show how, in the *Letter*, Wordsworth’s use of the allegory of “life as a bridge” in his condemnation of Bishop Richard Watson’s political reversal enacts hyper-conventional rhetorical strategies (derived from political pamphlets, Burke’s *Reflections*, and other sources) but ultimately fails to capture the intensity of this sudden “fall.” In contrast, Wordsworth’s representations in *Descriptive Sketches* of voices echoing from slave ships in the near distance—terrible cries that “force the sunk mind to dwell” in discomposure (14)—interrupt rather than persuade. Incongruous amid rhyming couplets, these voices emerge unexpectedly to create moments of suspended, unresolved feeling. They recall the injustices of slavery at a moment contemporaneous with the slave rebellions in the French colony of Saint Domingue (which was declared the independent republic of Haiti in 1804). I conclude this chapter by suggesting that, in a later sonnet, 1803’s “To Toussaint L’Ouverture,” Wordsworth unites the figure of the “fallen” man, in this case the titular leader of the Haitian rebellion, with a bathetic juxtaposition that seeks not to trivialize Louverture’s sacrifices, as one recent critic has claimed. Rather, Wordsworth juxtaposes the anguish of Louverture with an oblivious French Milkmaid in order to emphasize a

disappointing reversal of great hopes. The sonnet enacts the dissonance of those who live on without feeling their proximity to suffering.

In Chapter 2, “Disappointed Reading,” I address Coleridge’s attempts in the *Biographia Literaria* to interpret his aesthetic disappointment with Wordsworth’s poetry through an investigation of disappointed reading as a form of proprioceptive loss. This chapter takes its cue from Coleridge’s claim that reading metrically irregular poetry is akin to tripping down stairs in the dark. Massumi theorizes proprioception as embodied mediation and, as Coleridge suggests, mental activities like engaging with regular meter involve the felt expectation that lines will carry on and conclude at certain rhythmic cadences and predetermined points. Extending this discussion to Coleridge’s obsessive recording of visual stimuli (what he calls “spectra”) in the *Notebooks*, and to his discussion, in the *Biographia Literaria*, of the relationship between vision and the spoken cadences of reading aloud, this chapter reveals reading as an embodied activity that, if interrupted, can threaten readers with a loss of poise. Finally, through a consideration of Coleridge’s ambivalent censure of Wordsworth’s “The Sailor’s Mother,” I conclude that Coleridge goes some way towards rehabilitating off-putting readerly experiences as moments that also come the closest to Wordsworth’s aim of writing poetry in the language of “low and rustic” life (“Preface” 174).

My third chapter, “Downturn: Hölderlin and the Sense of Disappointment,” develops the disappointing “sense” or “dissonance” invoked by Wordsworth’s figures in Chapter 1, through an investigation of Hölderlin’s poems “The Course of Life” [*Lebenslauf*] and “Menon’s Lament for Diotima” [*Menons Klagen um Diotima*]. Here I argue that the disappointing resistance of that world to intervention, poetic or otherwise,

Hölderlin expresses in tonal “downturns” in his poetry and prose. Exploring his philosophical fragments and his novel, this chapter takes seriously Theodor Adorno’s proposal that scholars consider “Hölderlin’s genuine relationship to reality, critical and utopian” (“Parataxis” 115). In light of key historical and social features of German Romanticism, including *Bildung*, the Romantic cult of friendship, and the influence of the system of the *Hofmeisterium* on young German intellectuals, I show how the failure of language to reliably produce the conditions it expresses becomes, for Hölderlin, an irresolvable quandary that his theory of poetic composition through tonal alternations only goes so far in addressing. I show how Hölderlin’s repeated and ill-fated attempts at reconciling this conundrum nevertheless leads to a quality in his poetics of downward momentum that is expressive of Hölderlin’s “sense of disappointment.”

In my fourth and final chapter, “Reciprocal Keats,” I explore the expectations of affective reciprocity that attend Keats’s representations of arrest and passivity in his letters and poems. By affective reciprocity I mean the expectation of being inspired—to read or write poetry, to visit friends or the theatre—by forces unknown. Here, I consider the odes, beginning with an extended consideration of “Ode on Indolence,” as well as the verse romances “Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil,” and “The Eve of St. Agnes,” in order to offer a concluding investigation of “Romantic descent” that challenges the exertions of the Wordsworthian paradigm (struggle and difficulty) by, simply, stopping. Bringing Keats’s 1821 review of the actor Edmund Kean to the fore, I intervene in the long-established view that Keats’s passivity is modeled on Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness” and offer instead that the younger poet’s view of passivity gained much from William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and visits to Drury Lane. I argue that the dynamic between poet and muses in

“Ode on Indolence” is inspired by Romantic theatrical innovations, which emphasize the affective reciprocity of poet and muse, just as a stage actor moves and is moved by an audience. Considering Keats’s faith in affective reciprocity as an optimistic attachment to futurity, which pulls against his feeling of already living a “posthumous existence,” I explore the stilted, hyper-conventionalized style of the verse romances as exemplary of this tension between control over one’s future and leaving one’s legacy up to fate. This chapter’s final intervention is to advance the idea that stopping—and stopping abruptly—characterizes both Keats’s notion of aesthetic breakthrough and his deliberate attempts to disappoint, or “fling off” readers (JKL II: 163).

My coda considers how Austen’s anticipatory though evenhanded response to literary disappointment remains critically attentive to the affective intensity occasioned by the interruption or suspension of pleasure. Here, I suggest that a likeness to Coleridge’s projection of proprioceptive loss emerges in Austen’s framing of readerly disappointment in a letter to her father, as well as in the affective force of disrupted novel-reading as she represents it in a satirical aside in *Northanger Abbey*. Unlike Coleridge, however, who faults the writer (specifically Wordsworth) for interrupting poetic pleasure with metrical “downfalls,” Austen (much like Wordsworth) shifts the responsibility onto a specific type of reader—one who is susceptible to the social pressures that may compel the public disavowal of certain, in this case, novelistic, pleasures.

Taken together, the fact that the texts explored in these chapters do not always, or even very often, directly articulate their moments of “aesthetic disappointment” as such reinforces the centrality of affect, or what Ngai calls the “raw material,” for judging works of art (Ngai and Jasper n.pg.). At the same time, what mediates between this raw

immediacy and later judgments are individual subjectivities—each writer and reader’s unique way of being in the world, embodied, but also intellectual and social. While Hölderlin’s doctrine of tonal alternations offers the most meticulously formalized example of Romantic connections between poetry and affect, and genre expectations and aesthetics, the rigidity of his calculations also makes his work the most insular and difficult to access. Fittingly positioned as the focus of my central chapter, his musical conceptualization of poetry is the lynchpin upon which much of the development of this dissertation has turned, and yet Hölderlin’s project is both rarified and singular. Even though Hölderlin meant for his poetry and the novel to intervene in an imperfect world, his remains the most desolate aesthetics of disappointment because, as I will show, disappointment is an excess “sense” precipitated by his system, in which even positive affects become tainted by the inevitability of loss. By contrast, Wordsworth and Coleridge’s contemporaneous development of a poetics aimed at moral and social improvement foregrounds difficult narratives and off-putting affects but maintains a kind of formal easefulness and latitude. Not insular but outward looking and oftentimes pedantic, the “low and rustic” language of the *Lyrical Ballads* differs from Hölderlin’s high linguistic register, traditional verse structures, and classical allusions (“Preface” 174). The result is that, while the aim of poetic intervention is shared, the British poets’ pedagogical focus on readers as learners and moral agents in the broader community differentiates these two bodies of work, and the ways in which each engages disappointment as an aesthetic.

From Keats’s perspective, nearly two decades later, the appropriation of genuine experience by the synthesizing impulse of Wordsworthian ego-poetics and Coleridgean

aesthetics necessitated intervention. Casting the reader neither as “learner” nor offering her opportunities for conventional self-fashioning, Keats’s response to this legacy of philosophical and moral aggrandizement has in common with Hölderlin an interest in compelling readers to feel poetic cadences as raw and immediate. Yet while Keats actively differentiated himself from the older generation of poets, as my first chapter will explore, Wordsworth’s use of stark contrast in both early *and* later works suggests that there was a more incomplete investment in synthesizing epistemologies than Keats may have thought (and Coleridge may have hoped). The Romantic descents that I consider in Wordsworth’s and Keats’s poetry disrupt conventional genre expectations through precipitous, even bathetic, drops in register, and while neither poet’s oeuvre approaches the formal complexity of Hölderlin’s tonal alternations, each carves out space for dynamic, affective responses predicated on formal events. What Keats seems to have distrusted, and Wordsworth seems to have depended upon, is the power of these affects to compel readerly reorientations to a world of suffering. My coda, then, goes some way towards corroborating Wordsworth’s essential faith in readerships by revealing Austen as a reader capable of meeting texts for what they are. In their diverse ways, then, these chapters explore Romanticism through its experimentation with aesthetic disappointment while remaining attentive to the distinct nature of these writers’ approaches to poetry and poetic language.

Chapter 1

“The Most Unhappy Man of Men”: Wordsworth and Negative Intensity

A man is as much affected pleurably or painfully by the image
of a thing past or future as by the image of a thing present.

—Benedict de Spinoza (1677)⁹

...Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee

—William Wordsworth (1803)¹⁰

I. The Resonant Mind

In the second book of his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), “Of the Passions,” David Hume supplements his discussion of the relationship between the passions, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain, on the other, with a metaphor for the materiality of cognition:

[I]f we consider the human mind, we shall find, that with regard to the passions, it is not the nature of a wind-instrument of music, which in running over all the notes immediately loses the sound after the breath ceases; but rather resembles a string-instrument, where after each stroke the vibrations still retain some sound, which gradually and insensibly decays (282)

⁹ *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 2000), Prop. XVIII

¹⁰ “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” (1803 version), lines 9-12.

In claiming that the mind resonates physically with the forceful impressions left by the passions, Hume does not so much imagine a reactionary mind as a ruminative one, which dwells in that space of attenuating intensity. As Adela Pinch has shown, by “passions” Hume means feelings or affects, which might influence or be influenced by emotions, but which are not emotions (30). Sympathy is one mechanism by which the passions are transformed for Hume from a feeling, such as other people’s approbation, into an emotion, such as pride (Pinch 30-32). Prior to this, the mind resonates with the passions whether it means to or not—on Hume’s account, the vibration endures until its kinetic energy is played out.¹¹

While the gradual decay of the impression lends stability, as it lingers, to apperception (“the imagination is extremely quick and agile; but the passions are slow and restive”), Hume also claims that the resonant mind must meet every “stroke” of passion for what it is—“a note,” not “clear and distinct” but “mixt and confounded” (282). To be struck by a passion, Hume suggests, is to absorb a force that has also the character of musical dissonance, one that with tone and timbre shapes, in an enduring way, lived experience. As is well established by now, such an awareness of cognition as complexly embodied would not have been unusual for the period; Kevis Goodman, Richard Sha, Noel Jackson, Miranda Burgess, and others have shown that the delicate distribution of nerves creating and carrying impulses (including feeling) throughout the body was much discussed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and nervous “vibrations” was a

¹¹ This, the “insensible” nature of the passions, reinforces the notion developed elsewhere in the *Treatise* that subjects lack perfect control over their feelings and emotions (Pinch 9).

common description.¹² Hume's treatise, which would seem to figure a fitting mind for a deceptive cadence, reflects broader concerns about the structure of the mind and the forces that move it, physically and powerfully, to particular emotional states and bodily dispositions.

Hume's resonant mind, and the concerns it raises about the forceful impressions left by the passions, underpins this chapter's central argument, which is about the embodied force of affective suspension in Wordsworth's poetics. While much has been said about those generative impediments of the poet's maturity, "wise passiveness" and "spots of time," nevertheless this chapter investigates forms and figures of suspension hardly remarked upon, in two poems not much studied: *Descriptive Sketches, in Verse: Taken During a Pedestrian Tour in the Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps* (1793) and a later sonnet, 1803's "To Toussaint L'Ouverture." Published ten years apart but bound by stylistic similarities and the uncannily parallel representations of slaves and former slaves held in Alpine captivity, these poems enact the tension between freedom and injustice through stark contrasts and deliberately dissonant poetic arrests. Beginning with a moment in *Descriptive Sketches* in which the young poet-narrator recalls hearing, along the shores of Lake Como, the voices of slaves and the ringing of chains—terrible sounds that "force the sunk mind to dwell" in discomposure (line 139)—this chapter argues that in these poems affective suspensions reveal disappointment as an aesthetic critically responsive to the

¹² From the vibratory brain described by Johannes Hofer in his 1688 "Dissertation" on nostalgia (Goodman, "Nostalgia" 199), to David Hartley's "doctrine of vibrations," Robert Whytt's vitalism and, notably for his influence and connection to the Lake District, the work of William Cullen—that "famous physician and nosologist," as Thomas De Quincey called him (*Reminiscences* 127). Cullen's daughters lived in the Lake District during the period in which the Wordsworths and Coleridges were living near one another at Allan Bank, Grasmere (De Quincey, *Reminiscences* 127).

suffering Wordsworth both experiences during his time in the Alps and imagines those experiences to be haunted by.

What is at stake in this chapter is the felt experience of that haunting: the history made manifest by Wordsworth's formal and figurative suspensions. Seemingly wholly overlooked by critics, the voices at Lake Como create what Goodman has called, in other contexts, an "affective dissonance" that is also the felt necessity of attending to the suffering of others, under conditions that cannot be directly intervened in or fixed (*Georgic* 9). Wordsworth gives no explanation. The penultimate argument with which *Descriptive Sketches* opens, "*Wish for the extirpation of Slavery*" names the poem's abolitionist agenda, but still the voices on the barge are heard and felt, but not seen and certainly not stopped.¹³ The sound of slavery is a form of "intensity" not "matter-of-factness" and, as Brian Massumi theorizes it, "intensity," is "associated with nonlinear processes: resonance and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative...a state of suspense...[that] is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance" (25-26). The protest that Wordsworth's "vocal barge" makes, then, is a formal dissonance that becomes a felt imperative: the compulsion to "dwell"—to ruminate, to

¹³ The poem opens with this fragmented itinerary, what Wordsworth calls an "Argument":

Happiness (if she had been to be found on Earth) amongst the Charms of Nature—Pleasures of the pedestrian Traveller—Author crosses France to the Alps—Present State of the Grande Chartreuse—Lake of Como—Time, Sunset—Same Scene, Twilight—Same Scene, Morning, it's Voluptuous Character; Old Man and Forest Cottage Music—River Tulsa—Via Mala and Grison Gypsy. Valley of Schellenen-thal—Lake of Uri. Stormy Sunset—Chapel of William Tell—force of local Emotion—Chamois Chaser—Views of the higher Alps—Manner of Life of a Swiss Mountaineer interspersed with views of the higher Alps—Golden Age of the Alps—Life and Views continued—Ranz des Vaches famous Swiss Air—Abbey of Einsiedeln and it's Pilgrims—Valley of Chamouny—Mont Blanc—Slavery of Savoy—Influence of Liberty on Cottage Happiness—France—Wish for the extirpation of Slavery—Conclusion (4).

resonate, or at the very least to remain with the experience of suffering until the intensity of those reverberations are played out.

As Ian Baucom has shown, the trans-Atlantic slave trade was a protracted crisis that “haunts” Romantic attempts to bear witness to cruelty and injustice (33). Indeed, given *Descriptive Sketches*’ opening “Argument,” it seems impossible not to consider its voices as echoes of slavery more broadly, during a period charged with the ideals of “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*,” and contemporaneous with the slave rebellions, from 1791 onwards, in the French colony of Saint Domingue.¹⁴ At the same time, the experiences of enslaved Muslims and convicts, who were used as laborers, including oarsmen, along the Mediterranean coast even into the early nineteenth century, remain less well studied by Romanticists. Though sails gradually replaced oarsmen throughout the eighteenth century, it is probable that the “barge” to which Wordsworth refers was powered by galley slaves, a practice, according to David Eltis, that survived the longest in Italy (143-144).¹⁵ In 1798 Napoleon Bonaparte would free some two thousand “white slaves” at Malta, but prior to that, and throughout the eighteenth century, “the ratio of slaves to other oarsmen

¹⁴ Saint Domingue would become the independent republic of Haiti in 1804.

¹⁵ One reason that galley-slavery persisted in Italy was lack of access to the Atlantic (Eltis et al 143). To the extent that Lake Como is more geographically interior than the usual places tourists would see galley slaves, Genoa and Naples, their presence in Wordsworth’s poem retains a spectral quality. Predominantly glacier-fed, Lake Como is approximately 220 kilometers from the closest Italian port at Genoa. According to Eltis, France had been buying slaves for galleys up until 1748 (143). The royal Edict of October 1716 made it possible for colonial slave owners to bring their slaves to France for a limited time (no more than three years) for the purpose of learning a trade or receiving religious education, but this was contested by those who sought to preserve the “Freedom Principle” (Peabody 6). After the 9 August 1777 *Declaration pour la police des Noirs*, which forbade the entry of dark-skinned peoples into France, special depots at French ports were opened so that slave-owners could leave their slaves aboard so as not to lose their “property” (Peabody 6-7).

[in Italy] was often closer to one to two” (Eltis et al. 143). Charles Dickens describes seeing a galley slave in Naples as late as 1846 (225).

“[L]iterature is full of ghosts and specters,” says David Simpson, “but they are not like Wordsworth’s nor do they portend the same aesthetic and moral consequences” (*Social Concern* 11). Although Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson have critiqued a Wordsworthian imagination that “displaces,” for McGann, and “escapes,” for Levinson, painful social realities (*Ideology* 88; *Great* 52), Simpson’s more recent study reclaims the ethical dimensions of the poet’s specters and silences. Simpson considers the ghost-like figures in so many of Wordsworth’s poems to reflect a poet grappling with alienating modernity and, at the same time, as indications of an ethical attitude that Simpson calls “social concern” (2). Rather than side completely with Thomas Pfau, then, for whom the displacement of labor in *Descriptive Sketches* with aestheticized sights and sounds evinces the poet’s “professional” self-fashioning (*Profession* 95-98), Simpson provides a sophisticated reminder that, for Wordsworth, taking a moral stance often also involves an orientation towards the other that preserves distance. While Pfau does not comment on slavery in the poem, his approach suggests a reading in which the slaves’ voices signal the elision of their labor as well as of the slaves themselves. This is a necessary reading, and one that Baucom would corroborate in his identification of a “type” of colonial perspective common to the period, characterized by the retreat to the abolitionist position of moral “witness” or “modern historical observer” (33).

However, and without losing sight of these concerns, my focus in this chapter is less on what the poet elides and more on what the voices’ inclusion means for this disruptive poetics. This chapter considers Wordsworth’s “sunk mind” as a point of

convergence between these histories and their mediation, or between the disappointing affects of a Romantic descent and the poet's haunted recollection. As some of Wordsworth's earliest verse, written in heroic couplets that alternate descriptions of high and low, light and dark, sublime and beautiful, *Descriptive Sketches*, and the poem with which it was published, *An Evening Walk*, have often been regarded as rudimentary and juvenile—merely stepping-stones towards the poet's later, more sophisticated thought (Legouis; de Selincourt; Hartman, "Poet's Mind"). Yet to consider the affective intensity of the "sunk mind," which Wordsworth imagines as an ethical re-orientation characterized by sympathy, is to discover that the perspectival adjustments generated by sinking towards suffering exceeds the apparent binarism of regular rhyme and simple juxtaposition. Moreover, that Wordsworth would go on to make a similar juxtaposition central to "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" suggests that he neither gave up on poetic contrasts nor traded them completely for the "blendings" of the *Prelude*, as Geoffrey Hartman has observed (521), but rather that the poet still valued such an aesthetic as late as 1803. Following Levinson's more recent calls to attend to Benedict de Spinoza as a "submerged philosophical context" for Wordsworth and a number of other canonical Romantic poets,¹⁶ my purpose is to explore the affective intensities of Wordsworth's formal descents—descents that collapse ideals of distance through, for instance, passions that physically move the mind.

To that end, this chapter begins with a counter-example from Wordsworth's unpublished and polemical *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), in which the poet's use of

¹⁶ In "A Motion and a Spirit: Romancing Spinoza," Levinson indicates that her consideration of Wordsworth is part of a larger project that brings William Blake, S.T. Coleridge and P.B. Shelley into conversation with Spinoza (367).

hyper-conventional rhetorical strategies makes his claim that the Bishop Richard Watson has “at last fallen” from moral authority *not* a Romantic descent. For, while a Romantic descent would produce in a reader the sense of having been momentarily abandoned in her formal and generic expectations, the *Letter* keeps her confident and secure. Derived from political pamphlets, Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and other sources, it adheres to traditional genre expectations and delivers the expected degree of persuasiveness and a moral conclusion (3). By contrast, in *Descriptive Sketches* the “vocal barge” interrupts rather than persuades (line 140). The interruption seems incongruous amid the formal balance of rhyming couplets because the slaves’ voices are without a comparable, opposite image with which to equalize in the following line. Since such binary contrasts organize much of the poem, Wordsworth initiates a formal expectation only to disrupt it. Building on this finding, my concluding argument shows how, in “To Toussaint L’Ouvverture,” Wordsworth employs similarly uneven pairings in his contrast of the anguish of Toussaint Louverture¹⁷ (the Haitian revolutionary leader who was held captive at Fort de Joux) with an oblivious French Milkmaid and her cow, not with the intent of trivializing Louverture’s suffering, as one recent critic has claimed. Kristen Mahlis reads the incongruousness of the image as dismissive, even rude: as “turning to the irrelevant or the euphemistic in...supposed tribute” (333). However, I argue that Mahlis’s critical disappointment should be taken as the indication of a more discordant aesthetic effect. Not derisively but disruptively, the juxtaposition enacts the dissonance of those who live on without feeling their proximity to suffering. Reexamined as a deliberate, formal disruption, this reading of “To Toussaint L’Ouvverture” demands not just the sonnet’s

¹⁷ The French spelling drops the apostrophe, as does most current scholarship in English.

critical reevaluation, but also that of long-established views on Wordsworth's relationship to his early verse.

II. The Arc of Allegory: Tales Told with Resolve

While narratives of personal and political disappointment abound in the Romantic period, as they do in many periods, as a critical and aesthetic category disappointment emerges from a subtler set of criteria, not least, the interruption of formal or generic expectations. Beginning with a counter-example, the allegory of a fall in Wordsworth's *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff* (1793), this section clarifies the relation of falling figures to the aesthetics of disappointment, while introducing the young poet's Jacobinism during the period he wrote *Descriptive Sketches*. The letter, a tract in defense of revolutionary ideals and the regicide of Louis XVI, was composed not long after the publication of the poem, in reaction to a 15 January 1793 sermon in which Bishop Richard Watson reneged on his previously liberal leanings toward social equality and the needs of the French people in particular. Worried that a change of heart from such a well-respected religious leader as Watson would erode British support for the revolution, Wordsworth begins the letter with an *ad hominem* attack, declaring that Watson has "at last fallen through one of the numerous trap-doors [of moral life], into the tide of contempt, to be swept down to the ocean of oblivion" (3).¹⁸

Such a representation of a political fall—public, dramatic, and irreparable—is in keeping with much of the theatricalized rhetoric coloring the uprisings and falls of the

¹⁸ In Wordsworth's rebuttal, the twenty-three-year-old poet claims the king's murder was justified in pursuit of the greater good, since the death of one man will mean freedom for "Twenty-five millions of Frenchmen" (*Landaff* 54).

revolutionary period.¹⁹ Written during the “first flush of outrage” following Britain’s declaration of war with France (Reider 33), there is actually nothing very unexpected about Wordsworth’s use of “fall” to describe his lowered estimation of Watson’s principles.²⁰ Indeed, Wordsworth begins by ascribing the “sublime allegory” of life-as-a-bridge to Joseph Addison, whose 1711 essay, *First Vision of Mirza*, itself purports to be a translation of an older tale, gleaned from an “oriental manuscript” discovered in Grand Cairo (*Llandaff* 3; Addison 259). Revealing its tropological value by way of the angels and demons directing traffic over the bridge, Addison’s allegory is an Orientalized version of the Christian imperative to progress towards salvation. Wordsworth’s gloss, in seeking to mobilize the allegory’s moral thrust against Watson, also rehashes its conventional imagery: presenting yet another fall from grace as a significant moment in the revolution controversy.

Playing on conventional notions of political and moral descent, the “fall from power” is not an unexpected trope; in fact, its very predictability makes it an ideal fit for

¹⁹ Historians like Susan Maslan and Romanticists like Jonathan Bate, Julie Carlson, Judith Pascoe, and others have shown that the Romantics found the language and locutions of the stage especially suited for the embellishment of political events and public figures, and the drama of the fall from power offers an undeniably rich narrative arc. For a discussion of the extent to which the Romantics appropriated and internalized the language of Shakespeare, see Jonathan Bate’s *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. For more extensive investigation of Romantic theatricality and political rhetoric, particularly that of Edmund Burke, see Judith Pascoe’s chapter “Embodying Marie Antoinette” in *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship*.

²⁰ Burke famously ends his gilded portrayal of Marie Antoinette with a lamentation over her precipitous decline that is both theatrically tragic and designates it as a pivotal historical moment: “Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall!” (*Reflections* 66). For Burke, Marie Antoinette is an emblem of both an ancient lineage and feminine virtue, which together justifies his reaction to her elevated suffering: a model of rhetorical, antirevolutionary Englishness that would compel a chivalric rising to the occasion of an imperiled queen.

the poet's broader attempts to meet readers' genre expectations.²¹ For, although "falling" figures Wordsworth's loss of faith in an authority figure sympathetic to Jacobin ideals, Watson is merely the straw man. As James Chandler has shown, the letter is a coded attack on Burke that models its rhetorical strategy on political pamphlets, the conventional genre of protest during the so-called pamphlet wars of the early 1790s (*Second Nature* 19).²² While Wordsworth may have been personally disappointed in Watson, the letter's structure and style do not ask readers to struggle with "feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [*sic*]" in order to engage more fully with that emotion (Wordsworth, "Preface" 176). Rather, knowing that the persuasiveness of a polemic depends in part on its conventionality, Wordsworth mimics Burke, a sophisticated polemicist, in order to protest a political reversal for which he also blames Burke. For this reason, the letter offers expected images, easily digestible arguments, and Burkean rhetoric—which together aim

²¹ Having witnessed the revolutionary excitement of Paris in 1791, and again in the autumn of 1792, Wordsworth, in Book IX of the *Prelude*, takes note of the fomenting ideas disseminated by "the master Pamphlets of the day," which he recalls having "skimmed, and sometimes read / With care" (lines 95-96). Because Wordsworth is more likely to have turned to Burke's *Reflections* than to Cullen's *First Lines on the Practice of Physic* (1777-84), it seems probable that Wordsworth's philosophical model for the circulation of feeling during that time—and it seems clear from the letter that he had one—came from eighteenth-century philosophers like David Hume, Adam Smith, and the third Earl of Shaftesbury.

²² The letter's compositional contexts reveal the assiduous process through which the poet worked to achieve this, not least by studying closely the formal elements of political pamphleteering. In fact, Chandler surmises that Wordsworth wrote the letter to Watson with both Watson's sermon and Edmund Burke's *Reflections* open in front of him (*Second Nature* 22). The letter's mode of address ventriloquizes Burkean argumentation; like Burke, Wordsworth opens with an *ad hominem* attack, of which the allegory of the fall is a part, and in so doing the poet produces a work that rhetorically, as well as generically, matches Burke's seminal attack on Thomas Paine (*Second Nature* 19). Thus his allegory, insofar as it implicates Addison, Burke, Paine and others, increases the scope of Wordsworth's political argument by dint of these associations, and the tale's moral conclusion—the ruin of Watson's liberal reputation—lands a heavy, rhetorical blow, as it is meant to. This convoluted genealogy further emphasizes the power Wordsworth understands the allegory to possess in terms of rhetorical sway and the conventions of genre such strategies serve.

to communicate, rather than enact or express, the idea of disappointment. Had the letter been published, even those readers in disagreement with Wordsworth's position would almost certainly have agreed that their generic expectations for a political pamphlet about a "fall from power" were met.

In this argument about how formal and figurative descents resist resolution and convention, Wordsworth's gloss derives its rhetorical energy from adhering to both. It is necessary to have illustrated this difference at such length, I think, because *Descriptive Sketches* too has been called derivative (Legouis 133; de Selincourt). In 1896, Émile Legouis attributed its grammar and syntax to John Milton and its personifications to William Cowper and Thomas Gray (133, 139). Following Legouis, criticism in the early part of the twentieth century found unearthing the poem's literary allusions and "borrowings" to be one of the poem's few fascinations.²³ Recently, text-mining software has allowed such work to continue.²⁴

That not much has been said about *Descriptive Sketches*' style or subjects might be owing to, as Hartman pointed out in 1961, the poem's status as "not...a great or even very exciting work of art" ("Poet's Mind" 519). Little has changed in the decades since. Those who have examined the poem's style, including Hartman, have tended to look ahead to *The Prelude* for legitimacy; Jonathan Ramsey, for instance, cleverly deduces "The

²³ Starting with Émile Legouis's *La Jeunesse de William Wordsworth* (1896) (English translation 1897, *The Early Life of William Wordsworth*) much work has been done to trace the "borrowings" of *Descriptive Sketches*. A note by John R. Nabholz from 1964 chronicles many prospective sources for the phrase "sober Reason," for instance (297-302). In between, editors, publishers, biographers, and critics have added much, from Ernest de Selincourt forward.

²⁴ In 2007, Arnd Böhm published a note declaring to have found, using text-mining technologies, the source for "sultry ray" (147).

Prelusive Sounds of ‘Descriptive Sketches’” (1978), while in *Wordsworth’s Profession* (1997) Pfau considers the politics of its picturesque landscapes to foreshadow the poet’s conservative turn. Most recently, Adam Potkay presents an argument about the tensions between visual and aural sensation that I will take up later on (*Ethics* 21-40). The most interesting analysis for my purposes remains Hartman’s own; for, considering *Descriptive Sketches* to possess “its own personal and stylistic integrity,” Hartman illuminates the perceptual shifts through which Wordsworth seems to be, if not quite experimenting with, then *reacting to* the process of poeticizing. This is a process that manifests itself for Hartman, as for Legouis in fact, in a style expressive of “the poem’s peculiar authenticity” (521).

Descriptive Sketches is derivative, then, but its derivations are neither designed nor able to cohere into the expected whole. Unlike the letter to Watson, the poem’s argument is not made clearer by its allusions and its major stylistic feature, stark contrasts in rhyming couplets, holds little rhetorical sway. As Hartman puts it, “[i]n Pope, contrast is witty, or a strong means to pictorial emphasis; here it is less a rhetorical device than an awkward index of a mind uncertain as to what reality it should ascribe to external nature” (520). On Hartman’s account, the poem’s compositional contexts speak of an immediacy that differs profoundly from the careful study of Burke’s *Reflections* that Chandler describes. Hartman and Legouis agree that, because *Descriptive Sketches* and *An Evening Walk* were not treated to the same protracted revisions as Wordsworth’s other compositions, they constitute “genuine” expressions: both “belong as regards their spirit and their subjects...to [the poet’s] Cambridge days” (Legouis 120-121). In the poem, Wordsworth fashions himself a man of *Bildung* and the aesthetic: a poet of nature and pleasure, who

would, “While chast’ning thoughts of sweetest use, bestow’d/ By Wisdom, moralise his pensive road” (lines 28-29). By Hartman’s logic, the twenty-three-year-old poet expected nature to provide powerful examples of its sublime and picturesque authority, which Wordsworth would translate into powerfully sublime and picturesque poetry (519).

