

Reading Apocalypse: Ruptured Temporality and the Colonial Landscape
in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the process of reading in Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826). The novel illustrates a limiting conception of reading, as characters become bound to the futures that they consume via literature. However, there is a breach between the type of reading represented in the novel, and the model of reading that Shelley demands of her audience. By analysing the text's competing aesthetics of ruin and artifice, I argue that Shelley advocates for a system of reading that recognizes the audience's potential for agency and intervention. Just as Reinhart Koselleck theorized that the post-French Revolution world marked a new sense of time, *Neuzeit*, which corresponded with the burgeoning era of modernity, Shelley advocates for a uniquely modern system of reading.

By reading *The Last Man* in this way, the novel's critique of imperialism expansion is transformed from a prophetic vision of the future into a practically actionable critique. There exists much scholarship concerning the novel's criticism of England's early-nineteenth century project of colonial expansion. Notably, critics like Paul Cantor, Alan Bewell and Siobhan Carroll have conceptualized the plague as a cosmopolitan imperial force, spreading disease just as late-Romantic explorers, politicians, and merchants spread ideas, bodies, plants, and consumer goods. Yet, Shelley's critique of global interconnectivity extends beyond the plague to the world it leaves behind. Ecologically abundant and primed for human occupation, the post-apocalyptic world is deeply reminiscent of the early-nineteenth century ideal of colonial space. However, while late-Romantic imperialists conceived of these spaces as edentially new, Shelley writes a traumatic history explaining their emptiness. This narrative leaves readers as witnesses to humanity's apocalyptic end. Only through a new system of critical readership can the audience distance itself from this annihilating future view to envision alternate futures for England.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Morag McGreevey. An early version of the second chapter inspired part of a paper delivered at the 2015 Interdisciplinary Nineteenth Century Studies Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, titled “Colonial Ecologies/Colonial Anxieties: The Post-Apocalyptic Landscape in *The Last Man*.” An adapted version of the first chapter will be presented at the 2016 North American Society for the Study of Romanticism conference at the University of California, Berkeley under the title “Reading for the End of Time: Aesthetic Distance in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*.”

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Introduction

Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* is an apocalyptic vision of the end of humanity. The story's narrator is Lionel Verney, the sole survivor of a global plague that eradicates the human race. Meanwhile, nature persists undaunted, as the earth evolves into a perversely neo-edenic space: fertile, labourless, and largely empty of bodies. Yet unlike Adam's cursed companionship, Verney is fated to survive alone. In place of human relationships, Verney dedicates himself to writing a history of humanity's end. Although the novel's annihilating conclusion denies the possibility of an audience, Shelley circumvents this narrative constraint by constructing a prophetic framework for the novel. In the author's introduction, she claims to have discovered Verney's story transcribed upon fragmentary leaves in a long-forgotten sibyl's cave. By contextualizing Verney's work as a newly rediscovered ancient prophecy, Shelley disrupts linear conceptions of time and history to forge a connection between Europe's classical past, its future decline, and the novel's contemporary reading audience.

By the late-eighteenth century, the establishment of links between the modern world and its classical counterpart were commonplace, indicating a cultural tendency to recast the past as a vision of the future. Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published almost forty years before *The Last Man*, exemplifies the anxiety which accompanied this cyclical view of history: with the rise of empire comes the inevitability of decline and fall. Michael Sonenscher posits that the most significant threat to stability during this period was national debt incurred to support the transformation of warfare between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Europe's great powers cultivated massive standing armies under intense financial strain, placing pressure upon hegemonic political systems and foreshadowing the possibility of revolution. However, for Shelley, writing in the wake of the French Revolution, it

was neither finance nor war that presented the most pressing concern. Instead, Shelley's critique is fixed on global interconnectivity, as she imagines a world where the bonds of empire supersede the physical, ideological, and aesthetic borders of nationhood.

The novel's plague traverses Romantic routes of trade and maritime exploration, from "the verdant land of native Europe" to "tawny" Africa, "the fierce seas of the Cape," and "the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean" (Shelley 469). At the outset of the nineteenth century, England's island geography acquired an important imaginative status for authors seeking to reconcile the nation's perceived insular, agrarian past and its contemporary outward push towards empire. According to Samuel Baker, England's surrounding ocean served as "an imaginative arena in which to stage together the discontinuous modes of sovereignty that organized what was domestically as well as abroad a fundamentally maritime empire" (3). Essentially, the ocean became the geopolitical theatre upon which Britain enacted modern commercial life. For Shelley, it was simultaneously a site of uncontrollable mobility. In *The Last Man*, the flow of goods, people, and ideas is superseded by an onslaught of diseased colonial bodies infiltrating Britain's island fold. Meanwhile, the nation's maritime defenses are worthless against the plague's miasmatic transmission, illustrating the danger of initiating this degree of mobility and contact.