Such ready insights, however, failed to materialize. Over the course of the Alpine tour, says Hartman, “many scenes both impressed and vexed [the poet’s] sight,” but in the attempt to capture them in verse, Wordsworth’s “quest, to localize his Idea of Nature in nature, fails” (520). The loss of this optimistic attachment to the muse of Nature in the natural world Hartman considers a “crisis” that becomes legible in *Descriptive Sketches*’ jarring style (523). Building on both Legouis and Samuel Taylor Coleridge—for whom the poem is “knotty and contorted, if by its own impatient strength” (*BL* 1:4)—Hartman finds the clashing energies of the writing to evince its psychological tensions, as well as its import for Wordsworth’s poetic development.²⁵ That Wordsworth “records the crisis while still in its grip, and not, as in *The Prelude*, bent over in a deepened insight,” generates “dynamic effects”—“the portrayal of the *action* of a mind in search” (Hartman 523, 521, 522; emphasis in original). Yet such action, as I will now explore, also constitutes the momentum required to turn expectations into dissonant reverberations. *Descriptive Sketches* enacts the striving—again, as Coleridge has it, the poem is possessed of a life-force like

²⁵ According to Coleridge,

[i]n form, style, and manner...there is an harshness and acerbity connected with words and images all a-glow, which might recall those products of the vegetable world, where gorgeous blossoms rise out of the hard and thorny rind and shell, within which rich fruit was elaborating. The language is not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, if by its own impatient strength (*BL* 1:4)

that of a seedling emerging from its pod (*BL* 1:4)—of a poet persevering too in an experience of negative intensity.

III. How it Feels to Fall: The Sunk Mind

First among the “arguments” that map *Descriptive Sketches*’ journey Wordsworth plots pleasure. “*Happiness*,” he says, “(if she had been to be found on Earth) amongst the Charms of Nature—Pleasures of the Pedestrian Traveller—” (4). Thus the poem begins in lines expressive of energetic footfalls and a mind newly free to wander, which capture at the outset the embodied optimism of getting underway. Like the opening lines of Book I of *The Prelude*, in which a blessing rides the “gentle breeze,” here the poet imagines that there “Blows not a Zephyr but it whispers joy” (line 18). Nature, Wordsworth claims, not for the last time, makes man receptive to that which can be learned along the “pensive road” (line 30). Such ideals of progress—the journey, the pursuit of happiness, *Bildung*—set the stage for the highs and lows that galvanize the poem. *Descriptive Sketches* was inspired by a fourteen-week tour taken in 1790 by Wordsworth, then a student at Cambridge, and his friend and fellow student Robert Jones (Williams 36). It was published on 29 January 1793 by Joseph Johnson and reviewed ambivalently by the *Analytical Review* in March of that same year (“Introduction” *Prose Works* 39; Williams 36). According to the poem’s itinerary-slash-“Argument,” the two young men walked from France, through the Italian Lake District and the Swiss Alps, passing along the way through the Carthusian monastery at the Grande Chartreuse, Lake Como, Neuchâtel, Mont Blanc, and the Abbey of Einsiedeln, among other notable spots, before returning to France.

Part of *Descriptive Sketches*' impression of activeness comes from this foregrounding of location. Rather than reflect the two friends "plod[ding] o'er hills and vales" or, later on, "creep[ing]" "with tortoise feet," the poem skips abruptly from one place to the next, like flipping through postcards (lines 15, 105-106). Through chiaroscuro composition Wordsworth animates each snapshot-scene, so that between night and day, winter and summer, craggy heights and fishing villages below, each location is highlighted and shaded with hasty regularity. In a spot near Lucerne, for instance, when torrential rains give way to glaring sunlight, the perspective moves from the rain-swollen coastline up to the bright sky:

...hid in mist from hour to hour,
All day the floods a deeper murmur pour,
And mournful sounds, as of a Spirit lost,
Pipe wild along the hollow-blustering coast,
'Till the Sun walking on his western field
Shakes from beneath the clouds his flashing shield.
Triumphant on the bosom of the storm,
Glances the fire-clad eagle's wheeling form! (lines 270-276)

The poem's structure is thus a series of movements within movements, with the forward motion of the journey further activated by the juxtapositions describing each notable spot. Quick transitions—from "hollow-blustering coast" to "the Sun"—generate a sense of action. While the regularity of the contrasts might seem to suggest that each equal and opposite pair neatly resolves, there is, too, spontaneity in many descriptions, where the poet, according to Hartman, "wants contrast without balance" ("Poet's Mind" 522).

At Lake Como, such asymmetrical contrasts initially favor lightness. As the poet is struck by the beauty of the village and its environs (“More pleas’d, my foot the hidden margin roves/ Of Como bosom’d deep in chesnut groves” [lines 80-81]), the scene is predominantly cheerful: “Here half a village shines, in gold array’d/ Bright as the moon, half hides itself in shade” (lines 106-107). Hartman considers the surfeit of brightness in this couplet to evince the poet’s attempt to “eliminate the idea of a passive or static juxtaposition” (522), and is content to consider this a sign of Wordsworth’s active, searching mind. Yet what Potkay identifies as Hartman’s tendency to hone in on the tension between Wordsworth’s “visual imagery” and “imaginative vision” (*Wordsworth’s Ethics* 21), leads the critic away from an exploration of sensations and perceptions other than the poet’s visually oriented negotiations with his own dramatic perspective. Hartman privileges the visual because Wordsworth seems to, and, as John Barrell notes, because a bit of imbalance or roughness was thought to improve a picturesque view (7). Nevertheless, Potkay intercedes in order to explore a different tension: that between “seeing and hearing, or the different kind of knowledge gleaned by the eye and by the ear” (*Wordsworth’s Ethics* 21).

Certainly the poem’s aural tropes are of critical importance to both its embodied dimension, and for the consideration of what “knowledge” emerges from the affective register of perception. For, if “walk[ing] into a room and ‘[feeling] the atmosphere,’” as Teresa Brennan describes, is not about actively making an observation, then being moved to a new awareness “constitute[s] neither the antithesis of critical knowledge nor its anticipation in a lesser key. Rather [affect] amounts to a qualitatively different form of awareness whose relation to critical, analytical knowledge is one of complementarity”

(Brennan 1; Pfau, *Moods* 27-28). Yet Potkay's focus on sound as competing with sight is also a focus on resolving these apparent contradictions. Without mention of the poem's stylistic asymmetries, Potkay claims that *Descriptive Sketches* activates the tension between aural and visual imagery to produce balance; in his main example, Potkay concludes that in Wordsworth's depiction of the death of a chamois hunter, "the opposition...between visualized death and the power of music or euphonious sound [is there] to cancel its horror" (22). Potkay assumes a poet in pursuit of unity or wholeness, an approach to Wordsworth made canonical by Matthew Arnold and John Stuart Mill's celebrations of the poet's healing powers. Such an approach, however, does not address the "forms of awareness" expressed by off-kilter juxtapositions that, as early as Hartman, were being recognized as such.²⁶

The "vocal barge" is an aural imposition. Wordsworth's choice of "barge" rather than "galley," a term which seems to have been more usual in travelogues in the period,²⁷

²⁶ Noel Jackson has argued that "a consensual relation" existed for Wordsworth between "the nervous and the circulatory systems of the body," which analogously extends from eighteenth-century science of the nervous system to "consensus within the body politic" (145). "[L]ike 'sympathy,'" Jackson claims, consensus "signified a harmonious relation between organs or parts of the body," which Wordsworth sought to extend to his readers through poetry's "healing power" (145, 147). Although the story of Wordsworth the poet-physician has a long critical history, and the poet certainly valued poetic form, and particularly meter, for the regulation of impulses and feelings, habits of mind and body, Jackson leans heavily on unification as the marker of Wordsworth's curative powers, even when "feeling...[as a] basis for consensus, [calls] attention to experiences and individuals that exceed their recuperative containment" (136). Taking my cue from Brittany Pladek's argument that Wordsworth saw his role "less in terms of 'healing' than of alleviative or even palliative care," I will explore poetic irresolution as a reflection of that which is immediately unfixable but still in need of attention ("Soothing" 404).

²⁷ See the language of "galley-slaves" in Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz's *A Picture of Italy* (1785) and Charles-Marguerite-Jean-Baptiste Mercier Dupaty's *Travels through Italy: in a series of letters; written in the year 1785* (1785).

underscores this intrusiveness. Interrupting a scene of nighttime revelry, personified “Slavery” enters a soundscape in which the music of nature and culture meet the percussive din of chains and men’s voices:

—Thy fragrant gales and lute-resounding streams,
Breathe o’er the failing soul voluptuous dreams;
While Slavery, forcing the sunk mind to dwell
On joys that might disgrace the captive’s cell,
Her shameless timbrel shakes along thy marge,
And winds between thine isles the vocal barge (lines 156-161)

In this chiasmic verse paragraph, the first set of associations is between the lute-music that resonates on the water and produces “voluptuous dreams” to alleviate the “failing soul.” This logic is then inverted in equal and opposite proportions to become, from the last line moving up towards “Slavery,” slave voices that resonate with the sound of chains, which is represented by a timbrel, or tambourine. This “music” then produces the “sunk mind,” rather than the dreaming one.²⁸

²⁸ During the time of *Descriptive Sketches*’ composition, Britain’s involvement in the slave trade was in the forefront of many minds, made infamous by the tragic *Zong* Incident of 1781 and subsequent trials, and by Thomas Clarkson’s pamphlet of a cross-section of the slave ship *Brookes* (Baucom 265). This was a moment, too, concurrent with slave rebellions, which had begun in August of 1791, in the French colony of Saint Domingue, and although the poem would have been written before Britain’s 1793 entry into the conflict, France had been attempting to regain control of the colony since 1791, a protracted engagement about which Wordsworth certainly was aware. For a complete account of the import of the *Zong* Incident see Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic*, especially Chapter 10, “‘To Tumble into It, and Gasp for Breath as We Go Down’: The Idea of Suffering and the Case of Liberal Cosmopolitanism.” For an account of the Haitian uprisings see Jeremy D. Popkin’s *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010) and Philippe R. Girard’s *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801-1804* (2011).

What reveals the aesthetics of disappointment here is not just this dismal contrast, but also the figure of descent to which it is attached. The “vocal barge” exposes poet and reader to the other side of optimism, but the “sunk mind” compels them to remain there, imagining “joys” from the perspective of a “captive’s cell” (line 138). Rather than reinforce the sense of linear action, moving the journey along, as other contrasts in the poem tend to do, this figure plunges it downward. Affective intensity, for Massumi, “is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it” (26). Both “immediately embodied” and “potentially disruptive,” such intensity is “not exactly passivity...And it is not yet activity, because the motion is not of the kind that can be directed (if only symbolically) toward practical ends in the world” (Massumi 26). In the poem, the “sunk mind” departs from the “*Happiness...among the charms of Nature*” but, more critically, it departs from the active progress of the journey. Once “Slavery” appears, nothing is to be done but to “dwell.”

At the same time, Wordsworth presents this compulsion as one of “dwelling” *upon* something—a felt imperative to imagine the suffering of the slaves on board. In the 1791 translation of German historian Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz’s *A Picture of Italy* (1785), Archenholz describes the living conditions of galley slaves as “shocking to humanity”:

[o]ne should believe that the most abject degree of human misery is the life of a galley-slave. To be fettered to the deck, with no other cover than the sky, exposed to the caprices of the seasons and the impetuosity of the sea, the most miserable diet, eaten up by vermin, lacerated with lashes, it should seem those wretches would envy the state of the prisoner, who lies in chains in a

subterranean dungeon; for his situation, compared to theirs, is happy (216-217)

Archenholz's travelogue is one of two composed in 1785 and translated into English shortly thereafter. Strongly reminiscent of Wordsworth's poem, the comparison of the plight of the galley slave to that of a prisoner is especially evocative, for it helps make sense of *what* "joys," exactly, "might disgrace the captive's cell" (line 140). The life of the galley slave above deck was worse even, by Archenholz's account, than that of a prisoner "happy," in the sense of "lucky" enough, to be locked away indoors.

This travelogue and its contemporary, Charles-Marguerite-Jean-Baptiste Mercier Dupaty's *Travels Through Italy: in a Series of Letters* (1785), contextualize the poet's suggestion of what might be imagined, from the perspective of the sunk mind, about the lives of galley slaves. For, another answer to *what* "joys...disgrace the captive's cell" is, unexpectedly, singing. Both travelogues depict Italian galley slavery as a practice notorious for its brutality and for the rowdy camaraderie of the laborers who, working together on deck, were "always merry, sing and swear among themselves, and get drunk as often as they find an opportunity" (Archenholz 218).²⁹ From the outsider's perspective, the lives of galley slaves was therefore "shocking!" but also titillating; in his *Travels Through Italy: in a Series of Letters*, Charles-Marguerite-Jean-Baptiste Mercier Dupaty includes this

²⁹ This, in addition to the practice of self-enslavement, suggests that galley slavery, in addition to its brutality, was a class issue fraught with social prejudice (Archenholz 217). Taking great pain in his preface to connect white slavery to the backward state of the Italian government, Archenholz's English translator opens the travelogue with strongly Whiggish statements of support for the stability of the British system (iv-v).

description of self-enslavement, in which men would give up their freedom for twelve months at a time for a small amount of money upfront:

This morning I have been to visit the gallies [in Genoa].

Five forts of wretches are fastened indiscriminately to the chain; malefactors, smugglers, deserters, Turks taken by the Corsairs, and voluntary galley slaves.

Voluntary galley slaves!—Yes—These are poor men whom the government get hold of between hunger and death. It is in this narrow passage that they wait, and watch for them. These wretched beings, dazzled with a little money...are enlisted

(30)

Together these accounts suggest associations or prejudices with which Wordsworth might have approached the idea of galley slavery. While Wordsworth may or may not have read these travelogues or have been exposed to similar tales, the accounts of Archenholz and Duparty evince that the “vocal barge” was an occurrence that Wordsworth could have experienced firsthand. The likelihood of the poet’s having literally heard singing or chanting from the passing galley opens up the possibility that Wordsworth’s affective sinking or lowering reflects a disruptive moment that he experienced as embodied.

Following Hartman, I have been suggesting that *Descriptive Sketches* is a composition that preserves more immediacy or reactivity than is usual for Wordsworth, and that its jarring style captures negative affective intensities. That the “vocal barge” offers no specific details about or descriptions of those who suffer, however, would seem to suggest an ethical limitation for the poem’s “dynamism” or “potentially disruptive” qualities (Hartman 521; Massumi 26). For, even though *Descriptive Sketches* compels the “sunk mind to dwell” by way of the deliberate disruption of pleasure, the poem also, and not un-

problematically, lacks what Burke, in the *Philosophical Enquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), would call “positive pain.” For Burke, human experience begins at a neutral set point, which he calls “indifference,” and upon which he imagines pleasure and pain as layers of felt experience that accumulate independently of one another. Rather than decrease pleasure, adding pain only increases pain. For this reason, lost pleasure produces something other than pain: something new, the character of which depends upon the intensity of the lost pleasure (Burke, *Enquiry* 34). Disappointment, for Burke, is an “uneasy sense” that, as the interruption of pleasure without the addition of pain, sits between neutral unconcern and violent stimulation (34). In such a *Bildung* narrative as *Descriptive Sketches*, disrupted pleasure aimed at testing the poet’s (and his readers’) aesthetic self-fashioning without too much grief would not have been uncommon.³⁰ As Baucom’s “type of [abolitionist] witness...modern historical observer, actor, and judge,” suggests, the ethical “witness” is also very much the product of *Bildung*: “a type of romantic, interested, melancholy and cosmopolitan witness” (33).

Pfau’s characterization of the young Wordsworth caught between a model of self-making based on either inheritance or the work of professionalization casts *Descriptive*

³⁰ Like the pamphlets that inform the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, *Descriptive Sketches* had a well-established generic precursor: the *Bildungsreise* or “Grand Tour” travelogue, which was often also a moral or political statement. In the aggregate, according to Stephen Gill, “between roughly 1750 and 1850 books about scenery...[tended to be] ideologically charged statements about the nature of beauty, man, and the landscape, property and responsibility, labour and leisure” (vii). Rather than just give an account of the traveller’s experience, as Nigel Leask explains it, there occurred a “triumph of sensibility and imagination over erudition in [travelogues] of the Grand Tour,” because writers felt that their readers were too familiar with classical architecture and sublime landscapes, and sought to ameliorate this “belatedness” by focusing on questions of interiority and sentimentality (46). Like adding a little roughness to the picturesque, imagining a morally improving run-in with slavery might have aimed for a touch of authenticity.

Sketches as a test of the poet's ability to be professionally sympathetic (*Profession* 92-93). Like the rhetorical bluster required for a work such as *The Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, the "felicitous performance" that was necessary to become a career poet in the final decade of the eighteenth century can, according to Pfau, "only be understood as metaphoric, acquired, and simulated" (*Profession* 92). By metaphoric, Pfau means making feeling stand for the kind of shared sensibility that circulates as the "virtual capital" of self-fashioning (*Profession* 20). To the degree that *Bildung* requires not just the appearance of sophistication but also the conviction that one *feels* properly (has taste or sympathy), this metaphoric dimension allows for the displacement of the effortful acquisition of skills by feelings that seem natural or spontaneous.³¹ The result is a metaphoric engagement: what one feels like, one, in this figurative sense, *is*. For example, appreciating the picturesque requires studied attention to principles of prospect, colour and proportion, which allows the well-prepared viewer to feel (ostensibly) impromptu aesthetic pleasure as she strolls through the countryside. Her pleasure, rather than her preparedness, produces a psychological sense of belonging to a community of tasteful discernment, and this allows her to feel herself a person of refined taste. Active self-cultivation is replaced by the self-conscious surprise of the already cultivated, whose rationale for being so mixes inherent aptitude with claims about receptivity to feeling that, together, elevate the poet's perspective.

To consider Wordsworth's descents as "professionally" motivated is to envision a rapprochement between *Bildung* and poetic irresolution, or between the aesthetic self-cultivation that galvanizes *Descriptive Sketches* and the disruptiveness of a fall. In the last

³¹ For a discussion of the work of metaphor and displacement and feeling, see Miranda Burgess, "On Being Moved."

decades, critics have tended to treat *Bildung* and the subversion of traditional literary forms as either unrelated or opposed. If aesthetics permits the emergence of the bourgeois subject who reflects back to us the ideological structures of a historical moment, as Terry Eagleton has argued, then a genre like the *Bildungsroman* can be read as a formal pattern for self-fashioning, as Marc Redfield contends (*Phantom* 4). Meanwhile, Levinson has considered impropriety of style or substance as a reaction against the impossibility of aesthetic self-cultivation for, in this case John Keats, a poet who lacks class privilege. That Wordsworth means the “sunk mind” to elicit self-improving sympathy positions these tensions between *Bildung* and dissonant poetics as a continuous and dynamic relation, one that is characterized, in the entirety of its trajectory from hope to dismay, by disappointment.

However, such a reading evacuates that which makes Wordsworth’s descents so radical: their resistance to linearity. *Descriptive Sketches* is almost frantic in its attempts to record meaningfulness and inspiration, and when that anticipatory mode is interrupted, the resulting formal effects—the dissonance of heroic couplets when the ideas they express fail to balance or blend—seem to indicate a poet not quite willing (or perhaps not yet able) to produce the “esemplastic” transformation of social reality into aestheticized forms. This offers, perhaps, a middle way for approaching the history in “textual form” that, as Fredric Jameson says, “hurts” (*Political* 102). For, that Wordsworth sets out in *Descriptive Sketches* upon a journey of self-cultivation is undeniable; that he was taken off guard by experiences along the way emerges, as Hartman has shown, in jarring formal effects. Rather than consider the music of the slaves voices to be an aestheticized elision, then, as Pfau’s approach would suggest, I take seriously, first, that the slaves really were singing (a

conclusion suggested by the travelogues) and, second, that Wordsworth's reaction to it—the sense of lowering—reflects some semblance of his embodied reaction to the experience. That the sounds of slavery are not shouts or moans but appear to have rhythm and cadence—Wordsworth's "timbrel" certainly intimates that they do—suggests a connection between force of feeling and the power of music for Wordsworth. This returns me, in the next section, to Hume's resonant mind and the passions that move subjects without their consent—an affective intensity by which poets and readers might be moved to a negative intensity without the addition of pain.

IV. The Power of Music and the Force of Feeling

The "sunk mind" figures a relational dynamic (call it sympathetic condescension) that is also an insistence on the body-in-motion (sinking) as means of persisting under duress—in this case, the duress caused by intrusive sound. While Levinson's calls to attend to Spinoza's influence undergird this dissertation's affect-theoretical approach, Hume's resonant mind has seemed a more fitting interlocutor for Wordsworth in 1791-92, during his Cambridge days and the writing of *Descriptive Sketches*, because Wordsworth had almost certainly not been directly exposed to Spinoza's influences before 1793. The young poet who wrote *Descriptive Sketches* did so three years before meeting Coleridge in Bristol, and two years before the publication of the English translation of F.H. Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, a book which has been credited with spreading Spinoza's influence to a new generation in Germany and Britain (Coleridge owned the second edition) (Beiser 44). At the same time, as Jonathan Israel has shown, Spinoza's influence was more widespread than has been previously accounted for, so that what passionate vibrations of mind are

suggested by the communicable feeling in *Descriptive Sketches* “resona[te],” as Levinson puts it, with numerous sources, including Spinoza (“Romancing” 367). Before turning to such resonances, however, this section very briefly explores the connection between the power of music and the force of feeling for Wordsworth.

As Pinch points out, Hume’s *Treatise* is notable for its representations of the passions as “quantities of force” that “would seem to operate like a physical property” upon a feeling body (33). For Hume, “what authorizes feelings, what gives them their authenticity, their ontological status, their moral value, is not their cause but their force or liveliness” (Pinch 33).³² Feelings are therefore both profoundly personal but also—in the case of a crowd’s contagious feelings, for instance—impersonal, conventional, and mobile (Pinch 19). The trouble with music, for Wordsworth, is that it reflects and reveals Pinch’s paradox of feelings to our senses; music accesses hidden, individual emotions, and it also influences and creates public moods and promotes common passions. In *The Prelude*, as in “Expostulation and Reply” and later poems like “The Power of Music,” this methexic quality of feeling-through-music troubles assumptions about individual agency; if feelings can impinge on bodies as sound does, as inescapable reverberations, then strong feelings might move people “[a]gainst, or with [their] will” more violently, and on a much greater scale, than they can a single poet in nature (Wordsworth, “Expostulation and Reply” line 20).

Wordsworth’s revisions to the 1836 edition of *Descriptive Sketches* heighten this connection between music and forceful feelings. In the lines just prior to the intrusion of

³² Burgess emphasizes that such an *affective* model of feeling is distinct from an emotional one, a clarification that she also makes between Shaftesbury’s affective theory of taste and the bounded, emotion-like sympathies that circulate in the moral philosophy of Adam Smith (“Being Moved”).

the slaves' voices, Wordsworth adjusts the imagery to make undeniable the connection between music and subjects who are moved without their consent.

To all that binds the soul in powerless trance,
Lip-dewing song, and ringlet-tossing dance;
Where sparkling eyes and breaking smiles illumine
The sylvan cabin's lute-enlivened gloom.
—Alas! the very murmur of the streams
Breathes o'er the failing soul voluptuous dreams,
While Slavery, forcing the sunk mind to dwell (lines 129-135)

The “powerless trance” of the dancer recalls the effect of music on the listeners of “Power of Music,” in which a fiddling busker “works on the crowd/...[and] sways them with harmony merry and loud” (lines 5-6). Music “enlivens” but it also compels. The chiasmic juxtaposition that follows these changes (the description of the “vocal barge” remains unchanged from 1793) thereby becomes an analogous suggestion, at the level of form, that if the sound of slavery is like music, then like music it impinges upon the poet. The embodied force of this feeling moves him as the lute-music moves the dancer, not to sway but to sink.

In “Voice of the Critique” (1993), Pfau asks whether an aesthetic experience is preparation for the mind to receive knowledge in general or if, as Immanuel Kant claims, the nature of the aesthetic experience conceals from the subject caught in the experience the actual knowledge proffered by it (323). Wordsworth's revision would seem to suggest that the pleasurable aesthetic experience is the one that conceals its epistemological significance from the subject, while such a negative aesthetic as disappointment retains the

ability to ask readers to engage: to struggle with those “feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [*sic*]” (Wordsworth, “Preface” 176). For Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, music is inaeesthetic precisely because its immediacy disrupts the process of aesthetic judgment, disallowing the listener from *choosing* whether or not to engage. “Music,” for Kant “has a certain lack of urbanity about it. ...[I]t scatters its influence abroad to an uncalled-for extent (through the neighbourhood), and thus, as it were, becomes obtrusive and deprives others, outside their musical circle, of their freedom” (*Judgment* 207). Yet this intrusive, affective quality is also what makes the formal dissonance generative of an embodied negotiation with the aesthetic, for, as Kant writes, music “occupies the lowest place among the beautiful arts...because it merely plays with sensations” (*Judgment* 206).

In the 1793 version of *Descriptive Sketches*, a final scene seems to echo the account of the “vocal barge,” and to draw once again on the idea of falling or sinking as a means for sympathetic engagement:

Each clacking mill, that broke the murmuring streams,
 Rock'd the charm'd thought in more delightful dreams;
 Chasing those long long dreams the falling leaf
 Awoke a fainter pang of moral grief
 The measured echo of the distant flail
 Winded in sweeter cadence down the vail;
 A more majestic tide the water roll'd
 And glowed in sun-gilt groves the richer gold:
 —Tho Liberty shall soon, indignant, raise
 Red on his hills his beacon's comet blaze (lines 645-654)

The “falling leaf,” innocuous though it seems, intrudes upon this scene just as did the “sunk mind.” Responsible for awaking the “fainter pang of moral grief,” the “echo” of the “clacking mill” and its “cadence” upon the water recall again the collapse of distance wrought by musical sound. The mill labors by a rhythmic music, and the scene seems to test the waters of an aural impingement less aggressive than those of the slaves voices, which are not forgotten here but transformed into “murmurs.”

V. “The Most Unhappy Man of Men”

To return to this chapter’s opening argument, “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” also uses juxtaposition in order to enact the distance between those who suffer and those who dwell upon the suffering of others. While in *Descriptive Sketches* the “sunk mind” is forced to “dwell” upon slavery, the sonnet sets up two extremes: happy obliviousness above ground, and interminability and powerlessness below. The sonnet sinks into this detention, a state of mind reflective of Louverture’s captivity in his “deep...den” (line 4). While Hume’s resonant mind provided for *Descriptive Sketches* a well-established model for the materiality of cognition, I would like now to put further pressure on the radical potential of “Romantic descents” by introducing Spinoza as more than just a “resonance.” By considering “human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies,” Spinoza’s “geometric style” in the *Ethics* de-emphasizes individual ownership of emotions but also highlights the conative forces of individuals striving to persevere, even past death (III Pref).

Spinoza’s concept of “conatus,” or striving to persist in being, Levinson describes as “an endeavor to preserve a kinetic poise within a dynamic ensemble of relations” not

limited to the human (Spinoza IIP6; Levinson, “Romancing” 369). In Levinson’s recent re-examination of “A Slumber Did My Sprit Seal,” her reading of Lucy’s posthumous motions as conative rather than externally located challenges Wordsworth’s adherence to dominant Newtonian, and therefore Humean, thought (“Romancing Spinoza” 389-390). Arguing that a Spinozist “resonance” is “triggered...by certain words, gestures, and claims that occur throughout William Wordsworth’s poetry but that loom especially large in his early verse,” Levinson asserts that the connection in the Lucy poem is direct—at the level of “allusion” (367). I have argued that finding allusions to Spinoza in Wordsworth’s *very* early verse seems improbable, but the sonnet, especially its depiction of Louverture’s sublimated forcefulness past death, is a compelling case. Like the Lucy poem, here diurnal motions subsume individual agency, transforming Louverture’s loss of personal freedom into a dispersed, unattributable, and powerful force that continues, nevertheless, to animate his legacy.

Toussaint Louverture was a Haitian slave who became the Governor-General of France’s largest and richest colony. Though civil unrest between colonists and Haitians began as early as 1789, the slave rebellions started in earnest with the 22-23 August 1791 revolt at Saint Domingue, in which Louverture seems certainly to have been involved (Popkin 8). It was in 1793, however, after England and Spain declared war on France following the violence of the Reign of Terror, that his “meteoric rise” to power truly began (Girard 5). Louverture initially took up arms alongside the Spanish forces that had come to take Port-au-Prince from the French colonists, but France, in a bid to regain control of the island from British and Spanish forces, abolished slavery on 20 June 1793 and appealed to this newly freed labor force to enlist in the French army (Girard 5-6).

Defecting to the French, Louverture rose through its military ranks, waged a “brutal” civil war that united the island under his leadership, and over the next decade laid the groundwork for Haiti’s independence in 1804 (Girard 6). Although Louverture officially declared his allegiance to France whilst in office, his autonomy and authority posed a threat to French interests, and in 1802 Napoleon Bonaparte brought Louverture to France to be exiled at Fort de Joux, in the Jura Mountains, where the Haitian leader would die of exposure in April of 1803.³³

Fort de Joux is approximately 50 kilometers from Neuchâtel, the lake town that Wordsworth describes near the end of *Descriptive Sketches* (line 715). That Wordsworth knew the area, and that in 1802, during the Peace of Amiens, he was actually in France (a time when Louverture’s plight would have been news) seems to have suggested to the poet not only to write a sonnet about Louverture, but to revisit something like the contrasting style of *Descriptive Sketches*. According to Mahlis, “From the sonnet’s first line, the poem diverges from the expected mode of tribute and instead makes this hyperbolic assertion: “Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!” (333):

Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!

Whether the rural Milk-maid by her Cow

Sing in thy hearing, or thou liest now

Alone in some deep dungeon’s earless den,

³³ This briefest of overviews necessarily overlooks much important scholarly work and debate about Louverture’s role in various historical events. See Jeremy D. Popkin’s discussion, in *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010), of the competing accounts of Louverture’s leadership role, especially in the 22-23 August uprising at Saint Domingue (8-10). See also Philippe R. Girard’s *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian War of Independence, 1801-1804* (2011) and Pierre Pluchon’s critical biography, *Toussaint Louverture* (1989).

O miserable Chieftain! Where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; be thou
Life to thyself in death; with chearful brow:
Live, loving death, nor let one thought in ten
Be painful to thee. Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and Man's unconquerable mind (1803 version)

The sonnet's opening line appears to reprise the logic of *Descriptive Sketches*' "Argument": that freedom and the pursuit of happiness are tantamount (4). Louverture's permanent loss of freedom, for Wordsworth, is equivalent to the end of personal happiness (understood as striving to achieve some ends) and this demoralizing state of affairs is made worse by solitary confinement. Slavery's injustice reasserts itself under the guise of political maneuvering, this time hiding its captive in unproductive misery, "[a]lone in some deep dungeon's earless den" (line 4).

For Mahlis, such an introduction neither does justice to Louverture nor follows the expected protocol for a legacy sonnet. "Cast in a tragic mode before his virtues are extolled, Toussaint seems more an object of pity than of praise" (Mahlis 333). This complaint, which hinges on the poem's contrasts and "jarring" lines, nevertheless offers a fitting assessment of the poem's tone and a good summary, I think, of Wordsworth's likely reaction to Louverture's imprisonment. The loss of liberty for a man so fiercely committed

to preserving it must have seemed a pitiful fate. Indeed, that Louverture had been called the “black Napoleon” and now, on Napoleon Bonaparte’s orders, had been separated from his wife and family and left to die, still seems tragic (Girard 287).³⁴ Mahlis wants credit for “the leader of a powerful slave revolt in Saint Domingue” who paved the way to Haitian independence—for Wordsworth to *name* Louverture’s “cause” (333)³⁵—but the sonnet refuses to define Louverture by these victories. It offers, rather, an account at once more ambivalent and more astute: the feeling of a conceptual disjuncture. Such a disjuncture as arises, perhaps, from the jailing of one military dictator by another; or, even stranger, from the fact that Louverture, a free man in Haiti, must be summoned to France to be jailed, at a time when, famously, “there [were] no slaves in France” (Peabody 6).³⁶ Or perhaps it is a more personal disjuncture: that feeling of the Alps being haunted, once again, by Slavery.

Unlike the galley slaves, whose voices are both intrusive and signal camaraderie even in captivity, Louverture has been silenced and isolated. The singing of the “rural Milk-maid” (line 2), which Louverture may or may not hear, reinforces the evacuation of outside support. Mahlis, who takes issue with this juxtaposition of the solemn with the bathetic, finds that the “imagined figure of the ‘rural Milk-maid by her cow’” is “[e]qually [as] jarring” as the poem’s opening line, because in “equating this stock pastoral figure

³⁴ One reason that Louverture and Bonapart were seen as analogues was the lengths both dictators would go to maintain power; 7 July 1801, for example, Haiti’s new constitution included a provision making Louverture Governor for life, foreshadowing, perhaps, Bonapart’s own promotion to First Consul for life on 10 May 1802.

³⁵ In fact, Louverture’s leadership role at that particular confrontation has been questioned by historians, although it seems clear he was a participant in the revolt (Popkin 8).

³⁶ Owing to the “Freedom Principle” any slave who set foot on French soil would be set free, an edict that French courts upheld consistently from as early as 1571 (Peabody 5).

with [Louverture]...Wordsworth...turns to the irrelevant or the euphemistic in supposed tribute” (333). Leaning heavily on this notion of tribute as the enunciation of recognizable achievements, Mahlis underestimates the power of the alternative relational dynamic enacted by this contrast. The Milkmaid stands as geographically proximate to Louverture as it is possible to be, but remains oblivious to his suffering. The distance between them is physically slight but conceptually vast, and the tentative thread of her singing is only ambivalently capable of traversing it. Rather than “equating this stock pastoral figure” to Louverture, as Mahlis contends, the Milkmaid is a synecdoche who stands, bathetically to be sure, for the population in general: those who live on without realizing their proximity to suffering.

Together, the losses of Louverture’s personal happiness and his social connections coalesce, in the poem’s second half, into a radical inversion of interiority and exteriority. The “unhappiness,” “misery,” and “pain,” with which Wordsworth imagines Louverture struggling are replaced with forces more enduring, powerful, and externalizable: “Thou hast left behind/ Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies” (lines 9-10). While the poet continues to address Louverture throughout this half of the sonnet (“thou hast great allies;/ Thy friends are exultations” [lines 12-13]), there is a parallel sense of the Haitian leader’s diminishing personhood, as his life and liberty are subsumed by natural forces that will continue the work that he has begun. The sonnet turns outward, directing these forces towards that unseen, unheard and previously unreachable general population. While receiving inspiration “on the common wind” is a quite familiar Wordsworthian notion, the strength of these particular passions—“exultations, agonies,/ And love” speak of a more commanding forcefulness, one that is perhaps befitting the immortality of such

a powerful figure as Louverture, and that will continue to move populations as his “great allies” (lines 13-14).

From the standpoint of the *Lyrical Ballads*, such a characterization of forceful feeling is a familiar one, denoted by feeling “[a]gainst, or with our will” in “Expostulation and Reply” (line 4). In that poem, Wordsworth’s eponymous speaker, William, awaits inspiration by sitting on a boulder. William’s seeming indolence draws the interest of Matthew, whose queries give cause for a conversation poem about the encounter—a poem in which William describes his special receptivity to the motions of the natural world:

“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.

Nor less I deem that there are powers
Which of themselves our minds impress,
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness (lines 17-24)

In “Expostulation and Reply,” coming to a standstill in nature turns inhibition generative, so long as “wise passiveness” is observed. Wordsworth’s elaboration of the material basis for the circulation of feeling—those affective “powers” that swirl in and between things and thinking bodies—turns nature to inspiration and man to poet. These transformations

reveal a poet confidently directing “influxes of feeling” (the raw material of poetry) into metrical and conceptual shape (Wordsworth, “Preface” 175).

Levinson unearths in Wordsworth’s poetics, and particularly in “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” deep, corporeal concerns with the inextricability of subjects from the worlds they inhabit (“Romancing Spinoza” 391). Her Spinozist rereading of that elegiac poem, by expanding Wordsworth’s philosophical ambitions to include those rigorous dynamics of bodies and motions laid out by the *Ethics*, makes explicit the affective contingencies that Wordsworth seems to be mapping.³⁷ Although “Expostulation and Reply” differs from the Lucy poem by pertaining to the living, its focus on the corporeality of experience also insists that attention be paid to the subject who “is moved” rather than moves. Just as eyes and ears are open to sights and sounds, so too is the mind subject to impressions. “Expostulation and Reply” swells to accommodate this connection, puffing out four, final pedantic stanzas in which William emphasizes the inspirational possibilities of “*things* forever speaking” (line 28, my italics). Over-talking Matthew, the final irony of the speaker’s reply is that it renders his friend, too, a “thing”: a silently speaking body like the “mighty sun” or the “old grey stone,” by which a poet like William may be moved to write poetry (lines 29, 32).

While scholars have traditionally read William’s bodily passiveness as distinct from his mental engagement,³⁸ Wordsworth’s ideas about the embodied inhibition necessary to

³⁷ Levinson first reads Wordsworth in relation to Spinoza in “Romantic Poetry: The State of the Art” (1993). Considering “Old Man Travelling” as a poem resistant to normative expectations, she argues that such incommensurable non-characters as Wordsworth conceives puts pressure on dominant discourses. In 2007, Levinson applies the tenets of Spinozist thought to the Lucy poem.

³⁸ Charles Rzepka calls William’s repose “essentially disembodied—passive, detached, and observant, not active and deliberate” (36). For Goodman, it is “a wisely passive *apatheia*” (123), and for Levinson a

catch poetic inspiration point toward his openness to a Romantic intellectual climate thick with physiological and philosophical speculation. What Humean resonances are suggested by the sympathetic mediation of communicable feeling in *Descriptive Sketches* seem to give way, in the sonnet, to imagery and cadences reminiscent of the Lucy poems: the diurnal forces of “air, earth, and skies” mirroring those “rocks, and stones, and trees” (line 10; line 8). That Wordsworth makes no special exceptions for Louverture, neither naming his achievements nor condemning him, seems to indicate that the leader’s sublimation into natural forces is not simply or only a colonial but more particularly a Wordsworthian impulse—something akin to the “ego-poetical” flattening out that silences Matthew. What is left is not a resonant mind, but “Man’s unconquerable mind,” an idea of mind as matter that does not end at death, but perseveres, as in Spinoza’s philosophy, as passions without knowledge of their cause (line 14).³⁹

In *Descriptive Sketches* and “To Toussaint L’Ouverture,” juxtaposition and contrast generate formal descents that, when met with figures of sinking or arrest, exert a pull on buoyant imagery, holding beneath the surface brightness, lightness, or joy. Not only do the poems expose readers to the other side of optimism, but they compel them to remain there, experiencing “joy” or “chear [*sic*]” from within the “captive’s cell” or the “deep dungeon’s earless den” (*Sketches* line 138; “L’Ouverture” lines 4, 7). Considering such a trajectory, this chapter has shown that the perspectival adjustments generated by such

“meditative quiescence” (8). For Pfau, William’s leisure is “a stoic form of self-cultivation... bordering on indolence” that forces William to justify his economic non-participation by way of the productiveness of inspiration (*Profession* 196).

³⁹ “Men believe themselves free,” says Spinoza, “because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” (*Ethics* 73).

descents exceed our critical expectations of these poems, and that the poems betray history likewise unlooked for. In their suggestions of the materiality of the passions and cognition, these poems indicate the need for new approaches to Wordsworth that focus on his sensitivity to forms of relationality more lateral and radically dispersed than his “ego poetics” might suggest.

Chapter 2

Coleridge's Disappointed Reading

There must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark
from the last step of a stair-case, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap
of three or four

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817)⁴⁰

I. Dimensions of Disappointment

If Wordsworth's descents in *Descriptive Sketches* and "To Toussaint L'Ouverture" compel readers to dwell in discomfort, then this chapter both extends and hones that aspect of my argument by considering metrical disappointment in the *Lyrical Ballads* as a loss of "kinetic poise" for Coleridge, to borrow Levinson's phrase ("Romancing" 369). Proprioception, the pre-cognitive sense with which we anticipate and react to the spaces between our bodies and the world, conceptualizes "poise" as a dynamic mode of sensory perception, one that allows for the calibration and recalibration of readers to texts as it does bodies to worlds. Contributing to the sense of balance and to muscular memory, proprioception is a distributed sense, not simply located in the brain but also interoceptive insofar as the reflexes of muscles and ligaments come into play. Its loss, as Coleridge reveals in the epigraph above, feels like disappointed reading—an interruption of expectations felt in the body. Building on Coleridge's simile, this chapter will reveal the relationship between literary disappointments and the embodiment of reading for the poet

⁴⁰ *Biographia Literaria, Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, in two parts. Ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate. Vol.7 of *Collected Works*, 16 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), Book 13. Print.

to be centrally concerned with the spatial awareness made possible by such an interoceptive sense.

In the *Biographia Literaria* and Coleridge's *Notebooks*, proprioception is only really felt through its loss: ataxia, disorientation, and misjudged distances all constitute moments of proprioceptive deficiency experienced by either Coleridge or readers represented in these texts. The brain regulates proprioception and, when it goes uninterrupted, the effects of proprioception are hardly noticeable, embodied as they are within tiny adjustments to the muscles and ligaments. As Massumi theorizes it, proprioception is embodied mediation. It "translates the exertions and ease of the body's encounters with objects into a muscular memory of relationality" so that, for example, "the softness of a cat's fur becomes a lubricant for the motion of the hand" (Massumi 59). For this reason, Romantic views of proprioception might seem to align with "sensation," rather than "perception," to borrow Thomas Reid's 1764 distinction, since sensations refer to that which has "no object except for the feeling itself" (Jackson 36).

Proprioceptive loss, by contrast, does often alight upon an object of perception rather than pure sensation. The disruption of proprioception produces a kind of sensory belatedness: the sudden realization that the object—a stair, a line of poetry—*must* be perceived in order to be negotiated. Rather than align proprioception with either side of Reid's dichotomy, then, we might do better to emphasize the "in-between-ness" that Massumi invokes. As Goodman has shown, Romantic "media theory" has its roots in earlier conceptions of bodily "mediums": the "in-between thing or area," that "is both an activity and a substance; affected by the sensible object, it in turn...affects the organ of sense...[and without which] there would be no sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch" (17-

18). According to Massumi, proprioception is at once the “translator” and “lubricant” that generates an almost pre-conscious experience of sensation for sensation’s sake. So, after experiencing the cat’s supine shape or the distance between stairs, the “medium” of proprioception anticipates that feeling or that distance by bringing the “cumulative memory of skill, habit and posture” “into the motor realm of externalizable response” (Massumi 59). As Coleridge’s simile suggests, mental activities like engaging with regular meter involve such habituated, anticipatory activations, as readers embody the expectation that lines will carry on and conclude at certain rhythmic cadences and predetermined points.

By drawing together aesthetic and affective modes of apprehension under the aegis of Coleridge’s simile I do not mean to imply that a relation between proprioception and reading is merely analogical. A recent survey of the field of embodied cognition by Lawrence Shapiro concludes that we gain much by foregrounding the inter-reliance of cognitive processes with anatomical structures and systems, an understanding shared by eighteenth-century thinkers. In the last decade, ophthalmologists have tested the relationship between the impairment of ocular proprioception and dyslexia, finding that the oculomotor acuity necessary for the eyes to follow lines of text means that reading relies on the spatial orientation made possible by the proprioceptive work of the muscles that control eye movement (Quercia et al 869).⁴¹ Thus the physiology of vision influences readers such that interoceptive senses are always already bound up with comprehension and meaning making. For the Romantics, such a conclusion is foreshadowed by the

⁴¹ Other recent neurological research (2011) has found that the proprioceptive role of hand movements in concert with vision improves the temporal accuracy of a subject attempting to determine the collision-course trajectories of objects in space (Rodríguez-Herreros and López-Moliner).

perceptual experiments of Reid, whose *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) invites readers to produce in themselves visual aberrations like double vision in order to reveal the physiological dimensions of everyday modes of perception.⁴² Describing something like ocular proprioception, Reid contends: “We know not how the mind acts upon the body, nor by what power the muscles are contracted and relaxed; but...this power is so directed that many muscles which have no material tie or connection, act in concert” (235). Even in the case of the nearsighted reader, Reid argues that once accustomed to “hold[ing] the book to one eye...Such persons acquire the habit of attending to the objects of [that] eye, while they give no attention to those of the other” (285). For Reid, as for other thinkers of the period, including the medical professor and specialist of the nervous system, William Cullen, the “cumulative memory of skill, habit and posture” is a muscular memory and nervous memory: a physiological basis for sense perception (Massumi 59).⁴³

This chapter traces one thread of an affective history. Although my foregrounding of embodied cognition might seem to prompt a cognitive literary theoretical approach, the productive analogies that emerge from cognitivist comparisons (that is, the reading of problems raised by Romantic literature and culture against theories provided by twenty-first century cognitive science) tend to focus less on the historically situated sense of a

⁴² Against the skepticism of John Locke, Reid hypothesizes “That no material things can be conceived by us, or made an object of thought, until its image is conveyed to the mind by means of the senses” (185). Indeed, in describing the visual apprehension of perspective, Reid declares that such a (in this case) thought experiment depends upon an aesthetic form of attention: “The only profession in life where it is necessary to make this distinction [that of form from perspective] is that of painting. The painter hath occasion for abstraction” (Reid 165).

⁴³ See Noel Jackson’s work on Wordsworth’s habits of mind and the influential Scottish medical Professor William Cullen’s account of the habituated nervous system (75-80).

phenomenon than on its identification in contemporary terms.⁴⁴ Rather than merely point out that one embodied element of reading is “proprioception” and can be thought about as such, this chapter shies away from “cognitive constants” or what Raymond Williams called “fixed forms” (Bruhn and Wehrs 12, Williams 126). Attending instead to the interpretive flux of what are, essentially, unrecoverable activations of mind, I mean to historicize as fully as possible a Romantic, proprioceptive sense through an archive of its literary disappointments. Alongside recent formulations of the connections between history and affect from Pfau, Jackson, Goodman, Favret, and others, the accounts of embodied cognition offered by Shapiro and others help conceptualize a subject whose “multimodal” or distributed senses together contribute to the apprehension of texts (Quercia et al 869). Yet even these findings are only part of the story, and I would suggest that the proprioceptive dimension of disappointed reading has a larger part to play in recent conversations about Romantic science, the history of perception, and Romantic era reading practices.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ In *Cognition, Literature, History* Mark J. Bruhn and Donald R. Wehrs call for literary scholars to investigate how “cognitive constants make possible, indeed necessary and inevitable, significant literary change” (12). Although tracing the cognitive through-line from the Romantics’ experience of the world to our own can be productive of new ways of receiving the Romantic archive (see Alan Richardson, Lisa Zunshine and others), my attempt in this essay will to activate that archive from within, as historically situated and always already interpretively imbricated.

⁴⁵ At the 2014 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism conference in Washington, DC, Jonathan Kramnick shared a work-in-progress, in which he explored alternative long-eighteenth-century models for perception, in which perceiving is “an active process—more on the pattern of touch than vision” (1). Kramnick’s paper brought to the fore many of similar issues of affective perception (or interoception) that this chapter approaches, without naming it “proprioception” as such, and offered a rich discussion that was instructive for this paper.

Since proprioception describes the way that bodies expect to meet the world, proprioception or proprioceptive loss allows me to consider the embodiment of thought activities that involve anticipation and, sometimes, disappointment. Beginning with an overview of Coleridge and Wordsworth's attempts to defend poetic disappointment in the *Lyrical Ballads*, this chapter focuses on Coleridge's attempts in the *Biographia Literaria* to interpret his later disappointments with Wordsworth's poetry. I concentrate on Coleridge not only because his figures of aesthetic disappointment and metrical downfall are so evocative, but also because of his persistence in tracking the multitude of everyday weak affects he experienced in his *Notebooks*. If the well-documented Romantic preoccupation with sense perception has a critical context in addition to that of the history of science, then affect theory and Romantic media studies have together mobilized the period's philosophical and cultural history in new and vital ways.⁴⁶ Drawing on Celeste Langan's explication (after Marshall McLuhan) of the "medium cool" sense of feeling at a distance, and Rei Terada's patient analysis of Coleridge's phenomenology of perception, I examine how Coleridge struggles to mobilize the affective dimension of disappointing reading in order to disrupt what is, by his own account, an unbalancing inebriation with regular metrical form.

II. Disappointing Affects and the *Lyrical Ballads*

Concerned as the Romantics were about developing criteria for and understandings about aesthetic judgment, "disappointment" remains an evaluation that

⁴⁶ An area in which much critical intellectual work has been and continues to be done; see especially works by Bewell, Burgess, Goodman, Jackson. Jackson's work on the history of the senses provides an invaluable explication of the interplay between Romantic science and aesthetics.

was oft deployed but hardly theorized. As an indicator of critical and aesthetic value, disappointment hinges on anticipation: readers feel they have been disappointed when a work fails to live up to their aspirations for it. For this reason, disappointed reading was not so much theorized during the period as it was attributed to, blamed on, criticized and complained about, by both writers and readers. Although much work has been done on the social and economic concerns of an emerging culture of Romantic readers, less work has attended to representations of the affective experience of readerly disappointment.⁴⁷ Without losing sight of Coleridge's metrical disappointment as a stumble or fall, I'd like to begin by exploring the ways in which Wordsworth prepares readers to orient themselves in relation to the *Lyrical Ballads* as a potential disappointment, and how this flexibility enables and supports the ambivalences, or perhaps the "fair instance[s]" of truthful imitation, as Coleridge will later call them, in poems such as "We Are Seven" and "Simon Lee" (*BL* 2:18).

In a modern literary marketplace, disappointing readerships was clearly a concern for writers whose "pudding" depended on book sales, as Wordsworth complained (*WW*

⁴⁷ Critical to my thought on this subject were two discussions of works-in-progress. First, Christina Lupton's unpublished chapter, "Sunday Reading," which she shared at the University of British Columbia's Faculty Reading Series in the spring of 2015, argues that the temporal experience of Romantic readers is an affective, interruptive mode of engagement with both time and texts. Second, Mary Favret, at the 2009 conference for the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism in Vancouver, British Columbia, discussed the physical difficulty of the act of reading in the Romantic era. Notwithstanding near- or far-sightedness, the clarity of the printing and quality of paper, the capriciousness of the daylight, the flickering of candles, and the quality and expense of reading aids like magnifying glasses were very real impediments to the kinds of reading practices we take for granted. See also Deirdre Lynch's recently published *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2014).

Letters I: 268).⁴⁸ Wordsworth worries pragmatically that disappointed reading will immobilize the *Lyrical Ballads*'s circulation, decreasing its chances of being purchased and passed around. Even so, Wordsworth recognizes that judgments about reading, even about disappointed reading, reflect a conscious relation to a literary work, in which the reader might become the critical perceiver of an object of affective dissatisfaction. When he claims personal insult from readers' disappointments in the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, it is not to apologize or make amends; rather, it is to persevere in making the affects that might lead to aesthetic disappointment so inextricable from his innovative poetry that it

⁴⁸ Claims of disappointed reading provide crucial social and economic commentary about Romantic reading practices and the history of literary authorship. Significant contributions to conversations about Romantic reading practices include John Klancher's seminal work *The Making of English Reading Audiences*, William St Clair's *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, and more recently, Andrew Franta's *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* and Michael Gamer's *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception and Canon Formation*. If *Lyrical Ballads* launched Romanticism as a literature in 1798, as many critics have claimed, then Wordsworth and Coleridge's reactions to the *commercial* disappointments of the first edition constitute a nascent stage in the development of the 1800 and 1802 versions of what has been called the period's manifesto (Gamer 126, Langan 59). In 1798, the *Lyrical Ballads* was so disappointingly unmarketable that Joseph Cottle, its original publisher, decided against selling the poems' copyrights to T.N. Longman because Cottle thought their value "reckoned as *nothing*" (qtd. in Gamer and Porter 15). When a second edition was suggested (by Longman, no less), part of the poets' justification for writing the 1800 Preface was to personally ensure the collection was better marketed, since Wordsworth and Coleridge had been in Germany during the first edition's release and this had resulted, according to Wordsworth, in the "sad mismanagement" of its sales (Gamer and Porter 27, *WL* 1:259). Although the Advertisement evinces that Wordsworth foresaw that the collection was to be taken as an unusual literary object, towards which some semblance of readerly disappointment was almost surely inevitable, in a letter of 24 June 1799, Wordsworth told Cottle that "If the volume [*Lyrical Ballads*] should come to a second Edition I would [change] some little things which would be more likely to suit the common taste" (*WL* 1:264). Reacting to pecuniary disappointment, Wordsworth's declaration to Cottle seems to suggest that critical and aesthetic disappointment is a sticky label, which, Wordsworth worries, will leave on the *Lyrical Ballads* the residue of someone else's (dis)taste.

necessitates disappointment coping strategies (176).⁴⁹ *Lyrical Ballads* is a collection likely to cause “struggle[s] with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [*sic*]” and, to forestall any such uncomfortable flutterings from coalescing into disappointment, readers should refuse to submit to “that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision” (“Advertisement” 22-23). Disappointment’s avoidance depends critically, Wordsworth argues, on abandoning expectations in order to find pleasure in generic and metrical innovations that refuse to map easily onto previous experience.⁵⁰

Thus in the *Lyrical Ballads*’s 1798 “Advertisement” and the prefaces of 1800 and 1802, Wordsworth and Coleridge anticipate that readers will experience disappointing affects—those strange and awkward feelings—due in no small part to metrical disruptions

⁴⁹ For a recent exploration of the affective register of aesthetic apprehension and poetry see Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry*, especially “Maps of Misreading” (114-122).

⁵⁰ Wordsworth and Coleridge hoped to establish themselves as professional poets with the *Lyrical Ballads*, but they faced a busy, stimulating, often exclusionary literary marketplace bursting with new things to read. In a time of massive technological innovation in the industries related to the printing and selling of books, disappointed reading—and therefore disappointing sales—was implicated in the circulation of texts, especially with respect to forms of print media designed to grab readers’ attention by the surface-level heightening of expectations: newspaper headlines, the engravings illustrating *The Keepsake* and other literary annuals, and extravagant book bindings (St Clair 160-164). Romantic complaints about being duped by superficial and/or material accouterments designed to sell copies circulated in articles and reviews made possible by the very technologies that were flooding the market. At the same time, for the publishers and sellers of this media, disappointing the masses was often coterminous with poor profit margins. As William St Clair has shown, the powerful economic interests of the major publishers during the period changed the division of labor amongst the producers and purveyors of print (160-164). Bringing about, for instance, the advent of the literary agent, such as Sir Walter Scott employed, there emerged professionals whose job it was to predict a book’s marketability and so to stave off disappointing sales (St Clair 160). Authorial fears about causing literary disappointment might even lead to anticipatory revisions, as in the cases of Keats’s Preface to *Endymion* and Scott’s *St. Ronan’s Well*, in the latter of which, Scott took his agent’s projections of marketplace reactions into account and changed aspects of the narrative before the manuscript was finalized (St Clair 160).

of the kind Coleridge later decries. Hoping to stop such affects coalescing into judgments of critical and aesthetic disappointment, the poets appeal to readers to reorient, at the outset, their literary expectations. (That Wordsworth, in subsequent editions, also refuses to remove or rewrite poems that challenge or even alienate by asking readers to engage with difficulty, difference, and irresolution, becomes for Coleridge a sticking point and a provocation: the cause of the “direct hostility” that the collection received from critics [*BL* 1:4]). In the 1798 “Advertisement,” Wordsworth’s assertion that the collection’s prosaic language will alienate audiences is more properly an anticipation of inflexible readers holding fast to predetermined judgments (47). In those lines, the reader who struggles with awkward feeling is also the one who perceives: who looks around, asks questions, and ultimately judges. The recognition of disappointing affects is counterbalanced by a sense that readers can and will orient themselves towards the poems in order to “enquire” and judge them (“Advertisement” 47).

That Wordsworth seeks to foster such a heightened, double awareness (of affects that lead to disappointment, retrospectively understood as such, and conscious attempts at orientation) frames the collection as an object of potential disappointment rather than of outright dismissal. Wordsworth asks readers to accept the challenge of an innovative poetry and to square their expectations with his and Coleridge’s poetic developments *not* by feeling those awkward or disappointing affects any less, but by learning to ask new questions about poetry and sympathetic feeling in order to seek new kinds of poetic gratification. The “Advertisement” explicitly warns against anticipating the status quo (ornate language, overwrought style) in order to dispel expectations of easy pleasure. Giving readers responsibility for this new attention to poetic effects, as well as for the

pleasure they derive from it, Wordsworth reconfigures the poems as “experiments” of language, form, and content. He allows the moral and intellectual loads of these feelings to fall onto readers’ shoulders, and in so doing, implies that readerly presumptions, reactions, and sympathies produce another, and perhaps parallel, experiment—one that tests readers’ sensitivity to the passions, stories, and sufferings of others.

Comparing the *Lyrical Ballads* to an experiment allows for its conceptualization as a dynamic object (bound by time and variables rather than leather and silk), and this suggests that the collection tests not only the limits of formal innovation but also the possibility for a radical re-evaluation of socially conscious poetics. Prior to 1798, and before the first edition’s dismal sales and negative reviews,⁵¹ the “Advertisement” reflects Wordsworth and Coleridge’s hopes that class-based prejudices more injurious and deeply

⁵¹ That this tangle between disappointed reading and disappointed profit margins should encourage less innovative and more saleable works seems an obvious story, but of course this was not the case. Literary producers and consumers emerged to fill any niche in the burgeoning marketplace. In London, the radical publisher John Murray made its reputation publishing edgy works by Lord Byron and, at least until 1814, was known for accepting manuscripts refused by other publishers for being too brash or too risky (*Dictionary* 322, St Clair 160). Nonetheless, pecuniary disappointment remained a very real possibility for authors and publishers, no matter how pioneering or, indeed, how conservative the material, as demonstrated by the dismal receptions of Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Wordsworth’s *The White Doe of Rylston*, respectively (Johnson xi, St Clair 160). Wordsworth’s well-known complaint to his publisher, Joseph Cottle, about Robert Southey’s review of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*—“He knew that I published those poems for money and for money alone. He knew that money was of importance to me...I care little for the praise of any other professional critic, but as it may help me to my pudding” (*WL* 1:267-68)—evinces the messy junctures of pecuniary concern, commodity form, and the uncompassionate and often vitriolic review culture of the period. (If being oft disappointed designated discerning taste, then many Romantic reviewers made it their business to be chronically and publically afflicted.) Thus literary and critical descriptions of disappointed reading continued unabated during the period, and although I do not want to get carried away in reporting the lot of them, I also do not wish for this chapter to overlook the ties between disappointed reading and the rise of literary consumerism during the period.

ingrained than those of poetic style could be, if not overcome, then thought about, or even anticipated differently, by readers flexible enough to risk the reorientation of their expectations even in anticipation of disappointment. Even as a more self-conscious approach to disappointed reading replaces 1798's guarded optimism in the prefaces of 1800 and 1802, the *Lyrical Ballads's* critical innovation remains the same: to elicit affective dissatisfaction through the representation of human difference, in poems that break the codes of generic acceptability. These moments—the apostrophic turn that precedes the narrator's intervention in “Simon Lee,” the almost mechanical insistence of the little girl in “We Are Seven”—remain sites of unresolved tension that, if readers persist in expecting resolution, position them in relation to the text as a disappointing object. All this Coleridge knew; he was both complicit and invested in producing readers who must accommodate disappointing affects without giving way to critical and aesthetic disappointment.

Given his role in the *Lyrical Ballads's* development, Coleridge's own attempts to reconcile, almost two decades later, his longstanding disappointment (in the critical sense) with an affective disappointment (in the proprioceptive sense) seem both belated and idiosyncratic.⁵² As Goodman has elaborated, the privileging of reader participation in the creation of poetic meaning, and therefore in its pleasure, was not Wordsworth's unique innovation. Her example, Joseph Addison's “The Pleasures of the Imagination” (1711) papers from the *Spectator* (which Goodman argues build upon his “An Essay on the

⁵² Although Coleridge's criticisms do lean heavily on the corroboration of a critical public (“Among those [who judge the collection]...I distinctly remember six who expressed their objections to the ‘Lyrical Ballads’s almost in the same words...””) (BL 197-198).

Georgics" [1697]), theorize the ways in which "[t]exts merely sow the seeds, so that readers are pleased to reap the ideas" (32). The reader's task is to take that which is "low" (in the case of the georgic mode, verse about soil and even manure) and, through the appreciation of the poem's sophisticated *tekhné*, become "a genteel co-laborer with the author" (Goodman 32). For Coleridge, perhaps this dynamic of easy cooperation is precisely what throws into relief Wordsworth's difference: his one-sided pedantry, as "Expostulation and Reply" has revealed, and his resistance to compromise in poetic collaboration.

Yet, even notwithstanding Wordsworthian "ego poetics" and the two poets' well-known falling out, it is Wordsworth's use of low and rustic *language*, more than that of content, to which Coleridge takes offense. Where the georgics "soaring words" bring elevation to the quotidian, Wordsworth's insistence on employing "a rustic's language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar" is for Coleridge absolutely untenable because essentially disingenuous (Goodman 14; *BL* 2:17). His summary of what make up "Mr. Wordsworth's minor poems" include their "downright simpleness, under the affectation of simplicity, prosaic words and feeble metre, silly thoughts in childish phrases, and a preference of mean, degrading, or at best trivial associations and characters" (*BL* 1:4). This, in comparison to the strength and "knotty" language of *Descriptive Sketches*, which Coleridge declares the harbinger of Wordsworth's genius (*BL* 1:4).

What, then, is the relationship between these specific complaints against Wordsworth: "unpleasant sinkings," "disappointment felt," "abrupt downfall[s]" (*BL* 2:18), and the reading of low and rustic language that has been metrically arranged? Is it

truly the “lowness” of the language that pains Coleridge? For that “abrupt downfall” is, by Coleridge’s own admission, “the only fair instance...in all Mr. Wordsworth’s writings, of an actual adopting, or true imitation, of the real and very language of low and rustic life, freed from provincialisms” (*BL* 2:17). In Terada’s work on the *Notebooks*, the sense of sight dominates Coleridge’s perceptual field, and she explores his phenomenological dissatisfactions through the rich archive of visual data that he collected. Coleridge’s way of being in the world, Terada argues, was characterized by dissociation and feelings of impingement from outside bodies (*Looking Away* 36). Like Keats’s sense of the pressures of other people’s bodies in the “camelion Poet” letter, Coleridge feared “the possibility of being engulfed by another,” according to Terada, and it was this dread that contributed to his depersonalized sense of himself and his desire to cling to visual markers, or “spectra” (“Phenomenality” 261).⁵³

I include Terada’s characterization in order to suggest Coleridge’s deeper investment in proprioceptive or spatialized sensations of location and trajectory, and to propose that the *Lyrical Ballads*’s metrical downfalls may have exacerbated psychological tensions for the poet outside questions of taste. Terada’s account suggests that Coleridge’s plotting of spectra in the *Notebooks* acted as a kind of wayfinding, helping the poet orient himself in relation to a perceivable environment. “Coleridge...casts his experiences with spectra as rediscoveries of a very primary-sounding capacity to adjust one’s forms of contact with the world,” says Terada (*Looking Away* 43). If Wordsworth’s poems only truly approximate “the real and very language of low and rustic life” in moments of “downfall”

⁵³ “What Coleridge calls ‘spectra,’” explains Terada, “are more broadly afterimages, optical illusions, errors in perception, and very ephemeral visual experiences. Some of them are what Kant calls ‘charms,’ the stimuli of ‘attractions’ too fragile to be aesthetic” (36).

and sudden disruption, then might not Coleridge's censoriousness emerge from an embodied aversion to losing his bearings? If the *Lyrical Ballads's* greatest moments of linguistic verisimilitude depend on disappointing affects, orchestrated by Wordsworth's strong, often domineering, authorial presence, then for a reader sensitive to such impingements, metrical downfalls would constitute more than just a frustratingly deliberate resistance to interpretation. They would also, and more critically, signal the poet's intentional disruption of the "kinetic poise" and spatial orientation made possible by the proprioceptive capacities of the reader.

III. "All objects (as objects)": The Esemplastic Imagination

By the time he wrote the *Biographia Literaria* (1815-1817) Coleridge was ready to figure the sudden jolt of a poem's metrical slip—a poem from the *Lyrical Ballads* no less—as a disappointment akin to the proprioceptive miscalculation that occurs when one mistakes the number of stairs. In contrast to the "Preface," which treats readers' disappointment as an emotion—a feeling state more self-conscious and durable than the transient sensations that feed affective experience—here Coleridge's disappointment has more in common with surprise than dissatisfaction. Irregular meter disrupts something like spatial awareness, and this creates an instance of immediate and unforeseeable disappointment. Influenced by sight (darkness), muscle memory (distance between stairs) and conscious memory (number of stairs), Coleridge's metaphor projects the myriad and entangled senses that contribute to the proprioceptive ease with which readers read and bodies move through space.

Coleridge's theory of the imagination grants perceptual agency to subjects caught, as Terada argues, in a world of bodily apprehensions and passionate forces unseen. The imagination allows for "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" under the "conscious will" of the subject (*BL* 2:14). Such a view differs profoundly from earlier accounts of the embodied imagination, which tended to regard the relation of imagination to the body and mind as one of docile receptivity (Sha 200-201). In Richard Sha's discussion of Romanticism's "physiological imagination," he chronicles the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural philosophers and medical professionals theorized the imagination's inner workings, finding that "[e]mbodied within the nervous system...evidence [for the imagination's physiological basis] was palpable....Even when diseased, [in the case of a mentally ill patient] the imagination's hold on the body paradoxically gave it powers of transformation" (199). The imagination was thought to be "passive," in the sense of "acted upon" by outside forces and, according to Sha, this "vexed" the issue of a subject's control over her own imagination because "to control it meant control over one's surroundings" (203).

Given these established views on the nature of the imagination, Coleridge's account fundamentally augments the "passive" imagination by granting the subject some semblance of agency:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the

primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree* and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or, where this process is rendered impossible, yet still in all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead (*BL* 1:13)

While the primary imagination creates mimetic images from impressions of the world, the secondary imagination generates new combinations of images from disparate phenomena. The secondary imagination's "esemplastic" or unifying power makes it flexible and, even as the imagination creates "struggles to idealize and to unify," that the subject retains her "conscious will" while doing so allows her also to take ownership of the imaginings thus produced (*BL* 1:13).

The imagination for Coleridge is "vital," both necessary and embodied. This he contrasts with "objects (*as* objects)...essentially fixed and dead," a comparison that suggests the objects in question are those that the imagination had been struggling to unify only a moment ago (*BL* 1:13). This comparison, which invents a world of static and incontrovertible things by way of its parenthetical apposition (as if objects *qua* objects would be easier to keep track of), seems designed to hold the external world accountable for the imaginative perceiver's apprehension. It makes the subject active and the world passive; or, as Terada notes, it reveals that the "esemplastic" imagination "is as easy as squinting" (*Looking Away* 43).

In Noel Jackson's thorough analysis of Romantic science and sensation, books take on extra-curricular roles as commonplace objects that are also props for scientific enquiry, especially in the explorations of ocular perception found in the works of Reid and others.

That Romantic observational studies were also, often self-experiments—recall Humphrey Davy’s “analysis” of the effects of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, on himself and his friends—is well known, but, as Jackson explains it, this practice was not limited to risk-takers (115-116). The popularity of science writing in the long eighteenth century led many a writer to include experiments that could be tried at home (Jackson 116). Even medical journals like *The Lancet* included articles that were written with the “edutainment” of a general audience in mind (Pladek, “Lancet”). Coleridge’s familiarity with works on perception such as Reid’s or Alexander Monro’s *Three Treatises: On the Brain, the Eye and the Ear* (1797) finds its reflecting surface, according to Jackson, in the poet’s *Notebooks*, where Coleridge’s obsession with spectra emerges in self-experiments involving induced difficulty in reading, brought about by squinting in candlelight or reading through smoke that obscures the text (Jackson 116-117).

In response to Wordsworth’s claim that “There neither is or can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition,” Coleridge argues that the written word differs essentially from the spoken (*BL* 2:18). He declares that this distinction holds “even as reading ought to differ from talking,” and the footnote that follows, a gloss on “reading,” offers a strange and evocative account of the relation between the spoken cadence of reading aloud and vision, one that details the distress of a child whose eyes are not allowed to follow lines of text:

It is no less an error in teachers, than a torment to the poor children, to enforce the necessity of reading as they would talk. In order to cure them of *singing* as it is called; that is, of too great a difference. The child is made to repeat the words with his eyes from off the book; and then, indeed, his tones

resemble talking, as far as his fears, tears and trembling will permit. But as soon as the eye is again directed to the printed page, the spell begins anew; for an instinctive sense tells the child's feelings, that to utter its own momentary thoughts, and to recite the written thoughts of another, as of another, and a far wiser than himself, are two widely different things; and as these two acts are accompanied with widely different feelings, so must they justify different modes of enunciation. Joseph Lancaster... cures this fault of *singing*, by hanging fetters and chains on the child, to the music of which, one of his school fellows who walks before, dolefully chants out the child's last speech (emphasis in original, *BL* 2:18)

Here the child's hypersensitivity to the loss of visual cues, an event that occurs *before* the overzealous punishment, triggers something like a panic attack. The instant that the text is removed from his view, the child is overwhelmed. Yet, given the actual task (to recite from memory lines he had been reading—or *singing*—only a moment ago) such an intense response appears unjustified. The child's "fears, tears and trembling" only really make sense as a response to the imagined humiliation to come, after the inevitable failure.

Yet if we take seriously the child's reaction not as experience-based but visceral, an immediate reaction to the disorientation produced by the loss of the text-as-map, then reading (even reading prose) here becomes an engagement with cadence and rhythm built on ocular perception. Without those black marks on the page, the reader loses the rhythms that, by Coleridge's account, are *proper to* the distinction between writer and reader. The child's difficulty comes from the "instinctive" knowledge that the language must be met at its elevated level, so the child must elevate the cadences of his voice to

meet the sophistication of the writing (*BL* 2:18). What makes this account even stranger is that Coleridge depicts reciting aloud from memory as *lacking* a cadence—such a helpful mnemonic aid—and argues that sing-song rhythms would only reappear once the text is seen again. This footnote appears to reflect Coleridge’s psychological projection of the anxiety provoked by one’s loss of bearings, a projection mixed with the failed pedagogical or experimental mode—such a mode as Coleridge would also have associated, as we have seen, with the *Lyrical Ballads*.

IV. Cat Twist; or, Sideways Resolutions

Wordsworth’s famous declaration, in the “Preface” to the second edition to *Lyrical Ballads*, that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply,” singles out the poet for both his feeling and his restraint (175). The creative process Wordsworth describes transforms affect—immediate and in this case excessive feeling—into poetry through time spent in unhurried self-reflection. Yet because the value of the poetry thus produced depends critically on the writer’s inherent, “organic sensibility,” not just any leisurely contemplation will do. While the “also” of the buried, final clause might seem to make thought, long and deep, the final stage in the development of a poem, Wordsworth claims in other parts of the *Preface* that “habits of meditation” and “habits of mind” are prerequisites for producing poems with “*purpose*” (175). To transform powerful feeling into poetry worth reading must be both the

special privilege of the natural-born poet and the result of enough dedicated effort as to make poetic thought habitual. Literary production here becomes a routine of poetic athleticism, taken up by the naturally gifted, but built on the cerebral muscle memory that makes thinking an embodied rather than purely intellectual act.

The poet's mix of innate ability and habituated self-regulation contrasts starkly with Wordsworth's depiction of the readers of poetry, whom he treats as largely tasteless, tending towards over-excitability, and potentially irrational. Responding pointedly to the dismal reception of *Lyrical Ballads*'s first edition, Wordsworth identifies in the failure of readers to metabolize excess feeling into regulated thought a symptom of their misguided expectations. He exhorts them to abandon their "pre-determined codes of decision" and to control their excitements. For, according to Wordsworth, the problem with excitement lies not just in its simple abundance. As "an unusual and irregular state of the mind; [in which] ideas and feelings do not in that state succeed each other in accustomed order," excitement disrupts the habituated and foreseeable path of thoughts and feelings by which men are made predictable (181). For this reason, Wordsworth's answer to why the *Lyrical Ballads*'s exploration of "low and rustic life" was not simply written in prose, is that the excitement produced by powerful language makes readers volatile, and must be counterbalanced by the constraint and regulation of meter (174, 181). Along with the containment of feeling that this notion of ideational and metrical "co-presence" presents, there exists a sense of anxiety about the unpredictability of other bodies and other feelings (181). Even as Wordsworth makes it the poet's task to please and delight, he implies that the poet should also enforce, insofar as he is able, the "accustomed order" of readerly

thoughts and feelings—hedging against irrationality and disappointment with structure (181).

As Langan has shown, situating Romanticism in a media history at the midpoint between Walter Ong’s “primary orality” and Alan Liu’s “techno-informatic vanishing point” puts Romantic literature into productive, somewhat anachronistic suspense with questions about the perception and resolution of mediated experience. If proprioception is an interoceptive entanglement, influenced by visual as well as haptic stimuli, then keeping one’s balance means attending to—squinting, straining the eyes, perhaps—objects of perception in order not to lose oneself among them, especially given their structuring power, as Wordsworth recognizes. For Coleridge, the mediating force of poetic meter requires an active grappling in order to stay present; otherwise, sustained exposure to regular poetic meter produces in readers a fog of a normalized and normalizing pleasure, which anesthetizes the senses:

I argue for the effects of metre. As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation; they act powerfully though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in

the dark from the last step of a stair-case, when we had prepared our muscles
for a leap of three or four (*BL* 2:18)

The first part of this literary critical statement corresponds to Wordsworth's statements in the "Preface," by suggesting that poetic meter has a regulating, enlivening effect on the senses. Yet, like alcohol, which might help at first to lubricate a social interaction and, later on, to blur it, Coleridge imagines the poetic cadence that initially animates the reader to become, over time, a background rhythm. Once normalized in this way, the reader expects the meter to remain regular *not* in any conscious sense, but as necessary virtual to the "attention and feelings thus roused" (*BL* 2:18).

What Langan calls the "medium cool" of Romantic poetry—"the sense at once of sensory impoverishment and magical-prosthetic enrichment [produced by media technologies]"—asks how poetic mediation can create both a distanced, anaesthetized readerly experience and make absent scenes feel present (n.pg). Coleridge's description of the drug-like effects of poetic meter exemplifies Langan's answer: "telepathos," or the "transfer of warmth from makers and users to the medium itself" that makes the experience of mediated feeling at a distance "cool" (n.pg). As Langan describes it, such a transfer of "heat" (from reader to the meter, in this case) depends on certain media technologies' capacity for "active" or "passive" engagement. By Coleridge's account, the passive apprehension of meter extends into the dull and expectant passiveness—the "cooling off"—of the inebriated reader himself. In this opiated theory of poetry's power, meter feeds, if not an addicted subconscious, then at the very least one opened to/normalized by aesthetic apprehension.

Like the “person on business from Porlock,” whose interruption truncates “Kubla Khan,” the disappointing end to Coleridge’s dreamy metrical atmosphere is both the sudden intrusion of the everyday and the end of a high. By the substitution of one extended metaphor for another (or, perhaps, merely the pushing of one metaphor to its logical conclusion—stumbling home), Coleridge compares a disappointing interruption to an embodied experience of spatial disorientation. The abrupt break implodes the telepathetic connection between mediated feeling and feeling at a distance, since the mediation (sustained and regular meter) ends, the sense of distance collapses, and the reader returns to the present moment with a lurch. Rather than reprising the reader’s “vivacity” or active aesthetic apprehension, however, in the wake of disappointment Coleridge locates a “lower species of wit...[which] may become a source of momentary amusement” (*BL* 2:18). This “lower” aesthetic puts pressure on the aim with which Coleridge began his investigation into the effects of meter; namely, to refute Wordsworth’s claim that the conventions of poetry and prose can productively intertwine:

The true question must be, whether there are not modes of expression, a construction, and an order of sentences, which are in their fit and natural place in a serious prose composition, but would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry; and, *vice versa*, whether in the language of a serious poem there may not be an arrangement both of words and sentences, and a use and selection of (what are called) figures of speech, both as to their kind, their frequency, their occasions, which on a subject of equal weight would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose. I contend, that in both

cases this unfitness of each for the place of the other frequently will and ought to exist (*BL* 2:18)

Disappointing meter is, for Coleridge, one example of the “unfitness” that characterizes prose conventions in poetry. When the regulating effects of meter are troubled by “[d]ouble and tri-syllable rhymes,” he contends, the reader feels it as a lowering from “serious” poetry (*BL* 2:18).

Langan’s medium cool casts the Romantic poet as a “medium,” who is both affected by and expressive of “absent things as if they were present,” *pace* Wordsworth (“Preface” 595). Yet Wordsworth’s claim for meter’s cooling effect upon the senses, Langan surmises, may evacuate the “noise” of history by the constant flow of poetic cadence. In Goodman’s investigation, noise, in the sense of an interference or excess that accompanies expression, is the “phenomenological verification” of that which exists before and beyond lived experience: “this noise is the noise of history” (*Georgic* 64). Langan compares Wordsworth’s notion of soothing, smoothing metrical effects to the “digital (rather than the analog) encoding of feeling,” in which all the crackly, messy, in-between sounds of a gramophone record give way to the pristine emptiness of a digital recording (“Medium Cool” 9).

Coleridge, whose repudiation of Wordsworth in the *Biographia Literaria* goes some way to pathologizing such meter as inebriation, actually offers a counterpoint to Langan’s concerns by way of example. In Wordsworth’s “The Sailor’s Mother,” Coleridge identifies a tangle of noisy disappointments (considering rhymes of “oddity and strangeness” to be “cognitive noise,” as Goodman might do) and he introduces one stanza in particular that seems especially downward trending (*Coleridge, BL* 2:18; Goodman, *Georgic* 63). However,

the example stanza Coleridge chooses, and with which he means to reveal the “unfitness” of prose conventions in poetry, also, Coleridge admits, is the stanza that comes the closest to fulfilling Wordsworth’s aim of imitating “the real language of men” (“Preface” 176). This exposes the formal innovation made possible by courting affective disappointment, but it also reveals that the digital silence of successful, regular meter cannot capture what feels like, to Coleridge at least, the truth of an (historically-situated) adopted vernacular.

“The Sailor’s Mother” is a poem about meeting an itinerant stranger, who is revealed to be both impecunious and venerable; she is the mother of a dead sailor who carries with her his last possession, a caged bird. The poem is six stanzas, with each stanza composing a quatrain (in tetrameter) and a couplet (in irregular hexameter). For later eighteenth-century readers, such a form may have been more reminiscent of odes than of narrative verse: the closing hexameter in particular signals a more lyric mode, and both Coleridge and Wordsworth use it in odes including “Dejection: An Ode” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (O’Donnell 54). Thus, the poem’s sophisticated form contrasts with its pedestrian content and narrative diction, and this creates, for Coleridge, an conundrum of taste and convention. How to approach such a poem? Empathizing first with the reader, Coleridge contemplates strategies from “disproportioning the emphasis,” in order to feel the awkward rhymes more intensely, to overlooking the rhymes entirely—the easier route, he claims, “in sentences so exclusively colloquial” (*BL* 2:18). Inquiring after the poet’s intent, Coleridge singles out the second stanza, which is characterized by “an abrupt downfall”:

I would ask the poet whether he would not have felt an abrupt downfall in
these verses from the preceding stanza?

The ancient spirit is not dead;
Old times, thought I, are breathing there;
Proud was I that my country bred
Such strength, a dignity so fair:
She begged an alms, like one in poor estate;
I looked at her again, nor did my pride abate.

It must not be omitted, and is perhaps worthy of notice, that those stanzas furnish the only fair instance that I have been able to discover in all Mr. Wordsworth's writings, of an actual adopting, or true imitation, of the real and very language of low and rustic life, freed from provincialisms (*BL* 2:18)

For Coleridge, this low stanza epitomizes how awkward metrical arrangements produce a disappointing readerly experience, but the stanza is also, critically, one in which abrupt lowering makes space for a certain kind of truth telling. When the dissembling of “authentic” rustic language comes up against the distanced, telepathetic readerly experience, it destabilizes the “dis- or half-engagement” that Langan identifies in those who coolly apprehend scenes of intense feeling without feeling too much themselves (“Medium Cool”). In this abrupt break from “cool” aesthetic apprehension there emerges a struggle with a stanza of uncommonly common language, which moves Coleridge towards something lower: not “wit,” in this case, but a self-conscious appreciation of a convincing imitation.

That such “low” poetry emerges from the misuse of prose conventions in poems, especially in the case of the *Lyrical Ballads*'s prosaic language, Coleridge is sure. Yet Coleridge's critique also suggests that these descents contribute to formal and

representational innovation, and his example of Wordsworth’s “The Sailor’s Mother” identifies in the most egregious instance of disappointing meter the means by which Wordsworth achieves his goal of imitating “the real language of men” (“Preface” 595). In Coleridge’s refutation of Wordsworth, therefore, the affective descents that lead to disappointment mobilize if not something good, then at the very least something novel—the readerly struggle that Coleridge happily glosses. Affective disappointment here encapsulates both an abrupt break from pleasure and a new kind of readerly engagement, one neither vibrant and immediate nor dull and estranged, but spatial and ever so slightly deferred. Caught by the gravitational force of the poem’s sudden downfall, the reader’s proprioceptive calculation—like a gymnastic body regaining its bearings just before landing—occurs in the space between the sudden interruption of pleasure and the next line or stanza. It is the split-second reaction that decides whether or not to “disproportion the emphasis”; or, the poetic equivalent of cat twist.⁵⁴

In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge’s discomfort with many of the lyrical ballads emerges not merely from metrical jolts, but from the encounters with difference that these jolts help express, and which he is mortified to observe have been taken up by a new generation of poets and “admirers” (1:4). As Coleridge is at pains to highlight, what might

⁵⁴ “Cat twist” is a term used in gymnastic sports to describe a twist, or spin, performed by varying the movements of the upper and lower portions of the body; that is, by bending the body while it is in motion, which initiates a twist without using torque.



Figure 1.

Image from Hardy Fink, “An Insight into the Biomechanics of Twisting,” *Technique* 17.2 (1997): 38.

have been overlookable failures and small imperfections in the original, assume the status of derivative doggerel, a “bare and bald counterfeit of poetry” when so reprised (*BL* 1:4). From his later perspective, Coleridge predicts that critics would have overlooked many of these faults, and the collection’s notoriety would have likewise diminished, were it not for the prefaces, which draw attention to their deliberate inclusion. Ironically, then, Coleridge’s disappointed orientation towards the *Lyrical Ballads* has as its literary-critical antecedent the revisionary paratexts of Wordsworth’s prefaces, which constitute an anticipation of readerly disappointment that, as we have seen, challenges the later Coleridgean understanding of where disappointment inheres and what it brings to the work of poetry.

Chapter 3

Hölderlin's Downturns: the Sense of Disappointment

...like wandering phantoms I live now
Must live, I fear, and the rest long has seemed senseless to me

—Friedrich Hölderlin⁵⁵

I. Disappointment, Diffuse and in Excess

In 1963, at the convention of the Hölderlin Society in Berlin, Theodor Adorno delivered a speech that changed the way most scholars approach Friedrich Hölderlin's poetry. It was, reportedly, quite a scene.⁵⁶ Adorno spent the first twenty minutes excoriating Martin Heidegger's essentializing elucidations of Hölderlin's poetics and, in the time remaining, proposed his own radical alternative: the recognition of "Hölderlin's genuine relationship to reality, critical and utopian" ("Parataxis" 115). Adorno's furious polemic, according to Robert Savage, would go on to "rehabilitate [Hölderlin's] poetry *as itself polemical*, directed against an existing society in view of a better one" (100, emphasis in original). Although the paper that Adorno subsequently published has been much contested in the decades since, Adorno's virulent defense of Hölderlin as a man who, however idealistically, desired to intervene in the "real world" still challenges scholars to

⁵⁵ "Menon's Lament for Diotima" [*Menons Klagen um Diotima*], trans. Michael Hamburger, in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments* (London: Anvil, 1994).

⁵⁶ See Robert Savage's description of the competing accounts of what went on at the 1963 meeting of the *Hölderlin Gesellschaft* in "Polemic: Adorno, 'Parataxis'" in *Hölderlin After the Catastrophe: Heidegger, Adorno, Brecht*. The ideas under attack can be found in Martin Heidegger's *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* [*Elucidations Concerning Hölderlin's Poetry*] (1951), a collection derived from Heidegger's lecture materials and shorter publications from between 1936 and 1943.

explore the poet's relation to a world that, Hölderlin believed, necessitated intervention.

In this chapter I will suggest that for Hölderlin the disappointing resistance of the world to intervention, poetic or otherwise, finds expression in the tonal “downturns” that characterize his poetry. Over the course of his poetic career, the failure of language to reliably produce the conditions it expresses became an irresolvable quandary for the poet, one that his theory of poetic composition through tonal alternations went only so far in addressing.⁵⁷ Hölderlin's repeated attempts at reconciling this conundrum nevertheless generates a quality of downward momentum in his writings, which emerges gradually as a shading of negative affect, darkening and sometimes eclipsing the poet's attempts to grapple productively with his own private trepidations and with the social and political dissatisfactions of his age. Downturns, as I read them, are specific formal events that occur when a line or stanza shifts from one tone (which, if sustained, might preserve a sense of optimism) to another tone and, in so doing, reveals not only that poem's darker, more dissatisfying or melancholy aspects, but also—and more distressingly—that those aspects are in-built: ever-present and inevitable. This chapter argues that such downturns, as they destabilize but also exceed Hölderlin's calculated poetic formulas, create dissonances and drops in register that are expressive of an encompassing “sense” of disappointment. This

⁵⁷ Although Hölderlin published none of his philosophical works during his lifetime, between 1794 and 1800 he wrote a series of brief essays and fragments addressing the Idealist concern over the disjunction between philosophical abstraction and the materiality of existence. In some of these texts, as well as in letters to his friends and schoolmates Christian Ludwig Neuffer, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and others, Hölderlin details an extended theory of musical tones, which maps the expression of tension and resolution in poetry. In poetry, Hölderlin dictates that these shifts should occur at the level of form, through changes in poetic language, diction and syntax. In his novel, *Hyperion, Or the Hermit in Greece* (*Hyperion; oder Der Eremit in Griechenland*) (1797 and 1799), the shifts occur in content: the three main characters portray the three tones, and their interactions with one another constitute the alternations.

sense surpasses Hölderlin's hyperformalized poetry, and offers, if not an intervention, then the affective indication of a world that he thought needed one.

As more recent scholarship has made way for Hölderlin as a poet, philosopher, translator and theoretician, whose "poetological" project had specific aims and agendas, attention has turned to his unfinished philosophical writings.⁵⁸ One major discovery of the last half century has been a tripartite model of poetic composition, the so-called "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones," which describes how, by shifting between tones at predetermined intervals, poetry can initiate different affective states in readers.⁵⁹ In one fragment, Hölderlin maps out in tabular form how every poem should move through the three tones.⁶⁰ In another, he lays out the poetic genres of lyric, tragedy, and epic with their corresponding affective qualities: naïve (lyric) poetry and sentimental feeling, heroic (tragic) poetry and passion, and ideal (epic) poetry and sensuousness.⁶¹ Most scholars agree that this doctrine establishes that Hölderlin's interest in an aesthetics of practical, moral action, like that of Friedrich Schiller's *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794),

⁵⁸ Thomas Pfau uses the term "poetological" to describe the condition of Hölderlin's writings as a "response to the specific philosophico-historical debate of his age" ("Introduction" xviii).

⁵⁹ Scholars have forged these connections across multiple fragments; there is no central, finished text that makes clear Hölderlin's alliances between form, content and affect. See Cyrus Hamlin's "The Philosophy of Poetic Form: Hölderlin's Theory of Poetry and the Classical German Elegy" for more detailed explanation.

⁶⁰ Two schools of thought have emerged over the tones' application to and characteristics in poetry: Lawrence Ryan's formalist approach, which is the model popular in North American scholarship, and the so-called literary anthropology of Ulrich Gaier, which is the model used by the *Hölderlin Gesellschaft* (Hölderlin Society). Refer to Fig.1 at the end of this chapter.

⁶¹ The fragment in question, *Über die Verfahrungsweise des Poetischen Geistes* has been variously translated by Hamlin as "On the Processes of the Poetic Spirit" and by Pfau as "On the Operations of the Poetic Spirit." For the original German, I refer to Beißner's Stuttgart edition, and for English translations I primarily refer to Pfau. In this case, the comparison between the two provides the most thorough explanation of the relations of tones, affects and genres.

extends to Hölderlin's own poetics. Moreover, the dynamic shifts between tones, best exemplified by the fragment "Modulation of Tones" [*Wechsel der Töne*], have led scholars to conclude that Hölderlin was influenced by, and indeed influential for, the development of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's model of dialectical reasoning. Unlike Hegel and Schiller, however, Hölderlin's theory does not systematize its own dynamic perpetuation *ad infinitum*. Rather, the "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones" presents a complete and stable poetic vision, into which progress and growth are in-built, but also circumscribed.

In "The Calculation of the Poet," Jean-Luc Nancy develops "sense" as a concept that takes into account both the calculated nature of Hölderlin's tonal alternations (how the doctrine "makes sense" in its precision and consistency) and the affective states that Hölderlin hopes it will engender (an embodied sense). Nancy develops this double understanding of "sense" in order to refer to insights that are "ungraspable" by rational thought, and can only be apprehended tacitly (50). Reading Hölderlin's poetry triggers these felt insights because, following the doctrine, the poet orchestrates the formal and metrical dynamics of his poems specifically in order to cause them.⁶² In this way, what

⁶² With this assertion, I am invoking a well-established academic consensus, one that arose as mid-century scholars began reading together Hölderlin's literary works and his fragmentary philosophical writings. In the past four decades Hölderlin has received much attention by scholars seeking to explore his literary and philosophical import outside the mid-century focus on his contribution to the history of Idealist philosophy in Germany. Literary scholars like James H. Donelan, Angela Esterhammer, Ulrich Gaier, Cyrus Hamlin, Thomas Pfau, Jean-Luc Nancy and Eric Santner have moved towards investigations treating Hölderlin's poetic and philosophical achievements as complex, interrelated and innovative works. For Hölderlin's archive this has meant a turn away from Martin Heidegger's claims that a unified and essential poetic language undergirds the later poems, as well as a trenchant dismissal of what Paul de Man identifies as the "persistent tendency to treat Hölderlin as a prophetic and eschatological poet, the precursor of a new historical era that his work helps to prepare" ("Hölderlin's Riddle" 211). The fragments that make up Hölderlin's so-called "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones," have taken on a new significance in the work of these critics and many others.

Nancy calls “the sense of sense” presages the significant conclusions of Goodman, who builds on Alan Liu’s exploration of William Wordsworth’s “sense of history” in order to explore that history which “leaks” out of poetry’s affective “excess[es] and dissonance[s]” —a sense, in the words of Liu, which is “not yet formulated into an idea” (Goodman 9; Liu 5). By Nancy’s account, the ungraspable sense in Hölderlin’s poetry is an experience of simultaneous affect and consequence: “a sighting” and the moment of insight itself (50).⁶³ Here Nancy differs slightly from the focus on affective discomfiture in studies from Goodman, Favret and others, by maintaining an allegiance to Hölderlin’s own oft-stated ideal of unity or “wholeness” [*Gesamtheit*].⁶⁴ Thus the poet’s calculated insights, or the coincidence of a formalized “sense” made by the poems with the fullness of their affective resolution (the feeling of that sense), work together, for Nancy, to generate something like harmony: a “result” that is complete and self-evident (“Calculation” 44).

Designating this “oblique” or tacit way of knowing, Nancy’s “sense” corresponds closely to the early German Romantic appeal for the epistemological independence of feeling from reason (“Calculation” 45). It aligns with what Pfau has identified as a major turning point in the history of feeling: Romanticism’s attempt to differentiate feeling from reason in order to understand feeling *not* as reason’s “anticipation in a lesser key” but

⁶³ As Goodman makes clear as she launches her investigation of the affect of history, there are passages in Liu that are “wonderfully suggestive” of this type of thinking, in which the “pre-ideational consciousness resembles the ‘feeling’ of history-in-motion” (5).

⁶⁴ This idea has received much notice due to Hölderlin’s fragment “Judgment and Being” [*Urteil und Sein*]. Nancy refers to the Preface to *The Death of Empedokles* [*Grund zum Empedokles*], and a very recent article from William Davis, entitled “One with Everything: Hölderlin on Acrocorinth,” explores wholeness in relation to *Hyperion*.

rather as “a qualitatively different form of awareness” (*Moods* 27).⁶⁵ Pfau offers Hölderlin’s tonal doctrine as paradigmatic of the ways in which “poetry encrypts history” through feeling; specifically, how a “poetic text encrypts an anterior reflective disposition (*Stimmung*) [or “mood”] in the alien modality of a voice (*Stimme*)...[so that the poem] no longer purports to ‘express’ a feeling but constructively realizes feeling as an objective aesthetic artifact” (*Moods* 70, 71). Hölderlin’s poetological project—shaped as it was by the social and historical conditions under which it was conceived, hoping as it did to produce reliable and affective readerly responses from words on a page, and failing, as I will discuss, to bind this feeling within his complex system—presents us with many such sites of historically-telling encryption. Yet, as Goodman reminds us, “the significance of some kind of ‘feeling’ (‘sense,’ ‘hurt’) as a mode of historical manifestation” lies in its ability to provide the grounds to “unthink” the understanding of history as a parade of ideas (Goodman 4; Liu 47). Picking up “sense” where Liu leaves off, Goodman focuses less on what the poetry makes legible as a complete, historically situated “disposition,” and more on the “affect or cognitive dissonance [that] registers those unfixed elements of history” (Goodman 8).

What Nancy’s conception of sense takes for granted, and what recent Hölderlin scholarship has not emphasized, is that the coincidence of Hölderlin’s calculated sense with the history of feeling established by the literary monoliths of the *Sturm und Drang* are far from aligned. Those feeling-states to which Hölderlin declares his allegiance—sentiment, passion and sensuousness—are concepts defiantly “critical and utopian,” but

⁶⁵ Pfau establishes Hölderlin as one of the main figures, Kant, Novalis, and Hegel among them, to present alternative models of feeling’s efficacy.

they are not exemplary, I would argue, of the more radical and pervasive affective force that animates his poetics. As *Wechsel der Töne* indicates, the caesura [*Katastrophe*], which comes mid-line, is one moment of transition between tones. The space between stanzas is probably another.⁶⁶ In these momentary pauses, the poems contract long enough for a realization to occur that exceeds calculation: not the recognition of the feeling of the poem's current tone, or even of the next tone to come, but the realization of the tragic tone's always already coming around again. No matter how sensuous the epic, or how sentimental the lyric, it is this proleptic understanding of an animating downwardness, a volitional, tragic force that suffuses poems like "Menon's Lament for Diotima" [*Menons Klagen um Diotima*] and "The Traveller" [*Der Wanderer*], which allows some dissonant sense to seep out, as a still more diffuse and capacious register of feeling. Hölderlin's sense of disappointment depends on the recursions upon which the "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones" is built, but it also surpasses them as it emerges from the descent towards tragedy that shades each tonal shift.

This chapter begins by establishing the poet's interest in the dynamic possibilities *within* apparent pauses, like caesuras and the space between stanzas, through a

⁶⁶ Ryan and Gaier disagree as to whether a poem always performs two tones simultaneously or seeks from the outset to resolve into a single tone, with Ryan interpreting Hölderlin's marginalia to mean that the *Kunstcharakter* (artistic effect) of the entire poem follows that of the first stanza. Thus for Ryan the tones are singular. In contrast, Gaier claims the tones are inherently double, it being possible to break down stanzas much further in order to find tonal alternations between words and sounds as well as at the level of line and stanza. Gaier's *Aufmerksamkeits-Ebenen. Ein Hölderlin-Lehrgang von Ulrich Gaier* (*Levels of Attention: A Hölderlin Training Course by Ulrich Gaier*) is designed to teach contemporary readers of Hölderlin to distinguish the tonal qualities of a poem on multiple structural levels, including phonetically and by identifying certain key words. Hamlin and most other critics follow Ryan's simpler version, and do not seek to delve further into the composition of the tones than to mark the fact of their existence; Hamlin admits "very little, if anything, can be gained from an understanding of the poem based on such abstraction" (304).

consideration of a philosophical fragment in which the “feeling of freedom” [*Gefühl von Freiheit*] is a Spinozist ideal of movement-within-stasis. This fragment suggests a philosophical basis for the characterization of apparent immobility as a qualitative, affective force. Situating the fragment alongside key social and intellectual features of early Romantic Germany, including well-studied contexts like *Bildung* and the Romantic cult of friendship, in addition to that which has received less attention, namely, the influence of the *Hofmeisterstum* (the institution of house-tutorships) on young German intellectuals, I explore how Hölderlin’s development as a poet coincided with an attachment to the feeling, and specifically the feeling of freedom, that is not just possible but necessary within constraint. Drawing on Judith Halberstam’s work on failure as a form of non-normative resistance, I consider these poetic downturns as both descending and “dissenting” from the Swabian poet’s religious and educational upbringing, as they embed radical notions of movement and stasis in traditional poetic forms. By revealing the caesura’s pivotal moment not as interruption but as *torque*, it becomes possible to consider how, in the elegy “Menon’s Lament for Diotima,” downturns generate the sense of disappointment *as* potentiality for resistance—as a space for striving or for “unthinking” intervention as an exclusively affirmative act (Halberstam 2).⁶⁷

⁶⁷ In order to preserve Hölderlin’s intricacies of language, critics in English, like David Constantine, have often chosen to leave him un-translated. Yet this means that Hölderlin, more than his contemporaries Hegel and Schelling, has remained seemingly off-limits to North American literary scholars. Inasmuch as Friedrich Beißner’s *Stuttgart Editions*, which collects all of Hölderlin’s letters, fragments, and poems, reinvigorated interest in the poet throughout the German-speaking academy after the Second World War, no comparably comprehensive translation exists for English speakers. The result of this dearth for my study is twofold. First, although I use Beißner’s *Stuttgart Editions* for all Hölderlin’s texts in German, I employ a variety of English translations, including my own where no scholarly translation exists. Second, my view of Hölderlin has been much shaped by Constantine’s thorough and scholarly biography of the poet and my time spent at the

II. A World That Necessitated Intervention

The question of Hölderlin's desire to intervene through poetry in the "real world" is predicated on the importance he gave to feeling powerfully as a form of freedom, self-expression, and community. Hölderlin began developing as a poet on the heels of the literary innovations of the *Sturm und Drang*, during which time feeling powerfully was not only considered as an alternative to philosophical systems privileging reason, but was also beginning to be understood, as Pfau has shown, as a "qualitatively different form of awareness" (*Moods* 27). According to biographer David Constantine, as a youth the poet "inherited without question that legitimation of feeling over reason which his literary predecessors had achieved," believing that feeling powerfully was an overwhelming and prodigious "gift" for which he was often reverent and thankful (*Hölderlin* 9).⁶⁸ While we might focus on such representative works of the *Sturm und Drang* as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's wildly popular *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*] (1774) and Friedrich Schiller's *The Robbers* [*Die Räuber*] (1781), both of which preceded Hölderlin's poetic career and set critical precedents for the young poet, during Hölderlin's education at the Tübingen *Stift*, or Protestant Seminary school, he was exposed to philosophical debates that were also critical to his development, as the philosophical fragments reveal.

Universität Konstanz and the mentorship of Ulrich Gaier. This means that Hölderlin's fraught biography, which has long been treated with excessive care by those worried that the poet's final mental instability would undermine the authority of his poems, is here employed as freely as that of William Wordsworth, John Keats, or any number of British Romantic poets whose life-events most literary scholars feel more than comfortable mobilizing.

⁶⁸ Given that Hölderlin grew up in Nürtingen, under Württemberg's powerful Pietism, his tendency to treat powerful feelings with a kind of reverential enthusiasm might also be attributed, Constantine argues, to the fact that as a child, Hölderlin was taught that feeling, whether triggered by religious art or by nature, always comes from God (*Hölderlin* 9).

Informing my view of Hölderlin's poetic downturns as "dissenting" from the intellectual, and even vocational, constraints prescribed by the *Konsistorium*, or church authority, Hölderlin's fragments resist the official dogma of the *Stift* by taking seriously two strains of radical thought that had been disputed or "domesticated" by his teachers there: the *Ethics* of Benedict de Spinoza, and Immanuel Kant's first critique (Henrich 40).

At the Tübingen *Stift*, Hölderlin was part of an unofficial, radical student majority at a time when the school was officially anti-revolutionary and repressive.⁶⁹ In the years leading up to his graduation in 1793, one major philosophical innovation with which the *Stift* was still coming to terms was the radical skepticism of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or the First Critique (1781). There was a strong divide between the conservative, older generation of the professors, and the enthusiasm, or even *Kantomanie* (Kant Mania), of many of the students (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 21). From the perspective of the professoriate, "no one could teach philosophy without working out his relation to Kant's teaching" because "Kant had shaken [the professors'] confidence in non-Kantian methods of proof" (Henrich 40, 49). This led, paradoxically, to the entrenchment of Kantian methodologies at the same time as Kant's system was being injected with conservative theology in order to fit the curricula (Henrich 49). Even so, the radicalism of Kant's skepticism persisted, and introduced to the *Stift* ideas that made Kant's admirers, Hölderlin among them, "difficult" students to teach (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 21). Kant's argument—that an individual's sense of morality is the only basis upon which to choose right or wrong action—makes freedom of choice depend upon an innate faculty of reason, rather than

⁶⁹ "There can be no doubt," Constantine writes, "that among the students the preponderance of opinion was enthusiastically revolutionary and pro-French" (*Hölderlin* 20).

extrinsic motivators found in nature or society. This was naturally of interest to students who, like Hölderlin's roommate, Hegel, felt Tübingen to be "intent on keeping the Enlightenment firmly outside the city walls" and, like Hölderlin himself, felt the *Stift* to be a place of "oppression, injustice, and interference in personal liberty" (Pinkard 38; qtd in Constantine, *Hölderlin* 21).⁷⁰

For Hölderlin, carving out a space for liberty within the *Stift* meant forming bonds with like-minded students with whom he could pursue the kinds of philosophical questions not entertained by the Seminary's official curricula. Hölderlin and Hegel were part of a precocious social circle that included their roommate, Friedrich Schelling, as well as older students Christian Ludwig Neuffer, Rudolf Magenau and Carl Immanuel Diez. Their letters reveal this *Freundschaftskreis* (friendship circle) to have been characterized by a fierce intimacy, which has been variously attributed to the influence of the Romantic "cult of

⁷⁰ Hölderlin graduated at the end of 1793, the year that saw the regicide of Louis XVI and the beginning of the Reign of Terror, as well as the murder of the radical revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat in his bathtub by the Girondist Charlotte Corday. Although the poet and his peers were largely in favor of "*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*," they were also aware of the terrible violence suffered in the pursuit of those ideals. In a letter to his half-brother, Hölderlin reacts to the news of Marat's death by calling him "the disgraceful tyrant" and invoking the goddess Nemesis to see to it that Marat's associates also get what they deserve (qtd. in Constantine, *Hölderlin* 22). By allying himself with Corday and the more moderate Girondists, however, Hölderlin reveals both his idealism and his aversion to the violence of the Terror. Hegel, like Hölderlin, was sympathetic towards the moderate Girondists revolutionaries and, though news of the atrocities of the Terror did not sit well with him, Hegel continued to believe that change of a revolutionary nature was necessary step along the road to freedom in both France and Germany (Pinkard 152). From the perspective of Hölderlin and his contemporaries, however, for the radical and violent French Jacobins freedom meant the annihilation of all existing social and political structures in order to make room for a new order (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 22). In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) Hegel would go on to condemn such extremes, arguing that "[i]n their unfettered freedom, [individuals] become elemental beings raging madly against one another in a frenzy of destructive activity" (292). Instead, Hegel felt that some semblance of freedom within the established social or political order was possible.

friendship,” the lack of privacy at the *Stift*, and the sense of isolation felt by gifted students far from the intellectual life of Jena.⁷¹ According to Priscilla Haydon-Roy, friendship was what allowed Hölderlin and his classmates to resist from within a system that actively strived to suppress new ideas (198). In Adorno’s estimation, the effect on Hölderlin of these friendships was to allow the formation of an “attitude” towards thought, which made the poet feel that he was part of a larger movement dedicated to real social and political change:

Neither the German Idealist movement nor any explicitly philosophical movement is a narrowly conceptual phenomenon; rather, it represents an “attitude of consciousness to objectivity”; fundamental experiences press for expression in the medium of thought. It is those, and not merely the conceptual apparatus and technical terms, that Hölderlin shares with his friends (“Parataxis” 120-121)

⁷¹ The Romantic “cult of friendship,” in which passionate and sympathetic bonds between friends were idealized and even venerated, arose in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany, just as in Britain and elsewhere. In Hölderlin’s novel, *Hyperion, Or the Hermit in Greece* [*Hyperion; oder Der Eremit in Griechenland*] (1797 and 1799), the friendship between Hyperion and Alabanda exemplifies the effusiveness and rapture with which such friendships were often represented. (“Alabanda flew to me [says Hyperion] and embraced me, and his kisses penetrated to my soul. ‘Companion in the fight!’ he cried, ‘dear brother! oh, now I have a hundred arms!’” (*Hyperion* 22)). Building on such examples, Priscilla Haydon-Roy argues that Hölderlin “believed that through the strength friendship gave [him and his roommates,] they could contribute towards educating and freeing humanity” (191). Haydon-Roy has gone so far as to argue that the “sense of isolation” felt by Hölderlin and his friends in Tübingen “as the social bonds created by church and state were questioned” meant that such friendships could even be treated as “the surrogate of religion” (198). The question of privacy was another major concern. In 1790, Hölderlin, Neuffer and Magenau, for example, formed a private group called the *Aldermannsbund*, in order to discuss literary topics, and to read and critique one another’s poetry (Haydon-Roy 191), while the three roommates, Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling, were known to have used Kantian terminology as “code words” in their communications with one another (Pinkard 37).

Adorno here suggests that what Hölderlin “shares with his friends” is something like Williams’s “structures of feeling”: a social experience that, while still “in process...[was] taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis...[reveals] its emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics” (132). The “fundamental experiences” that press for expression are those that eventually become the tenets of German Idealism. Whilst caught in it, however, Hölderlin’s experience is one that legitimizes the epistemological value of feeling, so that what “presses” for poetic and philosophical expression is uniquely Hölderlin’s, but is also valued by his friends and the philosophers they admire.⁷²

Meanwhile, at the *Stift*, the professoriate’s dedicated efforts at bending Kant’s philosophy to fit their theology was having the effect, according to Dieter Henrich, of pushing the students to seek other, “deeper” means for preserving Kant’s radicalism (48-49). In a letter to Hegel of 4 February 1795, Schelling complains, “we expected everything from philosophy and believed that the shock it imparted even to minds in Tübingen would not fade so soon...[but] such strong theological concoctions... soon rise up healthier and stronger than ever. Every possible dogma is now stamped a postulate of practical reason” (qtd in Henrich 48-49). In response, Schelling turned to Spinoza, whose fraught relation to the *Stift* was longstanding, as Jonathan Israel has shown. In 1710, the chancellor of the

⁷² When Hegel left the *Stift* early, before his final examinations, to take up a tutorship in Bern, Hölderlin wrote in a letter to his half-brother: “My affections are now less directed toward particular individuals. The object of my love is the entire human race, though not, of course, as we so often find it, namely in a condition of corruption, servility, and inertia...I love the race of coming centuries. For this is my deepest hope, the faith that keeps me strong and vital: our grandchildren will have it better than we, freedom must finally come, and virtue will better flourish in the warmth of freedom’s sacred light than in the ice-cold zone of despotism” (qtd in Santner, *Hyperion* xii).

school lodged an academic disputation over Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in which he "depicts *Spinocismus* as the ultimate distillation of all that most fatally threatens Christian society" (Israel 635-636). Not much had changed by the 1790s, and it was under these conditions that Hölderlin was probably introduced to the thought of Spinoza as a possible precursor to the thought of Kant.⁷³

Evidence of Hölderlin's interest in Spinoza is found in his letters and philosophical fragments. In an early fragment, "Considering Jacobi's *On the Theory of Spinoza*" [*Zu Jakobis über die Lehre des Spinoza*], Hölderlin summarizes Spinoza's conatus, or striving to exist, as the "feeling of freedom" [*Gefühl von Freiheit*], or a feeling of movement-within-apparent-stasis:

Spinoza explains our feeling of freedom through the example of a stone which thinks and knows that it is itself endeavouring to further its movement as much as it can [*Spinoza erläutere unser Gefühl von Freiheit durch das Beispiel eines Steins, welcher dächte und wüßte, daß er sich bestrebt, seine Bewegung, so viel er kann, fortzusezen. Ep. LXII. Op. Posth. P. 584 et 585*] (Beißner 209; my trans.)

Hölderlin preserves the original source of this quote, a letter (#62) from Spinoza to G. H. Schaller of October 1674, which suggests that Hölderlin either consulted the collected letters, or that he meant to. This fragment appears to comprise notes Hölderlin took while reading Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's widely regarded meditation on the thought and

⁷³ Heinrich argues that, during this time, "the question regarding a possible connection between Kantian philosophy and the ideas of Spinoza was of equal urgency to Fichte, Schelling, Novalis, Hölderlin, Hegel, and many lesser figures" (73). Margaethe Wegenast, in *Hölderlins Spinoza-Rezeption*, records the first mention of Spinoza by Hölderlin in a letter to his mother of February 1791 (7).

influence of the philosopher.⁷⁴ In it, Hölderlin attempts to interpret Jacobi’s “love” [*liebe*] of Spinoza’s philosophy, and the fragments are mediated by what Hölderlin gleaned from Jacobi’s own predilections and motivations for engaging with the philosopher. What Spinoza offers Jacobi, Hölderlin writes, is “the complete knowledge that certain things cannot be proven; and that faced with this, one must not shut one’s eyes, but rather take things how one finds them” [*daß sich gewisse Dinge nicht entwickeln lassen: vor denen man darum die Augen nicht zudrücken muß, sondern sie nehmen, so wie man sie findet*] (Beißner 207; my trans.).

It is unclear whether Hölderlin agrees with what he perceives as Jacobi’s aversion to absolute skepticism, but the poet is interested in that feeling—love—and the leeway Jacobi grants Spinoza because of it: Jacobi “pulls himself back from a philosophy, which makes complete skepticism necessary” [*Jakobi zieht sich aus seiner Philosophie zurück, die den vollkommenen Skeptizismus notwendig macht*] but still focuses on the “positive” aspects of Spinoza’s “peculiar” thought [*positiven...Eigentümlichkeit*] (Beißner 208; my trans.). The notion of the stone’s striving as the felt experience of freedom makes matter, not intellect or even action, constitutive of consciousness, so that love too might tell us something about Spinoza’s philosophy. As Hölderlin reports, “Thought is not the source of substance; rather substance is the source of thought” [*Das Denken ist nicht die Quelle der Substanz; sondern die Substanz ist die Quelle des Denkens*] (Beißner 209; my trans.). This fragment, as it reveals Hölderlin’s awareness of Spinoza and conative force, underscores the poet’s preoccupation with feeling as a legitimating force for evaluating philosophy.

However, in a second, probably later fragment, Hölderlin describes the “law of

⁷⁴ Page numbers are given, and each entry is numbered—for instance, Hölderlin begins “1. Lessing was a Spinozist. pag. 2” [*1. Lessing war ein Spinozist. pag. 2*] (my translation/ German: Beißner 211).

freedom” [*Gesetz der Freiheit*] as an accident of fate (Pfau, *Theory* 33; Beißner 211). Although Hölderlin claims that this law can only be known through a state of “attunement” [*gestimmt zu sein*], which seems to imply a receptivity to being moved by passion forces like those of Spinoza, this fragment differs in its attempt to synthesize Kant’s more recent thought (Pfau, *Theory* 33/ German: Beißner 211).⁷⁵ According to Pfau, this is one of three seminal fragments that emerged out of Hölderlin’s interest in Kant’s aesthetics and that together evince the poet’s movement towards dialectical thought (“Introduction” 11):

[t]he law of freedom, however, rules without any regard for the help of nature.

Nature may or may not be conducive to its enactment...Indeed, it presupposes a resistance in nature, otherwise it would not rule [*Der Gesetz der Freiheit aber gebietet, ohne alle Rücksicht auf die Hülfe der Natur. Die Natur mag zu Ausübung desselben förderlich sein, oder nicht, es gebietet. Vielmehr setzt es einen Widerstand in der Natur voraus, sonst würde es nicht gebieten*] (Pfau, *Theory* 33; Beißner 211).

When Hölderlin asserts that freedom and nature are at odds with one another, he seems to return again to the idea that freedom is a force, but it is one that, rather than existing within or constituting the material world, subsumes and dominates it. Here freedom faces resistance from the world and, within this tension, reveals itself to be more powerful than nature.

William Davis has argued that Hölderlin’s early philosophical writings include his poems and the early epistolary novel, *Hyperion*, which the poet meant not just to “embody” but to “be philosophy” (emphasis in original 62). *Hyperion*, which was published in two

⁷⁵ Pfau indicates that through orthographic peculiarities Beißner has dated the text no later than November 1794.

parts in 1797 and 1799, presents Hölderlin's most sustained expression of the tensions between ideals of freedom and the resistance of the world to change in the face of revolution, war, and suffering. The novel's eponymous protagonist is a visionary, whose fervent Hellenism leads to his desire for social and religious renovations that would render his native Greece unrecognizable. Hyperion is also young, over-enthusiastic, often naïve, easily swayed by the opinions of others and still more easily deterred by their admonitions. In a letter to Bellarmin, the novel's epistolary addressee, Hyperion laments, "Oh that I had never acted! By how many hopes should I be the richer!—" before beginning to recount his tragic tale (3). The narrative culminates with Hyperion's loss of faith in himself and in humanity when he attempts to lead part of the failed emancipation of the Greeks from Turkish rule in 1770 and witnesses the terrifyingly brutal behavior of men in war: horrors that his words are not powerful enough to stop.

The novel is an elegiac working-through of disappointment at the level of language, which presages the three tones (naïve, ideal, and heroic) in the temperaments of its main characters. Hyperion's mentor, Adamas, is naïve; his closest friend, Alabanda, is heroic; and his love interest, Diotima, is ideal. Hyperion himself is most often heroic, although he vacillates between the tones throughout. This self-described "dissonance" [*Dissonanz*] emerges from the disconnect between his idealism and earthly reality, or from the powerlessness of his language to enact change (40). According to Angela Esterhammer, failed speech acts underpin the story's central dilemma, which is that Hyperion "senses that it lies within his reach to harness the efficacy of language, but [his] tragedy is precisely that he fails to take up the role of one whose words are effective in changing his world" (193). Indeed, all three of Hyperion's interlocutors recognize and exclaim over his

oratorical potential, yet in his enthusiastic disquisitions Hyperion gets so carried away by his own language that he forgets his audience, whose refusal to be convinced throws Hyperion into states of passionate despair.

Developed within the repressive atmosphere of the Tübingen *Stift*, these fragments and the novel together suggest that Hölderlin struggled with a sense of powerlessness that seems coherent with Spinoza's freedom-within-restraint. A Spinozist definition of "the passions" would attribute man's belief in his own freedom to his lack of understanding that his passions result from forces outside his control (3P2S2). In contrast, the second fragment presents "attunement" as a means for recognizing that the "law of freedom" will prevail, even as nature resists freedom. If the novel characterizes these abstractions, then Hyperion, as both letter-writer and the idealistic orator of repeated letdowns, must doubly engage with this tension between the feeling of freedom and worldly resistance. As he narrates his story, he is unable to change the tragic past and, as revolutionary idealist within the story, his speeches are unsuccessful in creating the ideal conditions they express. "Believe me," laments Hyperion near the end of his tale, "and consider that I say it to you from the depths of my soul: speech is a great superfluity" (98). That Hyperion seems to remain "unattuned" (or "dissonant") to the law of freedom is countered, throughout the narrative, by his profound ability to feel deeply—perhaps to experience rather than enact the feeling of freedom.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The hyperbolic intensity of Hyperion's enthusiasms and disappointments is so over the top that critic Kirk Wetters identifies the text's "abyssal comic dimension" (535), while Esterhammer and Edgar Pankow (more convincingly) treat *Hyperion* as an investigation of intersubjective dysfunction, in which the main character is repeatedly unable to overcome the dialogic relationship between the self and other (Esterhammer 193).

III. The Disappointing Resistance of the World

Within three months of graduation from the Tübingen *Stift*, Hölderlin had taken an appointment as a tutor in a private household. In Protestant Swabia, at a time when studying theology meant lifelong commitment to the church authority, or *Konsistorium*, such a decision signified protest but not outright rebellion (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 2-3). Although Hölderlin intended his tutorship to grant him the freedom to pursue poetical and philosophical inquiries (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 3), becoming a *Hofmeister* was not an uncommon pursuit for a young man of good education during the period; it was often seen as a kind of interim between graduation and finding a suitable parish placement (La Vopa 111). This section explores Hölderlin's discouraging experience as a *Hofmeister*, and proposes that its effect upon the poet's conceptions of freedom and self-cultivation finds its way into the downwardness of the fragmentary poems "To the Young Poets" [*An die Jungen Dichter*] and "The Course of Life" [*Lebenslauf*].⁷⁷

The institution known as the *Hofmeistertum* was a ubiquitous and unregulated phenomenon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; abuses of power, to greater or lesser degrees, were discussed, documented and satirized throughout the period (La Vopa 111-135). Yet the *Hofmeistertum* was also a well-established option for recent graduates seeking freedom, and at the time that Hölderlin graduated the market was appropriately hungry for educated tutors to help raise aristocratic or well-off bourgeois children (La Vopa 111). Terry Pinkard surmises that hiring theology students was an especially popular choice because, in addition to providing classical educations and accompanying students on their tours and travels, tutors were expected to offer moral guidance (46). Another

⁷⁷ Michael Hamburger places both fragments' composition somewhere between 1797 and 1799 (25).

reason that theology students were in demand was that, again according to Pinkard, there was an “enormous surplus” of them, making newly graduated theologians an especially economical investment for aristocratic and even bourgeois households (46). In terms of the marketplace, then, the historical moment into which Hölderlin launched himself as a newly educated and newly independent young man is one in which a tutorship, with its hoped-for social mobility and intellectual freedom, was certainly possible, if the fit between *Hofmeister* and household turned out to be a good one.⁷⁸ Yet a family’s *Hofmeister* stood at the hazy crossroads between adopted family member and servant, making the social dynamic in households difficult for some tutors to parse (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 41). Tutors were often paid a pittance but given room and board, which exacerbated their dependence on employers and employers themselves often had unrealistic expectations for the tutor’s accomplishments and abilities (La Vopa 111, 113). Literary representations of tutors during the period offer myriad examples of new hires, unsure of their place in the household hierarchy, overstepping boundaries and being called to order through public shaming (Pinkard 48).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Finding such an appointment, however, was easier said than done. The position of *Hofmeister* proffered, on the one hand, possibilities for contact with powerful and well-connected people, time for intellectual pursuits, opportunities for travel and, as many appointments were in France or Switzerland, the experience of living abroad. A new *Hofmeister* could also regard himself as following in the footsteps of many intellectual giants who had gone before: the list of well-known figures in poetry and philosophy who began their careers as tutors includes Kant (Kuehn 355), Fichte (Heinrich 179), and Herder (Hill 72). In 1795 Schelling would follow suit. Yet this well-trodden path was strewn with stumbling blocks. As Ulrich Gaier remarks, “the Swabian public viewed poetry as a nonsensical pastime—even in the late eighteenth century great writers such as Wieland, Schiller, and Hölderlin had to emigrate” (61).

⁷⁹ La Vopa cites biographical examples from various tutors employed by families of differing social classes, in which the expectations of the aristocrats, bourgeois and even artisans are laughably specific, often outrageous and sometimes lead to cruelty (112-119).

Although Hölderlin left the *Stift* in the middle of December, he travelled on foot from Tübingen to Stuttgart, taking leave of his homeland in the pedestrian fashion that would come to characterize his peripatetic independence.⁸⁰ Having secured a position in a provincial home in Waltershausen teaching a preadolescent boy, Fritz von Kalb, in letters to his mother and friends between 1794 and 1795, Hölderlin claims to be stimulated towards *Bildung*.⁸¹ While there, he studied closely Kant and Fichte's philosophy, composed essays on topics such as freedom and ontology, worked and re-worked his novel, and met various famous thinkers, including Schiller and Goethe (Pfau, "Introduction" xxi; Constantine, *Hölderlin* 42). After a year in Waltershausen, when Hölderlin's mother suggested he return to Swabia and take a clerical position in Nekarshausen, Hölderlin replied, "I think I shan't be in any hurry to leave my present situation. I've the leisure to pursue my own development here, and stimulus to do so too" (qtd in Constantine, *Hölderlin* 42).

Hölderlin's invocation of the twin notions, leisure and personal development, are

⁸⁰ Hölderlin walked for leisure and for health, and he often chose to make long journeys by foot (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 37-42). During his time as a *Hofmeister* in Waltershausen, he complained that he had to get away every once in a while because "the life I lead is—inevitably—such a sedentary one that I might easily fall prey to hypochondria unless every now and then I give the body and spirit some fresh air" (Constantine 1988 43). Hölderlin often undertook walks that were not just pleasant rambles, but serious undertakings. In June of 1794 Hölderlin took a solitary tour that lasted several days in the Rhöngebirge and Fulderland (Constantine 42). Between March and April of 1795, he took a walking tour that included visits to Halle, Dessau and Leipzig (Constantine 400).

⁸¹ *Bildung*, which means "education" and "formation," and has been variously translated as "cultivation" or "culture," refers to a complex process of personal growth and self-improvement through education and experience. For Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, even the most simplistic concept of *Bildung* "brings together shaping and molding, art and culture, education and sociability, and ultimately history and figuration" (36). A *Bildungsreise* is a journey of self-cultivation similar in nature and intent to the British Grand Tour.

meant to suggest that he was pursuing *Bildung*, yet it also recalls Celeste Langan's identification, in *Romantic Vagrancy*, of the paradox of freedom and mobility. Langan, by making analogous the modern liberal subject and the Romantic vagrant—he who is “dispossessed of a stable identity”—is able to discern that “negative liberty” lies in the pretense of the vagrant's mobility as freedom (11-12). For, “walking may *seem* to imply... leisure,” but, as Langan has shown, “freedom as sheer mobilization” is a concept co-terminus with the liberal subject, who feels himself to be free, but who actually moves with the commodity cycle: “‘the freedom to come and go’ become[s] the obligation to mobility” (Langen 13-14, 19). Hölderlin, as a participant in the *Hofmeisterium*, was part of an institution that endlessly circulated young men, treating them as interchangeable household assets. Pinkard's assessment of the theology students' drop in market value makes this point explicit, and La Vopa notes, “the problem facing parents, then, was that cheap labor involved a built-in disadvantage, if not an outright contradiction...the typical tutor, fresh from university [was not actually a tutor]” even though he was being put on the market as such (119).⁸²

Hölderlin's position as a *Hofmeister* was one cordoned off by his pedagogical responsibilities and his dependence on the von Kalbs. What the poet initially regarded as an opportunity for cultivating his own *Bildung* was not, in fact, a state of autonomy. Later in the year, Hölderlin reported to his mother that he needed to walk in order to preserve himself from the mental and physical lethargy of what he referred to as “the hermit life” in Waltershausen, yet he was not free to wander if and when he wished (Constantine,

⁸² By the 1770s, in order to make themselves more marketable as tutors, some students were studying French or other romance languages (La Vopa 119).

Hölderlin 43). As a *Hofmeister* of little means, Hölderlin would find it necessary in the years to come to walk between many tutorial appointments subsequent to his termination from the von Kalbs. The alternative was to return to Swabia and take a parish appointment, which, as Hölderlin wrote to his friend Johann Gottfried Ebel in 1796, would immobilize him and stymie his poetic ambitions: “You [Ebel] perhaps don’t know how dependent we Württemberg theologians are on our Consistorium. Among other things, those gentlemen can dictate how we should live” (qtd in Constantine, *Hölderlin* 57). The poet chose instead vagrancy and the “simulated” freedom of physical movement.⁸³

In Hölderlin’s early poem, “To the Young Poets,” personal disappointments appear to conjure a vision of the common shape of a young poet’s life. The fragmentary, two-stanza ode, which at first offers merely inspiration and advice along practical lines, takes for granted the young poet’s subordinated position:

Quite soon, dear brothers, perhaps our art,

So long in youth-like ferment, will now mature

To beauty’s plenitude, to stillness;

Only be pious, like Grecian poets!

Of mortal men think kindly, but love the gods!

Loathe drunkenness like frost! Don’t describe or teach!

And if you fear your master’s bluntness,

⁸³ The most notorious journey that Hölderlin undertook began on 10 December 1801, when the poet set off on foot for his final stint as a *Hofmeister* in France. His return in the spring of 1802, a journey on foot from Bordeaux to Swabia, proved to be terminal: Hölderlin arrived home mentally incapacitated and spent the rest of his life in Tübingen.

Go to great Nature, let her advise you!

[Lieben Brüder! es reift unsere Kunst vielleicht,

Da, dem Jüngliche gleich, lange sie schon gegährt,

Bald zur Stille der Schönheit;

Seid nur fromm, wie der Grieche war!

Liebt die Götter und denkt freundlich der Sterblichen!

Haßt den Rausch, wie den Frost! lehrt und beschreibet nicht!

Wenn der Meister euch ängstigt,

Fragt die große Natur um Rath]

The poem's hopeful first stanza gestures towards the divine or spiritual realm: the "pious" [*fromm*] Greek poets and their gods stand for the highest poetic achievements. Hölderlin implies that, for the young poets of his time, collective improvement—"Quite soon, dear brothers, perhaps our art" [*Lieben Brüder! es reift unsere Kunst vielleicht*]⁶—may take place, creating a similarly celebrated age of artistic "plenitude" (lines 1-3).

Yet the poem shifts, at an awkward moment in the second line of the second stanza, and drops into a register that is utterly, even embarrassingly pragmatic. The clause, "Don't describe or teach!" [*lehrt und beschreibet nicht!*] (6), bookended as it is by a warning about inebriation on one side and the censure of authority on the other, must not refer to a style of poetry but to the act of teaching itself [*lehren*]. Many *Hofmeister* in less than aristocratic households were known as *Hauslehrer*. This is to say that Hölderlin assumes any young poet must be in a state of economic dependence, and it is this realization that

breaks the atmosphere of the ode in such an intrusive way. To begin as brothers, and to end under the power of a master, parallels the trajectory of the *Hofmeistertum* in general and of Hölderlin's experience in particular.

This helps to clarify that tonal downturns and the sense of disappointment do not constitute celebrations of failure: Hölderlin did not want or mean to fail. In "The Course of Life" [*Lebenslauf*] (~1797), a poem written around the same time as the philosophical fragments and *Hyperion*, the speaker's individual disappointments are points along the common "Course of Life":

High my spirit aspired, truly, however, love

Pulled it earthward; and grief lower still bows it down.

So I follow the arc of

Life and return to my starting place

[*Hoch auf strebte mein Geist, aber die Liebe zog*

Schön ihn nieder; das Leid beugt ihn gewaltiger;

So durchlauf ich des Lebens

Bogen und kehre, woher ich kam]

From the speaker's lofty aspirations, the poem descends towards earthbound experiences, which associate love and grief, to varying degrees, with disillusionment.

Yet the built-in "reset button" of living—"So I follow the arc of/ Life and return to my starting place" indicates that, for Hölderlin, a downturn reflects *both* the recognition of a failure (to ascend, to progress, to fulfill expectations) and, significantly, a starting over in a state that is not, and never was, ideal (lines 3-4). The tension between a teleological and

progressive ideal of *Bildung* and Hölderlin's insecurity with respect to the actual apprehension of that ideal, makes itself felt in tonal returns that portend neither to a desolate future nor to the revisiting of a brighter past, but to disappointed new beginnings. In a later version of "The Course of Life" (~1800) Hölderlin announces "Yet our arc not for nothing/ Brings us back to our starting place" (3-4), reinforcing the affirmative logic of experiential growth, since man must therefore "*Learn* to grasp his own freedom" (emphasis mine 23).

In "The Course of Life," Hölderlin presents the arc of life as the universal shape of shared life experiences, in which the "arc" or bow [*Bogen*] of life's course pre-exists the actions of a single man. However, neither "The Course of Life" nor "To the Young Poets" employs the formalized dynamics of the doctrine of tonal alternations. Instead, both poems contribute to the understanding of Hölderlin's general patterns of thought and attitude during his formative years. The sense of disappointment in them is readily apparent, though it occurs along uncoordinated and less abstracted lines; that is, without the support of complex tonal alternations and caesuras. In "The Course of Life" life is a course to be "followed," or else "passed through" [*durchlauf*], which is not preceded in the poem by a possessive pronoun. In a later, extended version, also called "The Course of Life," Hölderlin refers to the arc of life as "ours" [*Unser Bogen*] and life's starting point changes from first person [*woher ich kam*] in the original fragment) to third person ([*woher er kommt*] in the later version),⁸⁴ thereby making explicit the poem's applicability to life in general (line 4). That Hölderlin situates life's "starting place"—literally "from where I came" [*woher ich kam*]⁸⁴—in the last words of the last line of the poem suggests that the

⁸⁴ Hamburger dates this poem between 1798 and 1803 (Hamburger 145).

lowest point of life's course is also its inaugural state. On the page, as in the poem, the "arc of life" [*des Lebens/ Bogen*] appears always to descend.⁸⁵ In both poems, that Hölderlin presents life as cyclical and downward-turning might seem to bring the influences of his worldly disappointments to weigh on his poetics.

Thus what might seem the poet's failures—his inability to produce "finished" (and readily marketable) poems, his refusal to write *Popularphilosophie* (as his friend Hegel did),⁸⁶ or even that he was unable to hold any *Hofmeister* ("house tutor") position for more than a few months—as the kinds of disappointments that are, in actual fact, "circumstances... [under which failure] may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (Halberstam 2-3). For, although Hölderlin often represents life as a cycle of returns, neither do his writings promote disillusionment or destruction. The influence of *Bildung* and the notion of the *Bildungsreise* lend a patina of hopefulness (and often naïveté) to many of his works. In Hölderlin's personal correspondence his foremost preoccupations were almost always personal growth and progress; he wrote to his mother and friends about becoming a poet, becoming a philosopher, and becoming a man.⁸⁷ In a

⁸⁵ See Figure 1 at the end of this chapter

⁸⁶ A *Popularphilosoph*, or "popular philosopher," was "the German equivalent of both the free-spirited *philosophes* of the French Enlightenment and of the Scottish philosophers. Like the *philosophes* and their Scottish counterparts, the German "popular philosophers" set themselves the task of doing philosophy in a manner accessible to the educated public and of explaining to the general public the more demanding ideas of modern, enlightened philosophy (such as Kant's)" (Pinkard 47).

⁸⁷ See David Constantine, *Hölderlin* and, especially, Hölderlin's letter to his brother Karl of August 1794, and Roy C. Shelton, in *The Young Hölderlin*, who argues that Hölderlin never did "become a man." Shelton's biography only chronicles the poet's life and prolonged adolescence up until his stint in Jena in 1795. Shelton chronicles how, as a youth, Hölderlin expended a considerable amount of energy worrying he would not attain his ideal of complete personal cultivation and would not be able to make a difference in the world (Shelton 230).

philosophical fragment known as the “eccentric path” (“*exzentrische Bahn*”), Hölderlin portrays life and personal growth as a series of vacillations along a course of experiential development, which treats self-improvement as the universal trajectory of all men.

IV. Failure, Lament, Recovery

Failure, according to Judith Halberstam, introduces the possibility that alternative ways of being in the world “dwell in the murky waters of the counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realms of critique and refusal” (2). From this dark demesne much of Hölderlin’s thought emerges, as his poems depict “again and again a condition of beleaguerment in a hostile world” (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 15). His novel too recounts (and then mourns again) a failed revolution, a failed love affair, and a failed friendship, while his letters betray an “obligation to engage with and assert oneself against the empirical world again and again” (Constantine, *Hölderlin* 59). The pervasiveness of critical commentary in which Hölderlin repeatedly devolves—“worries, strains, pulls up short, starts again, and often dries up...[that] Hölderlin often runs out of breath” (Nancy, “Calculation” 45)—suggests not only that the poet continually failed, but also that his re-emergence (“again and again”) might generate the “formulated” (for Constantine) or “calculated” (for Nancy) conditions of his unique perspective. This circling of difficulty, in other words, has led scholars to see Hölderlin’s approach to his poetic vocation as one of perpetual failure, but through which failures the conditions for poetic creation repeatedly emerge.

To this I would add that in the poems of Hölderlin’s maturity, characterized by the tonal alternations, the cycle of life’s downwardness exceeds the poet’s compositional

calculations to produce an overarching sense of disappointment. Rather than a reaction to or a condition of failure, I consider this sense an engagement, proleptic and enduring, with a world of inevitable letdown. The sense of disappointment manages the space between the poet and that world, and by being *something* to feel (even if that something is negative) disappointment offers a means to resist utter desolation. In Hölderlin's elegy "Menon's Lament for Diotima" [*Menons Klagen um Diotima*], for instance, the poignancy of Menon's struggle arises not only from movement as a metaphor for living through grief, but also from its sense: the in-built quality of its movements that are both affective and meaningful. Overtaking the discrete states of the ideal, the naïve, and the heroic, the sense of disappointment imbues "Menon's Lament for Diotima" with the understanding that, for Menon, happy moments always contain the expectation of utter desolation, and every pleasant memory contains within it the foreshadowing of a fall. When Menon claims, "the North Wind was threatening,/ Hostile to lovers...and down/ Came dead leaves from the boughs, the rain filled the spluttering storm-gusts" [*Und drohte der Nord auch,/ Er, der Liebenden Feind, klagenbereitend, und fiel/ Von den Ästen das Laub, und flog im Winde der Regen*], the poem's seemingly "ideal"-toned fourth strophe delivers the judgment that perfect love, caught in a cold wind, forecasts disappointment even before disaster strikes (lines 46-48).

As Hölderlin's "Doctrine of the Alternation of Tones" makes clear, caesuras are the turning points between tonal alternations, which produce the impression of movement within stasis and are meant to elicit an affective readerly response.⁸⁸ The caesura is an interruption that acts as a pivot towards the next tone, generating a recursive structure that eventually returns to the poem's initial tone within the three-toned sequence. In

⁸⁸ See Figure 1 at the end of this section.

“Menon’s Lament for Diotima” tonal shifts occur when Menon recollects happier days, seeking a momentary respite from his sorrow. These shifts simultaneously advance the narrative of Menon and Diotima’s love, and circle the inevitable tragedy. The profound hopelessness of Menon’s situation—that Diotima’s loss has already occurred—is thus contained by the suspensions, as a kind of awful resonance, and elided by them. As the speaker declares, “Time over us mortal men’s heads/ Rushes past up above, but not in the eyes of the blessed ones/ Nor of lovers, to whom a different life is vouchsafed” [*so tost droben vorüber die Zeit/ Über sterblichen Haupt, doch nicht vor seeligen Augen,/ Und den Liebenden ist anderes Leben geschenkt*] (lines 38-40). Here the caesura falls between “above” and “but not...” in Hamburger’s translation, and between men’s heads, “*Haupt*” and “but not”—“*doch nicht*”—in the original. The line shifts from an expository style, a marker of the “heroic” tone, to the hope and fantasy-laden desire that defines the “ideal.” The speaker equates a lover’s awareness of time with that of the gods, “the blessed ones,” because, for those who are in love, time seems to slow to such an extent that they believe themselves immortal (line 39). Yet from the poem’s opening lines the speaker signals that this is not so. The suspended moment between the mournful present and the fantasy/memory vibrates instead with a terrible, anamnestic suspense—the anticipation of despair that has already come to pass.

In “The Calculation of the Poet,” Nancy argues that the complete apprehension of a poem’s affective insights—what he calls the “the sense of sense”—is found in its tonal shifts and caesuras (50). According to Nancy, Hölderlin realized that “sense has to be interrupted in order for sense to take place, in order for it to be grasped in passing—in order that the unity of the whole...be grasped” (“Calculation” 50). This sense, in its “unity”

or harmony, corresponds with perfect clarity to tones themselves for Nancy and, because the tones are prearranged or “calculated,” a poem’s overall structure is “monotonous” (“Calculation” 67). Yet when Menon exclaims, “Cause I have none to be festive, but.../...I smile as I wonder/ How in the midst of my grief I can feel happy and blessed” [*Festzeit hab’ ich nicht, doch.../ ...lächeln muß ich und staunen,/ Wie so seelig doch auch mitten im Leide mir ist*], the tenuousness and apparent inconsistency of Menon’s own emotions make him feel ill at ease (lines 25-28). This is not monotony, but an emergent understanding based on Menon’s experience with the previous tonal shifts, which unsettle his overarching grief.

Yet Nancy does seem to intimate that something more emerges from the shifts, though it seems always subsumed, for the critic, by harmoniousness. Nancy highlights that Hölderlin’s tonal cycles repeat, and thus stretch out the experience of the poem in a way that both underscores monotony and the unified sense of these suspensions, but also might lead to “surprise”:

Hölderlin’s poetry...[is] the most monotonous there is...[it] repeats this same thing; that is to say, it repeats itself in the following way: [as] a phrase which moves forward and which is suspended on its own sense, which surprises its sense in advance or after the fact, and whose meter measures this gap that is each time infinite (“Calculation” 67)

Rather than suggesting sameness or boredom, for Nancy monotony implies forward movement that is suspenseful as well as suspended. This seems to suggest that a sense in excess of the tones emerges from the recursions—the ambivalent prolepsis, or perhaps realization, of “surprise” (67).

The in-between space of a caesura offers the reader the opportunity to feel the sense implicit in the movement of the poem. But even though the poem's form is a series of cyclical returns, in its narrative, the human soul has an additional capacity for dealing with these cycles, which takes the form of an embodied reverberation akin to music. In the second stanza, the elegiac speaker connects the return of hopefulness to his "habit of music" [*Lied...gewohnen*] and a susceptibility to melancholic lassitude to disharmony, or a lack of musical sound [*klanglos*]. He exclaims, "forget your welfare and drowse away tuneless!" [*so vergiß dein Heil, und schlummere klanglos!*] (lines 21-22). In these lines, the turn from tunelessness to harmoniousness enacts, through the lines' growing intensity, a correspondence between music "rising up" in the poem and increasing force of feeling for the reader: "Yet in your heart even now, hoping, a sound rises up,/ Still, my soul, even now you cling to your habit of music/ Will not give in yet, and dream deep in the lead of dull sleep!" (lines 21-24). Just as Menon's habit of musical expression is able to turn him away from melancholic lassitude, the poem's calculated shifts in tone are meant to uplift the reader even within disappointment, a kind of torque that turns the force of one feeling towards the work of another, rather than one tone replacing another.

This quality of tenacity, of striving after even imperfect versions of life, also suggests Menon's lament "unmakes," as Halberstam would put it, his fantasies and memories of Diotima in order to pursue an new way of being in the world (3). Together, these two ideas—habituation and music—may seem fitting analogues for Nancy's monotonous calculations and the felt insight of sense. Habituation is repetitive, but it also involves a certain degree of proprioceptive embodiment: muscle memory or patterns of behavior, as my second chapter has discussed. Music, along with its resonant ability to

produce a physical response, is often, though not always, accompanied by a calculated compositional structure. Thus the “habit of music” becomes a version of “embodied human expression through formal calculation,” which Hölderlin’s poetological project seeks to engender in his readers. The intensifying effect of poetic shifts suggests that, like Menon’s “habit of music” (23), the affective power of poetry lies not entirely in the natural sensitivity of readers, but can be manufactured by Hölderlin’s formal calculations. Thus if form makes “sense” through predetermined and even habituated movements, Hölderlin’s elegy here expresses its ideal consequence: Menon’s felt (affective) and momentary return to the hoped-for state of emotional (discrete, personal) equilibrium.

Nevertheless, “Menon’s Lament for Diotima” also creates a dissonant quality through shifts that take Hölderlin’s reader up to the brink of joyousness and then over it—into carefully constructed, philosophically motivated and heartwrenchingly unsatisfactory imagined worlds. The reader is asked by Hölderlin to feel what such worlds are like: “Desolate now,” cries Menon, “...myself I have lost, losing her. That is why, astray, like wandering phantoms I live now/ *Must* live, I fear, and the rest long has seemed senseless to me” (62-64). The world has taken all and has left Menon a wanderer, poetically moved to memorialize how he now, “*Must* live.” Why should the loss of the speaker’s self and his beloved compel aimless wandering, or the “sense” (*sinn*) that can only remain in movement? Not only does Menon admit that his life lost its meaning long ago, but its senselessness comes as no surprise to him because, in the characteristically Hölderlinian formulation, his life’s every moment has portended to this final giving way. The repetition of “live” across the line break emphasizes that to live is both a condition (“live now”) and

an imperative (“*Must* live”; emphasis not in German).⁸⁹ In the original German, the line reads “*so muß ich/ Leben*” (63-64), blurring the imperative verb-construction, “*ich muß leben*” with the possibility of a noun, “*Leben*.” Both cases imply that life is a state of being, a condition of movement and, something else: a command or challenge. Thus Hölderlin’s wordplay suggests that even when “life” feels deprived of “living,” there is still the possibility for a renewed commitment to the striving of the verb-form. It is for this reason that Menon can equate wandering “astray” (*umher*) with the purposiveness of an ontological struggle.

Halberstam’s dark counterintuitive also offers a more capacious lens through which to consider the fraught tenacity with which Hölderlin approached becoming a poet and intellectual, one that underscores not only repetition but possibility. As Christina Lupton does well to remind us, as a philosophical concept contingency refers to both the chance occurrence of something that has already occurred *and* the understanding that it “need not have been so” (1173). As Lupton explains, “An event such as a tree falling in one’s path has these qualities of being unavoidable and easily imaginable of having happened differently” (1173). In Hölderlin’s early philosophical fragments, specifically “On the Law of Freedom,” the pursuit of knowledge is a repeated engagement with negation, but it is also imperfect, or “accidental” [*zufällig*] (Pfau, *Theory* 33; Beißner 211). Such a contingent view of the nature of the apprehension of knowledge, it has been suggested, reveals that Hölderlin’s view of subject formation is also open to contingency and therefore to imagined futures quite different from lived disappointments (Pfau,

⁸⁹ For translations of poems I consult Michael Hamburger’s bilingual 3rd edition of *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments* (1994). For translations of letters and philosophical texts, I use both Thomas Pfau and David Constantine.

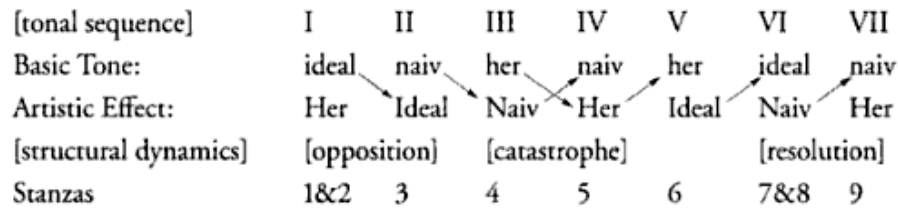
“Introduction”; Gosetti-Ferencei 132-133).⁹⁰ Like Halberstam’s “dark...refusal,” this contingent imagining of collapsed potential is, by virtue of the action of the thought, *something* (2). Thus what might seem, at first, the formal indicators of a flat, redundant sort of pessimism—Hölderlin’s repeated tonal downturns—might point instead towards the poet’s awareness of contingency, with its attendant qualities of persistence and resolve, and offer resilience in the worst of scenarios.

Hölderlin’s poetic downturns offer moments of intervention in a literary and philosophical community invested in generative discursive systems. Although he may well have asked himself, at one time or another, Halberstam’s question for the utopian radical—“What is the alternative... to cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other?”—it is in his poetry that this conundrum makes itself felt, as a downwardness that strives and a disappointed sense that starts anew (2). The sense of disappointment, as it emerges from these downturns, surpasses even Hölderlin’s most readily resolvable calculations in order to generate a more capacious intervention, one that envelops entire poems and plots, and reveals Hölderlin’s difficult engagement in a world where ideal freedom and striving within constraint are inextricable.

⁹⁰ Hölderlin, unlike Kant and Hegel, believes that unified subjects evolve *a posteriori*, which makes the apprehension of knowledge dependent upon lived experience (Gosetti-Ferencei 132-133).

Figure 1

The following diagram is Hamlin's version (304) of the theory of tonal variation, which derives from sketches by Ryan and Ziolkowski, and which illustrates the complexity of Hölderlin's schema:¹



The arrows between the basic tone and the artistic effect indicate the tonal alternations.

Note that after the catastrophe (what Hölderlin refers to as the *caesura*) the direction of the alternations of the basic tones reverses, bringing the artistic effect back to its original note.

The meaning and significance of this scheme is a contentious issue amongst Hölderlin scholars, the complexity and difficulty of identifying the tones in poetry being the major stumbling block to consensus.

Chapter 4

Reciprocal Keats

you perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain periods of time marked out—you have of necessity from your disposition been thus led away—I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness—I look for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment.

—John Keats to Benjamin Bailey (1817)⁹¹

John Keats
John Keats
John
Please put your scarf on.

—J. D. Salinger (1959)⁹²

I. Affective Reciprocity

In this final chapter, I explore the expectations of affective reciprocity that attend moments of “Romantic descent” in Keats’s poetics—expectations that, I argue, motivate the complex negotiations between pursuit and retreat underlying his expression. By affective reciprocity, I mean an artist’s expectation that his work will generate a felt response in an audience and that this audience will relay that feeling onward in such a way as to move the artist in turn. This is the model of “instant feeling” Keats describes in his review of the actor Edmund Kean, whose dynamic poses and active use of voice drew his audience to him, as Keats admiringly writes, like “moths about a candle,” and whose performances were further energized by the attention (*Poetical Works* 3: 229). That Keats too would be energized by positive reviews underpins many late-Romantic reactions to

⁹¹ 22 November 1817, from *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1958), 186.

⁹² “Seymour; An Introduction,” *New Yorker*, 6 June 1959, 52.

Keats's oeuvre, with critics suggesting that in the absence of such feeling Keats wilts and expires.⁹³

Yet what strength Keats might have gained from a more receptive readership he forfeits, by many accounts, for a style so overwrought as to almost certainly have been intentional; his revisions to *The Eve of St. Agnes* Richard Woodhouse took to be a deliberate attempt to “fling...readers off at last” by provoking their “pettish disgust” (*JK Letters* 2: 163-164). Alternatively seductive and off-putting, the experience of reading Keats is typified by interruptions and affective suspensions that resist “pass[ing] into nothingness,” but leave behind something else—inharmoniousness or “a twinge of distaste” (*Endymion*, line 3; Ricks 118).⁹⁴ Thus the variety of Keatsian epithets, starting with “vulgar,” are well known by now (Bayley 98). How to square such a poetics with a poet so public about his desire to please his audience and receive their recognition in turn, so certain that the scene of reading is one of moving intensity, and “so sensitive” (to rehabilitate Byron's phrase) to the forceful impressions of others' feelings?

One answer, also well rehearsed by now, is that Keats's social class exposed him to embarrassments pecuniary and social (as Christopher Ricks has shown), making his

⁹³ In a letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron obtusely bemoans the death of Keats, saying, “Had I known that Keats was dead—or that he was alive and so sensitive—I should have omitted some remarks on his poetry [from my latest article]” (1130). Gerald Manley Hopkins complains Keats is “wearisome” because “at every turn [the verse] abandon[s] itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury” (272), and Elizabeth Barrett, as we shall see, recalls feeling “disappointed” in the 1820 collection (141).

⁹⁴ Such observations extend to considerations of Keats's reception and characterization by the Victorians, so that, in exploring Keats's “museal poetics,” for instance, Christopher Rovee sees the vocabulary of bad writing mobilized around Keats as inextricable from later nineteenth-century debates about the uselessness of art and the museum as an end-stop in the circulation of aesthetic objects (1007). Keats's critics, according to Rovee, were right in noticing how Keats's poetry reflects too much, and in so doing, immobilizes its content.

“allegorical style” (as Marjorie Levinson has called it) the formal overcompensation for his lack of class privilege. For Keats Studies, Levinson’s Byronic characterization of the poet’s “masturbatory dynamics” was an assault that shuffled Keats to the bottom of a historical milieu striated along class lines, vitriolic in its judgments, and inextricable from the poetry thus produced (9). Meanwhile, attention to Keats and politics earlier in the decade had wrought significant changes in the field,⁹⁵ so that by the time Levinson was writing, it was “no longer possible to view Keats as a poet wanting in political interests, priorities, and commitments” (Roe 6). Much of what followed her account, then, attempted to balance the effects of debilitating social pressures upon a poet newly politicized, which often meant giving Keats more credit for the sophistication of his verse and, working from his letters, for the self-reflexiveness with which he approached his own poetic development.⁹⁶

In James Chandler’s examination of the “smokeability” of *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*, for instance, the markers of personal insecurity and Cockney slang (to be “smokeable” meant liable to be roasted by the public) are also a type of subtle, aesthetic apprehension: “an act of *comprehension* that implies an act of *condescension*, toward ‘weakness’ or ‘inadequacy’” (1819 399). If Chandler’s *England in 1819* represents a turning point in Romantic scholarship more broadly, through its successful mobilization of a literary historicism bridging history and theory, then his consideration of Keats as an active agent *and* a sign of Romantic literature’s own self-conscious historicity gave scholars back a poet both historical and capable. The “capacity to smoke” becomes, on Chandler’s account, a

⁹⁵ See Marilyn Butler’s politically-oriented reading of *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion* and “To Autumn” in *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981); Jerome McGann’s seminal *Romantic Ideology* (1983); and a special issue on “Keats and Politics” from *Studies in Romanticism* (1996).

⁹⁶ See the works of Nicholas Roe, Jeffrey Cox, Andrew Franta, among others.

chain of literary-critical judgments in which a man “cannot help both smoking and being smoked” (1819 402). While Levinson might be seen to have made Keats a victim, Chandler argues that Keats saw himself as a willing participant in a culture of predatory discernment based on identifying with another poet’s “instincts” (1819 401-402).

Though Chandler is right to refocus on Keats as actively engaged in this relational dynamic (the “chain” of smokeability from Keats to Mary Tighe), his investigation remains concerned with the “relative transcendence” of the poet’s literary influences, Tighe’s *Psyche; or, the Legend of Love* and Wordsworth’s *The Excursion* (1819 401, 425). Chandler’s significant conclusion—that Keats’s poem self-consciously situates itself as history—nevertheless remains invested in the exploration of the political and social aspects of his poetry (1819 417). Yet Keats’s attunement to the relational demands to be approached for its aesthetic force and intensity as well, in poems that so insistently move readers by unconventional formal and conceptual means. When Levinson, quoting John Jones, remarks, “‘End-stopped feel’ is as good a phrase as any to describe the alienating closure of Keats’s poetry,” she suggests that there is more of feeling and of psychic intensity to a Keatsian clunk than is captured by the usual critical vocabulary (*Allegory* 20).

What new critical vocabulary is now central for Keats Studies has emerged from literary criticism’s “affective turn.” Beginning with Pfau’s affect-oriented historicism, one recent shift has been towards considerations of the poet as complexly historical and complexly embodied. Rei Terada, Jonathan Mulrooney, Emily Rohrbach, Yohei Igarashi, and others, have explored sensation and perception as the markers of a Keatsian poetics expressive of the feeling of his historical moment. Another recent shift, and one that mirrors the landscape of literary studies more broadly, has been a turn, or return, to the

question of ethics. In Jacques Khalip's exploration of Romantic anonymity and Forest Pyle's more recent and wide-ranging exploration of radical aestheticism, Keats takes center stage, ironically enough, as the performer of "disinterested agency" and the "aesthetics of weakness" (Khalip; Pyle 70). These works point towards new approaches that emphasize the poet's affective potential and how his poetics resist normative assumptions by enacting alternative ways of being in the world.

If Wordsworth and Coleridge's project at the turn of the nineteenth century was to claim poetry as an authentic and "esemplastic" force capable of building community across the socioeconomic spectrum, then Keats's late-Romantic poetics unravels what had by then become a literary atmosphere of philosophical and moral aggrandizement. Keats's poems reconsider what he regarded as the appropriation of genuine experience by the synthesizing epistemologies of Coleridgean aesthetics and Wordsworthian ego-poetics because, by Keats's own account, they emerge from the mind of a poet who "has no nature" (*JK Letters* 1: 386-387). Offering neither pedantry nor opportunities for conventional self-fashioning, Keats resists classical ideals of catharsis through shared aesthetic experience by asking readers to feel poetic cadences as raw and immediate. Through abrupt halts and awkward transitions, his verse romances and the spring odes bring attention to the "sum-total effect" of an aesthetic work upon an audience or reader, and in so doing replace cultivation with consequence (*Poetical Works* 3: 230). Allowing poetic irresolution to ring out, Keats's poetry posits the aesthetic efficacy of affect; or, as the poet describes Kean's innovative acting, the immediate and reciprocal connection with an audience that is possible when one gives oneself up to "instant feeling, without the shadow of a thought for any thing else" (*Poetical Works* 3: 229-230).

The 21 December 1817 review in *The Champion* in which Keats lauds Kean is a touchstone for this chapter because it reveals Keats's thinking about how arrest and unresolved duration contribute to aesthetic experience. From his London debut at Drury Lane in 1814, Kean astonished audiences and critics with his powerful interpretations of Shakespeare and other modern playwrights, going on to become "the most popular actor on the English stage during Keats's poetic maturity" (Rzepka, *Self as Mind* 207). Keats saw Kean perform all of his principal Shakespearean roles as well as many of his modern ones, and in his letters Keats refers to the actor nearly twenty times (Kahan 53; Mulrooney, "Company" 237). In fact, Kean so captivated Keats that the poet co-wrote, with Charles Brown, an entire play for Kean, following "standard Keanian conventions" (Kahan 53).⁹⁷ Of these conventions, Kean's "musical elocution" and physical dynamism together produce, according to Keats, "an indescribable gusto in [Kean's] voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and future, while speaking of the instant" (*Poetical Works* 3: 230).

Combining timbre with raw vocal power, "gusto" might seem ancillary to this suggestion that Kean's acting reflects, in this case, Othello's psychic complexity. Yet for Keats, the intensity of Kean's delivery enacts, in real time, the Moor's reactivity to injustices, real and imagined. A forceful encounter with such felt immediacy generates synesthetic resonances, so that Kean's "exclamation of 'blood, blood, blood!'" is, for Keats, "direful and slaughterous to the deepest degree, the very words appear stained and gory" (*Poetical Works* 3: 230). As previous chapters have noted, Brian Massumi, following

⁹⁷ In a letter to the George Keatses of 17-27 September 1819, the poet writes that Kean "is the only actor" that can play the lead role of Ludolph, from *Otho the Great* (*Letters* 2: 186).

Gilles Deleuze, describes affect as essentially synesthetic, a form of “intensity” that taps into the “qualities of experience couched in matter in its most literal sense” (4). One of this chapter’s basic claims, then, is that Keats’s firsthand experiences of the actor on stage helped to shape the poet’s interest in the affective force of “instant feeling,” by quite literally giving him the opportunity to see it embodied.

Exploring what affective reciprocity might look like for Keats, this chapter begins by observing a connection, posthumously inscribed, between what late-Romantic critics judge to be Keats’s “ever dying youth” and their critical disappointment in his poems, which is premised on assumptions about his need for literary recognition. Tracing the emergence of a figure for the potentially terminal youngster poem (not poet) in Keats’s two versions of the Preface to *Endymion*, I show how Keats’s candid, idealized gestures towards affective reciprocity in the first version get subtly re-cast through the addition of a pitiable attachment to futurity in the second. In the verse romances *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* and *Eve of St. Agnes*, this tension between an ideal response and what Keats calls his “Morbidity of Temperament” emerges as a desire to interrupt, disengage, and disappoint: to move readers any way he can. Keats’s use of formal arrests—structural elements such as syncope, flat rhyme, line-breaks, stutters and halts—engage an affective quality of language that, as Woodhouse puts it, “fling[s]” readers off (*JK Letters* 2: 163). Thus the verse romances generate an affective resistance that challenges the active exertions of a Wordsworthian paradigm by, simply, stopping.

Not stopping without intention, however. The sudden arrests and passive retreats that Keats imagines, inspired as they are by Kean’s theatrical innovations, aim for a relational dynamic between writer and reader, just as a stage actor moves and is moved by

an audience. Considering the “Ode on Indolence,” in the final part of this chapter I counter the long-established view that Keats’s passivity is modeled on Wordsworth’s “wise passiveness” and offer instead that the poet gained much from Kean, along with the aesthetic preoccupations of Hazlitt, Hunt and his other Cockney School contemporaries. Here I argue that Keats saw passivity as an embodied and even physically demanding attitude that could prompt the interest and attention of others. Gesturing towards what such an aesthetics of passivity feels like for Keats, my reading of the ode engages the poet’s use of retreat and suspension to invite readerly engagement and argues for re-thinking Keats’s relationship to readerships, indolence and poetic production.

II. Disappointed Youth

I am not alone in pointing out that Keats imagined affective reciprocity with readers who were moved, spontaneously and physically, by what they read. While the relation between poet and reader is necessarily less immediate than that of actor and audience—delayed as it must be by printing press, circulating copies, and the time it takes to pen reviews—in his letters and poems, Keats describes the scene of reading as one rich in embodied potential. As Brendan Corcoran observes, Keats’s “desire for [literary] recognition *as* a physical presence” depends on a “virtual reality” that aims to collapse the distance between the poet and his reader (336). Just as Keats is inspired to take action after, for instance, “Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again,” his poems and letters construct readers who are moved by his writing, and whose responses move Keats.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ See Jonathan Mulrooney’s reading of this sonnet-inspired scene of reading in “Keats in the Company of Kean,” and Charles Rzepka’s chapter on Keats in *Self as Mind*.

Considering a limit case for such virtual connectivity, Igarashi finds in Keats's "fantasy" of opening a conduit of feeling between two geographically distant people through synchronized readings of Shakespeare, that the poet's figurative contact with his brother is only partial, since "space might be surmountable with sympathy or technology, but subjectivity is not" (173). Thus Igarashi reminds us that even Keats's most speculative accounts of suprapersonal feeling tend to preserve the essential unknowability of other people. Keats's desire for felt connections through poetry does not exempt him from feelings of estrangement or insecurity—what Andrew Bennett has called Keats's "anxiety of audience"—but neither does it release him from the sense of attunement to, or even impingement from, the forceful mass of the reading public.⁹⁹ As Mulrooney has shown, Keats's aesthetic detachment, his tendency to retreat into that virtual perspective, emerges from his susceptibility to the affective pressures of other people's bodies ("Avatar" 313). Such felt negotiations as these suggest that the poet's alternatively brash and guarded expectations of a poetically induced, reciprocal force of feeling are not merely premised on a desire for positive feedback, but have roots in his sensitivity to the visceral, affective forces—known and unknown, energizing and enervating—that underlie Keats's embodied awareness in a crowded room or at Drury Lane.

⁹⁹ Andrew Franta pinpoints Keats's statement, in the rejected Preface to *Endymion*, that "I have written to please myself and in hopes to please others, and for a love of fame" as evidence of Keats's understanding that the reading public is crucial to literary creation (*Major Works* 348; Franta 84). Without notoriety poetry has no life in print, but more important to Franta is that literary repute brings back to the poet a version of his creation that has been censured or distinguished through the critical mass of the reading public (84). Franta calls this Keats's "wait-and-see attitude" (84) with regard to reception, a double state of mind that is characterized both by fearful expressions of future failure and, importantly, by Keats's grasp of the public relations necessary for literary success.

For Keats's contemporaries, speculations about his bodily weakness as a reflection of his sensitivity continue even after his death. In a diary entry of 18 August 1831, Elizabeth Barrett recalls that she "finished Keats's *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *Evening of St. Agnes* & *Hyperion*, before breakfast. The first three disappointed me. The extracts I had seen of them, were undeniably the finest things in them....Poor poor Keats" (141). Barrett's condescending mix of pity towards the poet (then already deceased for a decade) and disappointment in the poems themselves encapsulates the judgment, common to many Keats critiques, that flaws in his poetry can be linked to the poet's personal infirmity and weakness.

Inaugurated, perhaps, by Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats," what we might call the poet's "ever dying youth" is the notion that, for Keats, the spectre of death hovered closely enough that it drained some essential quality from his life. Shelley's lament, that "[the] youngest, dearest one has perished, / The nursling... who grew / Like a pale flower... / ...fed with true-love tears" so thoroughly assimilates youth and death in the image of the pale flower that Keats, the Cockney School poet, playwright, and theatre reviewer, is retroactively uprooted by the simile (lines 46-50). Replaced by a flower of ghostlike color and sentimental appetite, the nursling poet, it turns out, was never fated to mature, but to sip paly on unrequited love. In his elegy, Shelley intimates that Keats's failure to ripen is both a physical and poetical affliction, or, as Lord Byron claims, that Keats met his demise "just as he promised something great" (*Don Juan* XI.60.1).

All this Barrett suggests in her mimicry, unconscious or even, compellingly, not, of the poet's well-known and youthfully flawed phraseology. Where Keats's "happy, happy" becomes Barrett's "Poor poor," the echo of a Keatsian repetition calls to mind the

additional disappointment that, while there is definitely no future for the poet, there may not be a future for his poems either. “Poor poor” interrupts pity with helplessness. It turns legacy to tautology, and recalls Shelley’s own pitying gloss, from “Adonais,” of Keats’s double happinesses. Of those who have ever striven for greatness, says Shelley, “happier they their happiness who knew” that their perseverance will lead “through toil and hate, to Fame’s serene abode” (lines 39, 45). Here too repetition plays up Keats’s inelegance whilst reading his legacy through his personal struggles. Shelley threads the language of Keats’s self-described “inexperience [and] immaturity” into an elegiac response that both admires and censures (*Endymion Preface* 60). What purports to be a lament actually resembles, as Jacques Rancière describes it, criticism’s tendency to reconfigure the traps of the literature it seeks interpret (*Dissensus* 164). Thus “Adonais” parrots even as it reveals how Keats’s poems incorporate, on the one hand, the living poet’s own tragic sense of embodiment without futurity and, on the other, an optimistic attachment to the poems’ future influence.

Nowhere is Keats’s attachment to the immortal powers of youth hedged more strongly than in the published and unpublished versions of the Preface to *Endymion*, which tell a story about the desirability of grit over candor when it comes to courting audiences. Judging modestly the poem as a “poor prologue to what, if I live, I humbly hope to do,” in his first attempt at a preface, Keats claims that readers care little for what a writer says in such remarks, before hinting at the tenuousness of his own survival (*Major Works* 328). Keats’s claim to have adapted the Greek myth “to please myself and in hopes to please others, and for a love of fame” makes no promises of future works (328). It is premised on a hope, and hedged by uncertainty. Yet in the second version, heavily redacted at the

request of his friends, Keats requests that critics leave him alone. What replaces Keats's "love of fame" in the published version is a gamble that perseverance and determination (the time and energy afforded by youth) might excuse or ameliorate the youthful flaws that Keats claims plague the poem, and he asserts that he "wish[es] to try once more" to adapt "the beautiful mythology of Greece" "before [he] bids it farewell" (*Major Works* 60).

Trading his own proximity to death for that of his work, in the second version Keats figures poem, not poet, as the dying youth: "It is just," he writes, "that this youngster should die away; a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live" (60).

This reversal—the young poet's death for that of his youngster poem—allows for potential future works even as it opens up the possibility of collapsing poet and poem into a single figure of "ever dying youth." Planning to live on, the poet constructed by the second version of the Preface presents some degree of confidence in his ability to continue producing poetry, and suggests that even publishing imperfect poetry will, sooner or later, engender some form of reciprocity that makes worthwhile the experience. Yet in the pushback he anticipates from readers—not fame this time, but critique—Keats distinguishes between the "feeling men" who will let him be, and those capable of "inflict[ing]" a "punishment" (60). While the forceful, physical nature of this second claim is hard to miss, Keats's more subtle suggestion is that readerly sympathy might make such criticism redundant. Since the poet has already experienced all the "feverish" sweats and shudders of acute embarrassment, a kind of negatively charged, affective reciprocity has been proleptically enacted (60). This preface constructs a poet who is, like Kean, not only psychically but also bodily subject to the force of his audience's reactions. Yet in so doing

it makes space for a poet who, in the words of Lord Byron, might be “killed off by one critique” (*Don Juan* XI: 60.2).

For Keats, then, youth is another name for the unsophisticated character of poetry, the “mawkishness” that might give rise to aggressive readerly reactions, but it is also a way of talking about a naïve, arbitrary belief in a surfeit of time, a belief that *Endymion* both fetishizes and undermines. This poem, published in April 1818, is Keats’s second substantive publication and his most infamous critical failure. Its narrative turns on the moon goddess Cynthia’s desire for the beautiful, adolescent, shepherd lord of Latmos, whose youthfulness is cast as an almost innocent virility, made all the more precious for its ephemeral nature:

His youth was fully blown,
Shewing like Ganymede to manhood grown;
And, for those simple times, his garments were
A chieftain king's: beneath his breast, half bare,
Was hung a silver bugle, and between
His nervy knees there lay a boar-spear keen.
A smile was on his countenance; he seem'd,
To common lookers on, like one who dream'd
Of idleness in groves Elysian:
But there were some who feelingly could scan
A lurking trouble in his nether lip,
And see that oftentimes the reins would slip
Through his forgotten hands: then would they sigh,

And think of yellow leaves, of owlets cry,

Of logs piled solemnly.—Ah, well-a-day,

Why should our young Endymion pine away! (lines 169-185).

In a poem that begins with an extended meditation on springtime, and which Keats meant his writing schedule to parallel in the seasons of its composition, the intrusion of autumn makes short work of leisurely abundance (Motion 180-183). The sensitivity of onlookers to the ephemerality of Endymion's youth collapses the distance between beginning and end, hope and disappointment, in language that already suggests a correspondence between disappointed youth and the life of the poem. "Scanning" Endymion's face like lines of poetry, the onlookers perceive something irregular, a loss of control over the direction or the cadence of the horse's—or the poem's—movements, as the reigns slip through the youth's fingers.

To think the collapse of youth into age or death, spring into autumn, is to engage with a tension that, in the poem, has its own affective force. Disappointed youth, even as a potentiality, elicits the "sigh" and interjective "Ah" that suggest a reaction to the discomfiting sense of loss, but critically for the poem this loss is neither irrevocable nor, in the end, to be. Although Endymion ultimately chooses what he believes to be mortal love over the love of the deity, the mythic narrative works at every juncture to capture, suspend, and preserve his youthfulness eternally—in drawn-out descriptions but also enchanted sleep—making Endymion's final consummation with the goddess a foregone conclusion. The poem ends on a self-reflexive disavowal of so much dithering:

...Drear, drear [says Cynthia]

Has our delaying been; but foolish fear

Withheld me first; and then decrees of fate;
And then 'twas fit that from this mortal state
Thou shouldst, my love, by some unlook'd for change
Be spiritualiz'd (lines 988-993)

This final stanza, which makes manifest Keats's opening bid that a "thing of beauty is a joy forever," fixes the fantasy of youth outside of time. Here, the preciousness of immortal youth lies not in its ephemerality but its submission: Endymion becomes "fit" for immortality not by his own actions, since the change is "unlook'd for," but by divine forces outside his own control.

Less obvious than the erotic submission of the youth to goddess, however, are the ways in which this finale corresponds with Keats's self-description from the final version of the Preface. The use of "fit" to denote Endymion's readiness for immortality parallels Keats's "fitting" himself for "verses fit to live," and suggests that the rewritten Preface does not simply replace poet with poem, but also preserves something of Keats himself. Even though *Endymion* ultimately immortalizes youth through magic, it also portrays disappointment as part of the felt condition of living. Keats's account of Endymion's quest makes a silver-linings argument about the value of suffering that casts any feeling, including disappointment, as better than no feeling at all:

But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
The disappointment, the anxiety,
Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
All human; bearing in themselves this good,
That they are still the air, the subtle food,

To make us feel existence, and to shew

How quiet death is.

For those judging the poet through that poem and its Preface, the claim that Keats failed to achieve poetic maturity finds its root, perhaps, in a correspondence that Keats helped create.

Yet Keats also maintains an awareness that affective reciprocity need not be always positive or celebratory. In a letter to Benjamin Haydon of 11 May 1817, in which Keats complains that money troubles have taken the wind out of his sails for the writing of *Endymion*, Keats judges the “self-delusion” of those who believe themselves immune or immortal, but casts his sense of his own mortality as the cause of his perseverance:

You [Haydon] tell me not to despair—I wish it was as easy for me to observe the saying—truth is I have a horrid Morbidity of Temperament which has shown itself at intervals—it is I have no doubt the greatest stumbling block I have to fear—I may even say that it is likely to be the cause of my disappointment. How ever every ill has its share of good—this very bane would at any time enable me to look with an obstinate eye on the Devil himself (*JK Letters* I: 142).

Like the challenge of filling 4000 lines with poetry, Keats’s objective for *Endymion* hinges on a certain kind of reckless endurance. In lines like “O thou, for whose soul-soothing quiet, turtles / Passion their voices cooingly 'mong myrtles” (lines 247-248), the very desperation of the rhyme suggests that Keats means it to be jarring.

The remarks of Barrett and Shelley confirm that even disappointing affects—the shock of interruption, the flatness of repetition—might return to the poet, or to his legacy, as echoes of the felt disappointments of his readers. Barrett’s journal entry is a good

example of this unexpectedly engaging dimension of aesthetic disappointment, in part because it describes her persevering through the reading of a disappointing work, and in part because it allows her to pinpoint what *isn't* disappointing about it: Taylor and Hessey's extracts and the collection's other poems. This contrary quality of disappointed reading—that it might compel a canny reader to stop and examine her expectations in order to assess the reasons behind her letdown—is Wordsworth's basic stance on poetically-induced “feelings of strangeness and awkwardness [sic]” in the *Lyrical Ballads* (76). But, as Keats admits in letters and his prefatory remarks to *Endymion*, the idea that audiences will come round eventually to his poems (or that Keats has time to spare while they do) seemed a bad bet, and it was one destined not to be defended across multiple editions.

Instead, and in spite of these concerns, Keats experiments with disappointing affects that reflect his own sense of a fraught and uncertain future, beginning to shape a body of work that invites affective reciprocity from readers by, in this case, the frisson of a sudden prolepsis of the time supposedly afforded by youth. For Keats, youth makes possible a naïve investment in the inevitability of a reciprocal response, but it also an attitude of irresponsibility, one that deliberately circulates disappointing affects as a condition of the poet's ambivalence about, even rejection of, such reciprocity. This tension, which Keats and his critics do agree upon (though usually at different times) offers as an alternative to pure censoriousness disappointed youth that is generative, even morbidly so, of the affective re-engagements and returns that make possible the life after death of the poet.

III. Late Style: the Dissonance of Arrest

In Keats's life and literary career, the years between *Endymion* and his romances represent considerable change. After the death of his brother, Keats's opinion of himself as a successful poet came increasingly focused on ideas of posterity.¹⁰⁰ By 1819 Keats's predictions about his poems' critical reception—his concerns over the “smokeability” of *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*, for example—also hinge on questions about which types of poetry “might do very well after one's death” and which might not (*JK Letters* 2: 174). During this period the poet's expectations for futurity begin to resemble what he would refer to, in one of his last letters, as “the habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence” (*JK Letters* 2: 359). That Keats felt himself to be both living and living towards death has been well documented by his biographers and has been linked to the speculative quality of his later works.¹⁰¹ Pfau argues that Keats's lyric work challenges the late romantic valorization of literature because Keats's early poetry betrays a dissonant melancholy that is at once *affective*—and therefore immediate, pre-reflective and ephemeral—and also *reflexive*—and therefore sustained, developed and “endlessly ruminat[ive]” (*Moods* 314). The affective quality of Keats's poetic arrests lies in their ability to interrupt or even corrupt (i.e., make inharmonious) the felt flow of poetic cadence or rhythm.

On 19 September 1819 Richard Woodhouse wrote to Keats's publisher John Taylor that in *Eve of St. Agnes* Keats had, among other changes, “altered the last 3 lines to

¹⁰⁰ Tom died from tuberculosis on 1 December 1818 (Motion 334).

¹⁰¹ See Andrew Motion, *Keats* (1997) and especially Stanley Plumly, *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (2009).

leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust” (*JK Letters* 2: 162-163).¹⁰² The change was met with disapproval from both Woodhouse and Taylor, the latter of whom replied, “I cannot but confess to you that it [the problem of “the new Stanzas”] excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation—Therefore...if [Keats] will not so far concede to my Wishes as to leave the passage as it originally stood, I must be content to admire his Poems with some other Imprint” (*JK Letters* 2: 182-183). Keats backed down, and the poem was published in a form to which he must ultimately have assented (Cook 595).

Important, however, is that Woodhouse recognizes in his original correspondence that Keats not only made the change, but that the poet *meant* it. “Pettish disgust” describes what Woodhouse believes to be the intended effect of Keats’s disappointing finale, an effect he reports Keats to have designed through an abrupt change in tone:

[Keats] says he likes that the poem should leave off with this Change in Sentiment—it is what he aimed at, & was glad to find from my objections to it that he had

¹⁰² Richard Woodhouse, “Letter of 19 September 1819,” in *JK Letters* 2:162-163. The particular change to which Woodhouse refers is “by bringing Old Angela in (only) dead stiff & ugly” (2:163) at the end of the poem, and although Keats made other changes as well, Woodhouse ascribes them different motivations. In George Keats’s transcript of the poem, the last lines of the final stanza read

...Angela went off
Twitch’d with the Palsy; and with face deform
The beadsman stiffen’d, twixt a sigh and a laugh
Ta’en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough.

Whereas the final version sees

...Angela the old
Died palsy-twitch’d, with meager face deform;
The Beadsman, after a thousand aves told,
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

The final version appears more self-consciously gothic and less bathetic than the original version’s ending of “one weak little cough.” For George Keats’s transcript of the poem in its entirety see *Major Works*, 554.

succeeded.—I apprehend he had a fancy for trying his hand at an attempt to play with his reader, & fling him off at last...(JK *Letters* 2: 162-163)

Woodhouse imagines that Keats aims to foil readerly expectations by first enticing or entertaining his reader—playing with him—before tossing him away. Accordingly, Woodhouse’s adverse reaction to the poem may fulfill Keats’s purpose in delivering a new kind of poetic experience predicated on a sudden and disappointing shift in sentiment.

Works of late style, according to Edward Said, express a “nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, ...a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against*...” (7). Considering Keats’s formal arrests in this light helps put in perspective some of the contrariness that Woodhouse ascribes him with respect to readership, but it also offers an alternative to interpretations that read Keats’s disaffected poetics through his social anxiety. Levinson, who has taken Keats’s “overcultivated” style as the signification of his class alienation, considers style as a measure of Keats’s psychic drive for acceptance (9). Yet Keats commits to a further level of lowering in *Isabella* and *Eve of St. Agnes* when he marries overconventionalized prose-conventions with *undercultivated* rhythmic haltingness. Insofar as his romances have an ulterior motive, social acceptance is not Keats’s principal concern. Rather, what he seeks is the absence of a negative pushback—the ellipses at the end of Said’s “going *against*...” speaks volumes—from reviewers and readers. It is Keats himself, in 1819, who meant to push.

Like the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* more than twenty years before, Keats’s 1820 collection asks readers to experience something new, to “struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: [readers] will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.”

How Keats's romances differ, of course, is that they are so insistently within a gothic aesthetic that the poems appear, at first glance, familiar and predictable.¹⁰³ Gothic elements—what eighteenth-century reviewers believed to be the markers of bad prose and “bad passions” (*Romantics Reviewed* 745)—were an already well-established part of poetry in 1820 and by 1810 the “species of courtesy” by which readers could identify the gothic was firmly entrenched. In an 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats, the poet jokes, “I shall send you the Pot of Basil, St. Agnes eve, and if I should have finished it a little thing call'd the ‘eve of St. Mark’ you see what fine mother Radcliff names I have” (*JK Letters* 2:62). From their very titles these poems advertise their provenance. Attendant on Ann Radcliffe's often well-reviewed gothic novels, *Eve of St. Agnes* and *Isabella* pay homage to narrative motifs and stock characters that satisfy the requirements for a properly gothic tale (*Great Enchantress* 24).

Yet a properly gothic tale, according to Radcliffe, “expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life” through sublime terror, while Keats's poems do quite the opposite (“On the Supernatural” 149).¹⁰⁴ Keats's use of overconventionalized—what

¹⁰³ According to Michael Gamer, the gothic is an entire aesthetic built on hybridity and amorphousness, which comprises “multiple modes of writing, shifting from novelistic prose into poetry, inset oral narratives, didactic fables, or pantomimic and dramatic spectacles” (4). Gamer's work redefines the gothic's association with such spine-chilling tales as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), by arguing that the gothic is not a genre, but an entire aesthetic. For further detail consult Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation, 1790-1820* and Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy*.

¹⁰⁴ Though Radcliffe's distinction is anachronistic to Keats's compositions, this kind of delineation was already present works by A.L. Barbauld and her brother John Aikin, Coleridge, and Nathaniel Drake. See A. L. Barbauld and John Aikin, “On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror, with Sir Bertrand, a Fragment,” in *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* (London: J. Johnson, 1773); Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Review of *The Monk*,” in *The Critical Review* 19 (February 1797): 194-200; and Nathaniel Drake, *Literary Hours* (1800).

Fredric Jameson calls “ossified”—generic prose-conventions are too obvious and ersatz for the “uncertainty and obscurity” that Radcliffe deems necessary for highbrow aesthetic terror (151). In fact, part of Keats’s formal innovation is a stylistic ploddingness that diminishes and contracts the readerly experience, highlighting the ambivalence of these poems towards the sublime and popular.¹⁰⁵ Here Keats describes a clandestine meeting between Isabel and Lorenzo in *Isabella*:

All close they met again, before the dusk
Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil,
All close they met, all eves, before the dusk
Had taken from their stars its pleasant veil (81-84)

He resists received notions of poor writing and overwrought language suggested by the poem’s gothic and sentimental conventions by being *worse*, even, than that.¹⁰⁶ Keats upsets already low expectations through flat, etiolated repetition and exact rhyme that clunks awkwardly. Without virtue of a line break or a period, tautology halts the reader by making him read the same lines twice. The result is an experience of lowering more akin to what Radcliffe deems terror’s imitative and disappointing counterpart: horror. Horror,

¹⁰⁵ By popular, I mean accessible middlebrow literature, specifically of the sort containing gothic fiction following Radcliffe. *Isabella* is based on a tale from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and *Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats asserts in a letter to Bailey on 14 August 1819, is based “on a popular superstition” (*JK Letters* 2: 139). The poems also, according to Cox, converse with poets of the Cockney School, whose “‘new-fangled’ poetry (as Gold’s *London Magazine* [1820] called it) was patently urban, chic and cheeky” (Cox, “Eros and ‘romance’” 56).

¹⁰⁶ Reading sensational writing is, for Coleridge, part and parcel with “gaming, swinging, or swaying on a chair or gate; spitting over a bridge; smoking; snuff-taking; tete-a-tete quarrels after dinner between a husband and wife; conning, word by word, all the advertisements of the daily advertiser in a public house on a rainy day, &c. &c. &c.” (BL 36).

explains Radcliffe, “contracts, freezes, nearly annihilates [the faculties of life]” (150).¹⁰⁷

Keats’s extreme self-reflexivity prompts an experience of affective freeze-frame that informs, rather than annihilates, his portrayal of characters that seem lifted from other gothic texts. Isabel and Lorenzo appear more static and overconventionalized with each of the narrator’s intrusions and asides. Neither poignant nor uniquely expressed, Isabel and Lorenzo’s professions of love, for example, have no force of feeling. The two lovers press clichés upon one another—“Believe how I love thee, believe...” (60) and “...I cannot live/ Another night...”—with an urgency supported by the narrator, who grants them “the general award of love” (97) a few stanzas later. Moreover, the narrator interrupts to imply that sentimental conventions from other texts should be enough to carry the burden of their feeling for them:

Were they unhappy then?²—It cannot be—

Too many tears for lovers have been shed,

Too many sighs give we to them in fee,

Too many pity after they are dead,

Too many doleful stories do we see (89-93)

Here Keats disappoints readers and he does so twice: first by setting in motion genre conventions that were already established as low or banal, and then by intentionally disappointing expectations of that genre. At the level of the felt readerly experience, Keats recognizes the stiltedness of the gothic; but by choosing to work within the genre Keats also writes *about* its constraints.

¹⁰⁷ According to Radcliffe, “the great difference between horror and terror ... [lies] in the uncertainty and obscurity that accompany the first” (150).

Self-consciously employing and then destroying gothic conventions, Keats does not write truly gothic poems. Instead *Eve of St. Agnes* and *Isabella* are verse romances of the kind recognized by current scholarship for its role in challenging the very idea of generic cohesion.¹⁰⁸ In 1817 Keats notes that *Isabella*, his “new Romance,” will revive him since he has become tired of composing *Endymion* (*JK Letters* 2: 168),¹⁰⁹ and even after the poor reception of *Endymion*, “A Poetic Romance,” Keats continues to refer to the 1820 poems as romances (Stillinger 595). Popularized by but not limited to prose fiction, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century romance is a “composite genre,” as Miranda Burgess has shown, “a moving point of intersection for a shifting array of intertexts” (*British Fiction* 7). Romance draws upon medieval, sentimental, sensational and gothic elements, importing and building on generic conventions even as it subverts, questions, and challenges them (*British Fiction* 1-24). By choosing to call *Eve of St. Agnes* and *Isabella* romances, Keats aligns himself both with the experimentalism of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798)—which, according to William St Clair, “was probably the first poem at the time to be described as ‘romantic’ by its author”—and with commercially successful and well-received verse-romances like Sir Walter Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) (St Clair 211).

This generic clarification, from gothic to romance (which subsumes, interprets and reinterprets elements of the gothic), highlights the complexity of Keats’s poems and helps to reposition them as responses to critical debates about genre and readerly experience

¹⁰⁸ See Miranda Burgess’s “Introduction: Romantic Economies,” in *British Fiction and the Production of Social Order* (2000), 1-24.

¹⁰⁹ See Jack Stillinger’s *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Literary Transaction* (1999) for evidence that the “new Romance” is indeed *Isabella*.

that, as Robert Miles has shown, are not limited to just poetry or just prose.¹¹⁰ *Eve of St. Agnes* and *Isabella* are part of a conversation about the aesthetic efficacy of terror and revulsion that includes poems like Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816) and novels like Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797). When Keats's verse romances emend and enhance middlebrow prose conventions by way of short lines of verse, awkward repetitions, prosaic language and stilted meter, they do not merely parody, but actively intervene in the language of storytelling designed to highlight the relationship between an aesthetically mediated experience of terror and feelings of disappointment. In the wake of *Endymion*'s poor reviews, Keats begins in earnest to challenge familiar models of affirmative development, common in Romantic aesthetic theory, that judge art's ultimate function to be *Bildung*.¹¹¹

IV. Towards an Aesthetics of Passivity

In a letter to J.H. Reynolds of 19 February 1818, John Keats describes "the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness" and, comparing busy bees to feminine flowers, he exclaims, "let us not therefore go hurrying about...[but be] passive and receptive" (*JK Letters* 1: 232). Presupposing a binary between "hurrying" actively and receiving passively, such a statement might seem to reinforce that Keats saw a connection between psychological openness and bodily inactivity, an assumption that locates Keats's view of passivity easily within a Wordsworthian lexicon, right under the entry for "wise passiveness." Yet attending to Keats's own, *active* use of passiveness illuminates other ways of striving. Flowers call to bees without effort, through colors indiscernible to the human

¹¹⁰ See Robert Miles's "What is a Romantic Novel?" (2001).

¹¹¹ See Marc Redfield's *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (1996).

eye, and, for all his idleness, Keats judges his morning to be both beautiful and operational. Passivity, Keats implies, is both a choice and an attitude, which may be struck even, or especially, in writing—"I am sensible," Keats teases, that "all this is a mere sophistication... [designed to] lift a little time from your Shoulders" (*JK Letters* 1: 233). By inviting Reynolds, the receptive reader, to participate in an epistolary exchange activated by indolence, Keats turns from his own repose to his reader's equally embodied response, shoulders and all. Reoriented by the "mere sophistication" that directs Keats's posturing self-consciously towards his addressee, the poet's passive attitude encourages a lighthearted sociability that is at once reciprocal and, indeed, flowerlike.

This well-known letter captures the dynamic passivity that animates many of Keats's poems, but it also employs a vocabulary so Wordsworthian (or so it seems) that scholars have consistently presumed confluences of definition between the two. Walter Jackson Bate, for instance, has noted that Keats's sustained work on *Endymion* caused the poet to seek out "mere passivity," a "natural reaction," which explains why "the image of the receptive flower, visited and fertilized by the bee, caught his fancy" (250). By the end of the paragraph, Bate is ready to claim that Keats was interested in "slow development, maturity, rooted strength, leisure for growth... something close to Wordsworth's 'wise passiveness'" (250). This pervasive assertion—that, for Keats, poetic production benefits from, and may even depend upon, an unassertive sort of passiveness—gathers strength from the established relationship between Keats's negative capability and Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" inaugurated by H.W. Garrod and Jacod D. Wigod in 1952.¹¹²

¹¹² Although Wigod and Garrod disagreed about the efficacy of even making the comparison—with Wigod disputing Garrod's claim that the terms share an essential similarity—the connection was, by the fact of the scholars' dispute, established. Li Ou, who provides the most thorough anatomy of negative

Canonical Romantic criticism, from Bate to Geoffrey H. Hartman and Jack Stillinger, has reinforced this link, and the comparison remains even in recent critical reconsiderations.¹¹³ In fact, many scholars, Bate foremost among them, have shown that negative capability arose quite immediately out of Keats's admiration of Shakespeare, modern theatre, the acting of Edmund Kean and William Hazlitt's critical reviews. Yet important contributions to this revisionary conversation from Andrew Bennett, Jeffrey Cox, Jonathan Mulrooney, Nicolas Roe, and others, have either maintained or overlooked the original comparison to Wordsworth.¹¹⁴ The unintended consequence for

capability's reception and rise to prominence as a philosophical ideal, positions Wigod and Garrod's debate in relation to Lionel Trilling's introduction to the *Selected Letters of John Keats* (1951). Wigod's censure of Garrod, therefore, occurs at a critical moment in negative capability's development as an important idea for Keats studies.

¹¹³ Scholarship that continues to make the negative capability/wise passiveness comparison falls into roughly two camps. On one side are romanticists and scholars of the long eighteenth century, most notably Donald C. Goellnicht, Thomas McFarland, and Patricia Meyer Spacks. Goellnicht, who wrote his Master's thesis on "Negative Capability and Wise Passiveness" in 1976, makes the most classic comparison almost a decade later in *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*. Goellnicht writes, "The main thrust of this passage [from the "passive and receptive" letter (*Letters* 1: 232)], heavily influenced by Wordsworth's concept of 'wise passiveness,' is that calm, passive receptivity, in which the mind is open to sensations and speculations, is an integral part of the creative process...an idea that echoes Keats's concept of '*Negative Capability*'" (100). In the other side are non-specialists, who use the comparison as an evocation of their particular interests. Such texts are especially damaging because the comparison is so often made off the cuff, with little thought for accuracy or even relevance.

¹¹⁴ The first connection between negative capability and Keats's interest in dramatic intensity comes from Bernice Slote, who connects negative capability to Keats's "dramatic view of the world" (23). In 1965, Bate's chapter on "Negative Capability" (in *John Keats*, especially pages 242-63) contends that Hazlitt's essay "On Gusto" influenced Keats's ruminations, in the negative capability letter, on poetic style. According to Bate, Hazlitt's essay must also have suggested Keats's use of the term "gusto" in the 21 December 1817 review of Kean (245). Following Bate, see works by Jeffrey Cox, John Kandl, Jonathan Mulrooney, Nicholas Roe, and Charles Rzepka, among others. Critics studying Hazlitt have made the claim as well, so that Bromwich, in *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*, connects negative capability's genesis to the critic by way of

Keats studies has been that presumptions about a Wordsworthian inheritance continue to overshadow Keats's dynamic engagements with passivity. Scholars may differ over the degree to which negative capability was influenced by, or is similar to, "wise passiveness," but they still generally agree on what passiveness means for Wordsworth, and, by the same logic, for Keats—a diffuse or open mind, and a stationary body.¹¹⁵

In recovering passiveness as a dynamic attitude for Keats, I want to suggest that Keatsian passivity suspends action in such a way as to produce the affective force of reservation or retreat. Like the Romantic theatrical practice of striking attention-grabbing poses, or "attitudes," on stage, Keats treats passivity as an embodied and even physically demanding attitude, which stages detachment in order to prompt the engagement of others. This chapter concludes by arguing that *Ode on Indolence* figures movements into and out of such attitudes, creating a dynamic of retreat and pursuit through which Keats activates the relational subjectivity that drives the poem. While *Ode on Indolence* has been taken as a work about the burden of poetic creation, in which the luxury of idleness competes with the pressure to produce, such critiques too often read the speaker as

Hazlitt's encouraging Keats's interest in the theatre (213). See also Jon Kinnaird, "Hazlitt, Keats, and the Poetics of Intersubjectivity."

¹¹⁵ Charles Rzepka, for example, has called William's repose "essentially disembodied—passive, detached, and observant, not active and deliberate" (36). Rzepka's transition between passiveness, the noun, and passive, the adjective, underlines his point about William's status—it is not the embodiment of passiveness that is Rzepka's subject, but the passive state of the body. For Kevis Goodman, the poem presents "a wisely passive *apatheia*" (123), and for Marjorie Levinson a "meditative quiescence" (*Allegory* 8). For Thomas Pfau, William's leisure is "a stoic form of self-cultivation... bordering on indolence" that forces William to justify his economic non-participation by way of the productiveness of inspiration (*Profession* 196). This focus on the relationship between passiveness and poetic production, via an open mind and an idle body, has also found its way into the language of Keats critiques, so that Keats has been portrayed coveting "authority, authenticity, and ease" (Levinson, *Allegory* 8), "mere passivity" (Bate 250), or even "passive submission," surely a contradiction in terms (White 124).

helplessly enervated, motivated, as Jacques Khalip asserts, by “a consciousness forever craving to disappear into the art it imagines and wants” (50). Such utter self-negation, psychological and physical, fails to appreciate the active negotiations between poet and audience that the speaker’s passive encounters animate. Following Mulrooney’s claim that Keatsian subjectivity depends vitally on the affective pressures of other bodies (*Avatar* 314), I propose that passivity, for Keats, draws out and on the affective register of perception in order to invite (and even, sometimes, to compel) an embodied response. Keats’s love of the theatre, evinced in letters and his review of Kean, opens *Ode on Indolence* to critical engagement with the art of the theatrical attitude, and most especially to Kean’s dramatic innovations. Propelled by these contexts, Keatsian passivity reveals its aesthetic as well as its social dimensions, as the poet’s passive retreats invite his audience to read, as well as sit, on the edges of their seats.

Keatsian passivity invites sociability—it creates lines of influence and agency that strengthen friendships and shape social dynamics. This assertion summarizes what Keats says in his letters, particularly one to Benjamin Bailey of 23 January 1818, but it also brings Keats, once again, into close proximity with Wordsworth and “wise passiveness.” In the letter, Keats explains that adopting a passive attitude helps fortify male friendships. “The sure way, Bailey,” he writes, “is first to know a Man’s faults, and then be passive, if after that he insensibly draws you towards him, then you have no Power to break the link. Before I felt interested in either Reynolds or Haydon—I was well read in their faults yet knowing them I have been cementing gradually with both” (*JK Letters* 1: 210). For Keats, passivity helps gauge whether, despite knowing a potential friend’s flaws, that friend’s attractions are enough to compel the poet to pursue the relationship. By this account,

passivity prompts intimacy without agency, since Keats's passive attitude invites Reynolds and Haydon to "insensibly draw" him towards them, and it also establishes a social dynamic in which the bond of friendship is more powerful, even, than the men it binds. "Cementing gradually" implies a slow, yet irreversible change of state, as though the friends themselves are transformed in order to accommodate the connection.

In the lyrical ballad "Expostulation and Reply," which contains Wordsworth's most well known use of "wise passiveness," William, the poem's eponymous speaker, also invites, by way of passiveness, a friend's engagement (line 24). William's indolence piques Matthew's interest, which creates the conditions for the composition of the poem. Couched alongside the impulsive geniality of "The Tables Turned," a poem "on the same subject" as "Expostulation and Reply," and leaning towards the familial confidence of "Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads* positions "wise passiveness" amongst themes of sociability; "Expostulation and Reply" is a poem in the form of a conversation, after all. But it is also a poem about pedantry, in which "wise passiveness" signifies a radical openness to the teachings of the natural world. Wordsworth idealizes the lesson made possible by Matthew's appearance—casting William as "wise" instructor and Matthew as pupil—and William's "reply" to Matthew's admonishments neatly justifies William's idleness with the suggestion that "wise passiveness" leads to inspiration and, eventually, to poetry. Yet William's response also dismisses the concerns of his student ("Then ask not wherefore, here, alone, / Conversing as I may, / I sit..."), whose voice is not heard again, and this closes the poem with an abrupt repudiation of any further discussion (lines 16, 29-31). Just as "wise passiveness" grants the poet access to powerful natural impressions without any clear recompense for nature, the society engendered by William's idleness is a

one-way street. Keats, by contrast, represents a passive attitude as part of a negotiation between clever social positioning and receptivity to the attractions of friendship that is necessarily reciprocal. Following Keats's passive retreat, the felt immediacy of the friends' influences—those “insensible” movements by which they draw him back towards them (*Letters* 1: 210)—suggests a relational subjectivity by which each friend moves in response to the other. This process begins with a deliberate, and perhaps one-sided aim—passivity as the “sure way” to gauge a friendship—but it produces a bond that Keats's metaphor, “cementing,” indicates is shared between them (*JK Letters* 1: 210). Although both Keats and Wordsworth relate encounters in which passivity invites society, and this does suggest that the poets had similar understandings of the attention-grabbing quality of retreat, Keats's performance of passivity differs in that it is more critically an attunement to the reciprocal influences that his passive attitude initiates.

In late 1817 and early 1818 Keats had myriad reasons for conceiving of passivity as a dynamic attitude capable of engaging such forms of relational subjectivity. Attending theatrical performances and participating in the lively aesthetic debates of Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt and other Cockney School contemporaries, Keats sought to express the aesthetic power of affect—or something very like it, “gusto” (an idea introduced to him by Hazlitt) or “intensity”—in his letters, poems and the review of Kean (*Poetical Works* 3: 230, *JK Letters* 1: 192).¹¹⁶ Emphasizing the affective immediacy of the actor's voice and presence,

¹¹⁶ Recent scholarship that positions Keats as a “Cockney School” poet, most notably from Roe and Cox, has brought attention to the political dimensions of Keats's poetry. Building on this scholarship, John Kandl's 2001 article directly links Keats's review of Kean to negative capability and to Keats's political ideals. For Jonathan Mulrooney (2003), Keats's social positioning was “an identification with the new modes of cultural experience that Kean embodied on the London stage” (228) – that is, Kean's “low company” (*Letters* 1: 193). As Mulrooney points out, the first correspondence in which Keats mentions Kean is the

Keats's review pays close attention to the ways in which Kean's passive achievements both move audiences *and* reveal the actor's responsiveness to the roles he plays (*Poetical Works* 3: 230). Keats begins by admiring Kean's ability to inhabit characters of both "the utmost of quiet and turbulence" but ends by choosing, from an entire "volume" of timeless examples, to commend especially Kean's dramatic demotions, "those lines of impatience to the night who 'like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp so tediously away'" (*Poetical Works* 3: 229). Such an assessment differentiates Kean from his forebears and contemporaries; for, even though the dramatic attitude—or the "strategic use of sustained pause," as Judith Pascoe describes it (77)—was already an established part of the repertoires of Sarah Siddons and other Kemble School actors, Kean radically refashioned the practice. Rather than holding static postures for an extended period, Kean's pauses, advances, and retreats created an effect, according to Coleridge, very like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightening ("Table Talk" 265). As Tracy Davis makes clear, Coleridge's remark is far from complimentary, as it alludes to the swagger and unevenness of Kean's style (940). Keats's review of Kean, by refusing to censure the bathos (as Coleridge describes it) of Kean's abrupt shifts and descending actions, indicates the poet's interest in the affective power of such retreats—Kean's laudable ability to do "his spiriting gently" (*Poetical Works* 3: 229). Most critically, Keats describes how Kean attracts an audience, like "moths about a candle," by opening himself to the felt immediacy of each moment on stage, "deliver[ing] himself up to the instant feeling, without the shadow of a thought about any thing else"

negative capability letter (written the same day that the review of Kean came out) and this propinquity—of the "several things [that] dovetailed in [Keats's] mind" and the poet's wish to be of Kean's "company" (1:193)—represents a clear connection between Kean's acting, the actor's perceived social status, and Keats's thinking about poetic expression ("Company" 229).

(*Poetical Works* 3: 229, 230). For Keats, Kean's passive attitudes become part of a reciprocal relation between actor and audience, mediated by the play's language, in which Kean gives himself over to these influences and his audience, in turn, finds him utterly compelling.

That Keats later claimed to want "to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting" further establishes Kean's influence, and it also suggests that Keats saw enough similarity between the roles of writer and actor that Keats's own works, and specifically the play, *Otho the Great*, might garner responses comparable to those surrounding Kean's acting (*JK Letters* 2: 139). While much scholarship has devoted itself to characterizing Keats's concerns about reception, as the symptom of the Romantic "anxiety of audience," for instance, or of his sensitivity to issues of class (Bennett 4), *Ode on Indolence* offers an alternative relation of poet to audience, which mobilizes the affective possibilities of passivity and, in so doing, casts the ode's speaker-poet as the viewer and receiver of "instant feeling." Readings of the ode that identify its central tension in the practical necessity of poetic production for Keats and his fear of negative reviews rest too heavily on assumptions of the poet's desire to escape from or efface these pressures. Such criticism notices Keats's dramatic language only to diminish it, as the "display of ease," Levinson asserts, is "another device for converting nothingness into prolific tension" (*Allegory* 24). This is not to say that the ode is devoid of such tensions—in Christopher Rovee's evocative account, Keats crafts a "museal poetics," typified by "characteristically Keatsian states of intense suspension and eerily estranged enjoyment" (1007). Rather, it is to ask how Keatsian passivity's social and theatrical dimensions square with the suspended, "museal" quality of *Ode on Indolence*, a poem that

has been read as sumptuous and self-interested. As recent work from Levinson, Mulrooney, and others suggests, a Spinozan model of the affects provides a generative framework for exploring Romantic conceptions of subjectivity and agency, by rigorously delineating a world of embodied influences or “affections,” in which subjects move, and are moved by, the bodies of others.¹¹⁷ In *Ode on Indolence*, to deliberately adopt a passive attitude means the addition of artistry or craft—the aesthetic, in other words—which both distances and compels affected subjects to seek the source of their affections.

Ode on Indolence is a poem in pursuit of itself, which is to say it is a poem about indolence, in which indolence measures the desirability of poetic composition. Keatsian passivity here becomes a means to express the speaker’s changing relationship to poetic perception—figured by the muses Love, Ambition and Poesy—from his initial state of unsuspecting indolence, to his pursuit of the muses’ passive retreats, to the dramatically passive attitude by which the speaker finally claims to throw off the muses’ influence. This dynamic exchange between pursuit and retreat drives the ode’s narrative and, more critically, casts poetic perception as an affect—as the immediate and embodied response of poet to muse. If indolence leaves the speaker’s senses “Benumb’d” and “Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness,” then the muses’ presence makes him “burn” and “ache for

¹¹⁷ Mulrooney’s recent work mobilizes Brian Massumi’s theories of movement and affect in order to take up Levinson’s claim for Spinoza’s “submerged” philosophical relation to Romantic poetry, and has shown that Keats’s notions of subjectivity and selfhood depended vitally on the poet’s perceptions of what Spinoza would call “affections” (Levinson, “Romancing Spinoza” 46; Mulrooney, “Avatar” 314). In Spinoza’s *Ethics*, affections describe the actions of one body on another body, by which an individual experiences, and is able to increase or diminish, the motion that makes up its being in the world (2Post4).

wings” (lines 17, 20, 23, 24). When they appear to be retreating from him, the speaker “want[s] wings” to follow, even though, only a few lines later, he admits that his “demon Poesy” has “no joy for him” (lines 31, 30, 35). Since, for much of the poem, the speaker cannot identify the figures, perceiving Poesy (and the other muses) becomes an affective negotiation with unknown influences, or what Spinoza calls “the passions”—affections that cannot be easily traced to their source (3P2S2). Indolence, in this way, leads to poetic production, wanted or unwanted, but only because it opens poets to passions that influence and even compel them unawares.

Passivity’s subtly compelling force in *Ode on Indolence* emerges most clearly in the speaker’s perceptions of the urn. In the ode’s opening stanza, the speaker perceives the muses, as if frozen on a vase, in attitudes as stolid as those of Kemble School actors. The speaker describes these figures advancing and retreating, coming into and out of view:

They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
And they were strange to me...

How is it, Shadows! That I knew ye not? (lines 1-9, 11)

Whereas *Ode on a Grecian Urn*’s “attic shape! Fair attitude!” that is “for ever panting” gasps with passionate potential (lines 41, 27), *Ode on Indolence*’s passive attitudes wear “placid sandals” and move “serene[ly]” (lines 3, 4). The speaker, caught in a “blissful cloud of summer indolence,” may merely gaze at the puzzling urn, or may hold it aloft and turn it;

Keats's passive constructions ("When shifted round," "Is shifted round") conceal the source of the urn's revolutions, and emphasize instead the dreamy quality of both speaker and muses (lines 16, 6, 8). Yet as the figures revolve into view a second time, they are even less present: "faded," as the speaker says later on, or else more shadowy or shade-like (lines 23, 11). From a *tableau vivant* the figures on the urn become a moving (fading) picture, before which Keats's speaker is both captivated audience and keen pursuer. Fading and revolving collapse into the speaker's singular experience of the muses' retreat, and he "burn[s]" to follow (line 23). This is more than a depiction of indolence as receptivity to inspiration: it is the deployment of passivity itself as a force of affective engagement.

Keats's speaker is not completely oblivious, however. His recognition of the figures in the third stanza produces a sense of guardedness and restraint that, although not quite enough to extricate him from the vortex of the muses' attractions, subtly shifts the terms of their relationship. The muses are, for the speaker, a paradox of desire and refutation, as he admonishes them for "steal[ing] away, and leav[ing] without a task / [His] idle days," on the one hand, and asks, "O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?" on the other (lines 14-15, 19-20). The senses by which the speaker perceives these goading affections are similarly paradoxical. The ode opens with a sighting—"One morn before me were three figures seen"—that does not provide the speaker sufficient information to identify the muses, and it closes with a command for the figures to "fade softly from mine eyes," and "Vanish" (lines 1, 55, 60). Yet the speaker's affections compel him as "a fever fit" even after he recognizes the figure for what they are (line 34). The felt immediacy of the muses' influence—those aches and wants (line 24, 31)—do not shift in tandem with the speaker's visual cues, but seem, rather, to layer on

top of one another, suspending the revelation of the muses' identities and obscuring their purpose. A "visual touch," as Massumi conceives it, affirms the fundamentally synesthetic nature of affect, and highlights the particularly close interpolation of touch and vision in Gilles Deleuze's theory of the haptic. "What," Massumi asks, "besides sight can feel texture at a glance?" (158). The answer, for Keats's speaker, is the dream or memory of a haptic experience, a persistent and embodied re-encounter that blurs distinctions between modes of perception. By giving way to the muses as in a "dim dream," the speaker finally locates himself in relation to them and, at the same time, accepts the visions they have to offer (line 42).

Tilottama Rajan has argued that the "discourse" of indolence in Keats's early poems has prevented critics from exploring the Keatsian ideal of "poetry as a mode of attentiveness" in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Rajan adopts the wise passiveness/negative capability comparison as a synonymous evocation of this "mode" (344). Rajan highlights Keats's concerns about poetry as an unattainable leisure-class pursuit, and her important discussion of worklessness, the "darker side" of indolence, in the early poems reveals Keats's awareness of history's ambivalence and "negativity" (355). But to this I would add that *Ode on Indolence*, both a "mature" poem and one that unapologetically exploits the language of indolence, disassembles indolence by way of an altogether different "mode of attentiveness," which is not illuminable by that borrowed comparison. Neither the cessation of striving nor its nihilistic absence, the speaker's final repose reverses the muses' passive retreats from the opening stanzas, and in so doing reveals both a reciprocal relation between speaker and muses, and the speaker's penchant for the dramatic. In a final refusal that thrums with passionate refusals and commands, the

speaker casts himself upon the earth and declares, “Ye cannot raise” me (line 51).

Delivered in an attitude of dramatic and forceful passivity, the speaker’s exaggerated admonishments to the muses—“fade softly from mine eyes,” “Vanish,” “and never more return!”—emphasize the scene’s theatricality (lines 55, 59, 60). His sudden worry that he has become “a pet-lamb in a sentimental farce” indicates his awareness of his actions’ artifice but makes him no less a performer (line 54). In this gymnastic model of passivity, retreat is a suspended pose that teeters, Kean-like, on the edge of excess, but it is also a site of affective energies built up throughout the rest of the poem. Like “instant feeling,” the mode of attentiveness that *Ode on Indolence* constructs responds to the affections of speaker, muses, and reader in order to capture the immediacy of a shared aesthetic experience.

The theatrical contexts that permeate discussions of passivity in Keats’s letters and the poem suggest new approaches to the familiar tension between indolence and poetic production. In a letter written on 23 January 1818 and addressed to Keats’s brothers, the poet frames the composition of the *King Lear* sonnet (a poem occasioned by a play) as an act of dramatic and discursive intensity prompted by passivity. The letter describes Keats’s changing mindset, which moves from a passive “addiction,” to interest and employment, and finally to a sense of motivation so insistent that it appears located elsewhere—in the “demand” of Shakespeare’s play for a prefatory poem:

I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately—I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I, who for so long a time, have been addicted to passiveness—Nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers. As an instance of this—observe—I sat

down yesterday to read *King Lear* once again and the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet, I wrote it (*JK Letters* 1: 214).

Like the slow cementing of friendships, Keats's chronic passivity opens him to the attractions of poetry by the "very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers" (*JK Letters* 1:214). Here again, passivity allows the poet to gauge whether, despite his knowing the play well, its inspirational effect is enough to compel him to write. Yet neither of these outcomes leads directly to the play's demand. Rather, Keats's first passive addiction frames another retreat—momentarily suspended by the command to watch it—into a pose of readerly receptivity. Sitting down, Keats embodies an attitude attuned to inspiration and, at the same time, positions himself in relation to his reader-as-audience. Keats's deployments of passivity as a dynamic attitude, here and in the other letters and the ode, challenges the assumption in much recent scholarship that passiveness, for Keats, was an essentially disembodied and unassertive state, a conclusion that has hinged upon the established relationship between negative capability and wise passiveness. Keats's review of Kean suggests ways in which dynamic passiveness gained an aesthetic dimension for the poet, and drawing attention to the affective intensity of such movements, *Ode on Indolence* reveals that, for Keats, a passive retreat could not only be a receptive state, but a powerfully persuasive mechanism for inviting response.

Coda

The Scene of Reading

My father is disappointed—I am not, for I expected nothing better

—Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen (1798)¹¹⁸

“Map of Disappointments”—Nabokov would call that a good title for a bad novel.

—Zadie Smith (2007)¹¹⁹

I. Disappointed Reading’s Novel Forms

Disappointment’s moving feeling—its quality of downwardness mixed with dismay, and the way this descent makes space for a readerly “course correction”—has introduced to this discussion about the affective force of a sudden interruption of pleasure questions of orientation, or what Rei Terada, in her phenomenological approach, might call “intention.”¹²⁰ Often, those who claim to be disappointed by something or someone are not reporting only the felt interruption of a moment’s pleasure, but also an enduring attitude toward the disappointing object. While much of what has been explored in these chapters have been the work of an instant—an affective immediacy like Wordsworth’s “sunk mind,” Coleridge’s cat twist, Hölderlin’s downturns and Keats’s “instant feeling”—in this concluding section, I will consider Jane Austen’s enduring attentiveness as a means for managing or even benefitting from disappointment. Exploring Austen’s anticipatory

¹¹⁸ *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. Deirdre le Faye (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).

¹¹⁹ “How to Fail Better,” *The New Yorker Festival*, original staging, 2007.

¹²⁰ “Intending,” in phenomenology, refers to a conscious relation to an object, whether it has a purely mental existence or is part of the physical world.

though evenhanded responses to the disappointed reading of novels reveals a literary critic who remains judiciously attentive to the affective intensity occasioned by the interruption or suspension of pleasure. Although in the epigraph above Austen's penchant for avoiding disappointed reading might seem to oppose her taking an interest in those immediacies entirely, I will suggest that a likeness emerges in her framing of the affective force of disrupted novel-reading in *Northanger Abbey*. Unlike Coleridge, who faults the writer (Wordsworth) for interrupting poetic pleasure with metrical "downfalls," Austen (much like Wordsworth) shifts the responsibility onto a specific type of reader—one who is susceptible to the social pressures that may compel the public disavowal of certain, in this case, novelistic, pleasures.

The affective dimension of disappointment, which feels like proprioceptive loss, as Chapter 2 has shown, is the embodiment of interrupted expectations—particularly those that depend upon regularity, repetition, or habit. Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a novel preoccupied with the expectations of novel-readers, specifically those with a habit for the gothic. That it is also a comedy about the dangers of naïve literary consumption has made it Austen's most pointed disquisition on the subject of Romantic reading practices—a focus that is, by the account of many a nineteenth-century commentator, disappointing. Finding it "too long a strain of irony on one topic," the English actor William Charles Macready records in his journal on 8 July 1836 that "'Northanger Abbey'...I do not much like" (39). In 1842 Henry Crabb Robinson, somewhat more cannily, calls the book "little more than [a gallery] of disagreeables" before going on to admit that he "ought to be suspicious perhaps of [his] own declining judgement" (625). To read Austen's irony as

one dimensional, however, or to be put off by its disagreeableness, is to overlook her expert wielding of the B-side of literary disappointment: pleasure. Her prose is pointed, certainly, but also playful, entreating and winking at the reader at the same time, and making clear that anyone who has picked up *Northanger Abbey* is already complicit—as a reader of this novel—in the defense of novel-reading that her well known digression elaborates. If Crabb Robinson’s final remark denotes critical agnosticism, then *Northanger Abbey* possesses influence enough to make a mature critic think twice. Throughout, Austen champions not only the sophisticated pleasures of novels’ content and style, but also the pleasures that might be gained if those readers with a shared understanding of the genre came together in their common hopes and anticipations. Against those who would call novels “trash” Austen claims instead a figure of pitiable solidarity: “Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body” (36).

William Galperin, who takes the first half of that hortatory statement as the title of an essay on Romantic canonicity and “the new,” has characterized the *Northanger Abbey* digression as “surprising in that it appears to contravene the satiric drift of the narrative thus far,” by signaling an earnest request for the canonization of novels (82). Yet this surprise—produced, as Galperin emphasizes, by the apparent contravention of genre expectations—is satirical precisely because it is interruptive, if we attend to the ways in which the digression enacts the very reading experience that it purports to abjure. Halting the narrative with the interjection “Yes, novels;—” Austen’s narrator interrupts herself, turns from the main narrative, and enters into a sarcastic tirade against those who would interrupt the reading of novels and their censorious attitudes (36). At a certain point,

voicing the anxieties of the socially embarrassed novel-reader, Austen presents fragments of speech that respond to unknown questioners with hasty disavowals:

“I am not a novel reader—I seldom look into novels—do not imagine that *I* often read novels—It is really very well for a novel.”—Such is the common cant.—“And what are you reading, Miss —?” “Oh! it is only a novel!” replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame.—
“It is only Cecelia, or Camilla, or Belinda” (36)

The surprise that Austen’s digression depicts is that of the novel reader caught in the act. Like Coleridge’s “disappointment felt,” which hangs on startled, rather than ponderous, dismay, Austen’s digression expresses a relation between disconcertion and interrupted reading suggestive of affective disappointment. Moreover, by staging a “surprising” interruption for the benefit of the reader of *Northanger Abbey* as well, Austen reinforces the link, implicating the reader of *this* novel with the felt situation of interrupted novel readers in general.

The “body” of novel readers, Austen’s digression implies, feels its injuries most acutely at this moment: the moment of interrupted reading. Tinged with discomfort or even guilt, Austen’s abrupt shifts in register appear to designate unique disruptions, as individual readers react more or less strongly to their questioners, and thus betray their susceptibility to the prevailing opinion that novels are to be disapproved of. Austen’s final two imagined responses—“affected indifference or momentary shame”—suggest that, while some readers find it possible to maintain their self-possession, others lose their poise. “Momentary shame” trips a reader up, like Coleridge’s loss of bearings; it makes her

forget the name of the novel she had been reading only a moment ago. The stuttering, stumbling staircase of “Cecelia, or Camilla, or Belinda,” for the reader susceptible to public censure, reflects and intensifies her embarrassment and sudden confusion. While for the cannier reader these names may signal the common complaint that such novels are all the same, Austen offers an alternative reaction in the publically humiliated reader. Unable to protect herself from negative feelings, this reader’s “momentary shame” might speak synecdochally for the entire body of novel readers, for whom that affect pains, perhaps, one limb.

If the pain of the body of novel-readers emerges, most immediately, at the moment of interrupted reading, then its pleasure, at least in part, lies with reading’s endurance. As Deirdre Lynch has shown, considering the novel as a “habit-forming” genre as early as the Romantic period helps recognize how the “conservative comforts of continuation” influenced reading practices just as much as did ideas of novelty and “reading for closure” (216). In *Northanger Abbey*, the novel readers’ desire for pleasurable perpetuation allows the mediating force of proprioceptive thought—that which anticipates and externalizes “ease”—to be literalized (Massumi 59). Nowhere is the physical actualization of never-ending reading more explicit than in the anecdote that the Tilney siblings relate about Henry “running away with the volume” he was supposed to be reading to Eleanor:

“...The Mysteries of Udolpho, [says Henry] when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again;—I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time.”

“Yes,” added Miss Tilney, “and I remember that you undertook to read it aloud to me, and that when I was called away for only five minutes to answer a note, instead of waiting for me, you took the volume into the Heritage-walk, and I was obliged to stay until you had finished it.” (103)

Novels carry you away from it all, this passage suggests, but they also induce you carry them away. Notwithstanding the proprioceptive acuity necessary for walking and reading at the same time, Henry’s compulsion to continue reading along the Heritage-walk emphasizes continuity over novelty. Reading becomes a marathon of imaginative and embodied stimulation, imbued with a kind of moving-yet-permanent affective thrill—since Henry recalls his hair “standing on end *the whole time*” rather than at discrete moments of terror or climax.

That this passage also establishes, within the readerly society of Henry, Eleanor and Catharine, the possibility for interrupted reading without embarrassment or shame returns me to the preliminary conclusion with which this coda began: Austen’s dismissal of her father’s disappointment in a letter from 1798. For Austen’s treatment of the disappointing work in question, Samuel Egerton Brydges’s novelistic epistle, *Arthur Fitz-Albini* (1798), rests on both the book’s publically established shamefulfulness and her ability to value it nevertheless:

We have got ‘Fitz-Albini’; my father has bought it against my private wishes, for it does not quite satisfy my feelings that we should purchase the only one of Egerton’s works of which his family are ashamed. That these scruples, however, do not at all interfere with my reading it, you will easily believe. We have neither of us yet

finished the first volume. My father is disappointed—I am not, for I expected nothing better (23)

The “scruples” that Austen says she has felt, having already felt them, constitute a token adherence to social discernment by which she justifies her enjoyment of a portion of the work that is, by her own account, often quite tasteless. (“There are many characters introduced, apparently merely to be delineated. We have not been able to recognise any of them hitherto, except Dr. and Mrs. Hey and Mr. Oxenden, who is not very tenderly treated” [23]). Finding satisfaction in such reading, Austen suggests, means playing a game of social decoding that is also an act of cool aesthetic judgment, one that reflects the reader’s sophisticated aloofness and allows her to participate in conversations occurring in and around the novel without completely investing in it. By this account, readerly engagement becomes an exercise in disengagement, or the trick of deciphering the novel’s social parodies without giving way to its literary faults.

Yet Austen suggests that a further difference between her experience of the book and that of her father is due to her superior tolerance for the unconventional. For, not only does *Arthur Fitz-Albini* offer thinly veiled portrayals of people within the Austen family’s social circle, the formal components of the book itself capture, according to Austen, something of the character of Egerton Brydges. With approbation Austen writes, “Never did a book carry more internal evidence of its author. Every sentiment is completely Egerton’s. There is very little story, and what there is told in a strange and unconnected way” (23). The awkwardness of the book’s form, primarily its narrative cohesion, make *Arthur Fitz-Albini* disappointing only for those who have condescended to

read it in search of that enduring sort of easeful pleasure. Austen herself, having not expected ease, finds value instead in actively deciphering the authorial situation behind the novel's oddity of form and expression. As she dismisses her father's dissatisfaction in the epigraph above, Austen appears to have little patience for disappointed reading (she implies that he *should have known better*): "expecting nothing better" actually means both knowing what is already being said about a work, and projecting onto that work just the right amount of anticipatory condemnation or distrust (*Letters* 23). To end up disappointed, Austen implies, constitutes a lack of critical resources, since it indicates both ill-preparedness and poor judgment about the likelihood of an unhappy reading experience.

If proprioception, or an unconscious calibration and recalibration of embodied anticipations, provides a means for thinking through the bodily dimension of disappointed reading, then even within the community of novel readers, Austen's letter suggests, disappointed reading attends those whose mental processes are too sluggish to recalibrate mid-step. In *Northanger Abbey*, the convergence of disappointment's affective and self-reflective dimensions in the figure of the interrupted reader of novels animates a process of questioning that may or may not trigger the quick reorientation of the reader feigning "affected indifference." A reader of novels like Austen, however, differs in that she also meets novels for what they are. Her preparedness and readerly endurance both differentiate her from the "body" of novel readers, and make her an ideal reader, perhaps, for poems of affective irresolution and suspension, like those of Wordsworth, Hölderlin, and Keats.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that disappointment is a foundational category for Romantic aesthetics, one that, though often unacknowledged, was critical for the development of much of the poetry we now think of as canonical. In my discussions of Wordsworth's poetics in Chapters 1 and 2, I traced the development of his formal and conceptual descents, from his first publication in 1793, through the *Lyrical Ballads*, to "To Toussiant L'Ouverture," a Liberty Sonnet from 1807's *Poems, in Two Volumes*. I showed how the poet's contrasting style in *Descriptive Sketches*, along with figures of descent, compel readers to relate to suffering anew, and how these stylistic innovations are reprised in the sonnet, to a similarly radical effect. In light of models for the materiality of the passions from Hume and Spinoza, I explored the ways in which Wordsworth seems to imagine these affects circulating. The relational dynamic, and its history, that emerged from these poems I have called "sinking in sympathy," a kind of negative intensity, as Brian Massumi might say, that revealed the affective and ethical negotiations enacted by Wordsworth's representations of encounters with slavery and injustice in the Alps, particularly in France and Italy. In Chapter 2, I furthered this discussion through an investigation of the affective experience of disappointed reading, which took into account Wordsworth's self-consciousness about the tendency of his lyrical ballads to disappoint readers, even as he persisted in doing so.

That reading is a form of embodied cognition makes possible a link that Coleridge forges, and that I focused on in that chapter as well, between disappointment that is *like* tripping down stairs in the dark and the theorization together of reading and affective disappointment. Proprioception, as a distributed sense that bridges visual and haptic

experience, offers a means for conceptualizing the embodiment of disappointed reading, and its allusions in Romantic science writing, specifically that of ocular perception, offers a rich historical context for this aesthetic mode. In the literary criticism of Coleridge and, as in this coda, that found in Austen's letter and novel, the moment of proprioceptive loss differs in cause (metrical irregularities versus interrupted reading sessions) but not in effect: those dynamic attempts at sideways resolutions triggered by disappointed reading. "Being disappointed" might mean an immediate reaction to a difficult object, and when this object is a literary text, it often means having persisted in reading it and thinking about it in order to form the opinion.

Such affective excesses I investigated in Chapter 3, through an exploration of the development of Hölderlin's formal calculations: specific metrical and conceptual devices aimed at specific readerly responses to his poetry. Here disappointment emerged as an excess precipitated by the recursive structure of Hölderlin's tonal alternations. Presaged by the tensions between lived and abstract freedom in the philosophical fragments, and made manifest in the essential "dissonance" of the title character of Hölderlin's novel, *Hyperion*, I argued that the "tuneless" [*klanglos*] or imperfect tone of "Menon's Lament for Diotima" is more than a clear move towards the final, "tragic" tonal shift. Shading the poem with a proleptic understanding of loss and inevitable suffering, this tunelessness makes space for living within disappointment without escaping it, a way of being in the world reflected by Hölderlin's educational experiences and time spent as a *Hofmeister*.

In my fourth and final chapter, I investigated Keats's "affective reciprocity," or his expectation of being moved by forces unseen, in order to consider the ways in which

passivity takes on an active quality in the poems and letters. I proposed that the acting of Edmund Kean influenced Keats's thinking about seemingly passive retreats as a dynamic force, offering an alternative to scholarly accounts that treat passivity and indolence as synonymous. Beginning with an overview of the poet's posthumous reception as one of "disappointed youth," I argued that in *Endymion* and the verse romances, *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* and *Eve of St. Agnes*, subtle and not-so-subtle indications of the poet's pitiable attachment to futurity might be partially to blame for these opinions. At the same time, however, what Keats calls his "Morbidity of Temperament" emerges as a desire to move readers any way he can, by interrupting disengaging, and disappointing. I showed how Keats uses formal arrests to engage an affective quality of language designed to shock or halt readers, and it is such an active suspension, even in its bathos, that I find reflected in the theatrical review in which Keats lauds Kean.

As a category for formal and conceptual descents that might compel a more lateral or flexible engagement with literary innovation, the aesthetics of disappointment is as much a negative aesthetic as a way to reimagine Romanticism's relation to the unexpected in likewise unexpected terms. Sinking, twisting, returning, retreating, even, for Austen, deciphering, become means for engaging aesthetic phenomena that are also sites of the encoded history signaled by these negotiations. The reorientations that take place emerge from the "specific feelings," "rhythms," and "sociality" that Williams identifies, which give shape and intensity to a subject's lived experiences, but which are nevertheless constitutive of the larger "structures of feeling" at work (132). Thus my explorations of these relational

dynamics has exposed that which makes history both legible and, for the disappointed reader, ever-newly affective.

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