The plague's air-borne assault reframes the imperial dream of an interconnected world into a nightmarish vision of relentless connectivity and inescapable disease.¹ Shelley's interlinking of colonialism and disease highlights what Alan Bewell has termed the "epidemiological cost of colonialism" (101). Imperial contact enabled illnesses to circulate with unprecedented speed and reach, as traveling bodies carried pathogens into previously distinct

¹ Siobhan Carroll and Anne McWhir both offer sophisticated readings of the plague's miasmatic transferal. Notably, both critics highlight the global cosmopolitanism suggested by this method of disease transmission.

disease environments. This new epidemiological mobility created the necessary conditions for devastating pandemics of small pox, measles, and other infectious diseases. However, unlike the actual illnesses circling the globe during the late-Romantic period, Shelley's literary plague is not merely a symptom of colonial interconnectivity. Rather, in *The Last Man* the plague is a direct metaphor for imperialism. By recasting colonialism's rapine as a plague's insatiable hunger for the consumption and destruction of human bodies, the cost of imperialism is embodied and exposed: England's imperial ambitions come at the expense of life, nationhood, and futurity.² Thus, the world's last man Verney is both a faithful historian and reluctant prophet, as he narrates Shelley's vision of the world's decline and fall.

Verney's Narrative as a Kantian Universal History

Taken alone, the plague's violent consumption of humanity offers a clear indictment of England's imperial project. However, Verney's dual role as unknowing prophet and self-fashioned historian complicates the novel's straightforward narrative drive. Up to this point, scholars addressing Shelley's imperial critique have adopted a predominately historical methodology that emphasizes the text's spatial dimensions.³ In doing so they have overlooked the text's equally important temporal challenges. Shelley's critique of colonialism isn't only manifested through anxieties about maritime contact, miasmatic transmission, and traveling disease; the novel's complicated claims of time and history are also fundamental to understanding Shelley's account of an annihilating imperial end.

Near the novel's conclusion, Verney self-consciously reflects "for whom to read — to whom dedicated?" (Shelley 466). While some critics, notably Elizabeth Effinger and Robert

² Ranita Chatterjee's work on Giorgio Agamben's theory of the "state of exception" offers a compelling reading of the treatment of bodies in Shelley's novel.

³ Alan Bewell, Paul Cantor, Siobhan Carroll, Audrey Fisch, and Anne Mellor have all contributed to this canon of scholarship.

Lance Snyder, have begun to address these questions by offering hermeneutic readings of the novel's proleptic futurity, these interpretations are generally isolated from the text's imperial concerns. My project addresses this gap in scholarship, by arguing that such questions of audience and authorship are central to unpacking Shelley's colonial critique. Working in the vein of Charlotte Sussman, who frames her historical analysis of the novel and the early-nineteenth century debates over state aided emigration by querying "can books exist without readers?" (287), I integrate these critical methodologies to present a more comprehensive understanding of Shelley's commentary on England's late-Romantic colonial expansion. Through its temporal maneuvering, *The Last Man* posits two imagined audiences: prophetic witnesses of a proleptic future, and readers of history's end. The author's introduction frames the prophetic sibylline leaves as having a limiting *affectus* (here, I draw from Benedict de Spinoza's terminology). For Shelley, this manifests through her self-identification as the prophecy's "decipherer" (6) rather than creator. For the novel's audience, the prophecy's constricting effect upon individual autonomy is conveyed through the expectation of passivity, rendering readers helpless witnesses to an inevitable future.

Verney's pretensions to historiography impose concurrent expectations of readerly compliance. Reinhart Koselleck theorizes that the French Revolution marked a new sense of time, *Neuzeit*, which represented a breach between the past and the future era of modernity. This rupture is visible in the discipline of history, as the past was transformed from an instructive model for the present (as in the case of eighteenth century fears about the fall of European civilization) to a linear narrative with a beginning and an end. The potential to reflect back on the past as distinct from the future gave historians the ability to not only learn from the past, but also to judge its outcomes. As Friedrich Schiller famously stated, "world history is the world's

tribunal.”⁴ Therefore, history became a subject “furnished with divine epithets, omnipotence, universal justice, and sanctity” (Kosseleck 34). For Verney, the Last Judgment gravitas of history is complicated by the very nature of his “last man” narrative. By endorsing the legitimacy of Verney’s account, the readers essentially erase their audience position. After all, there can never be a reader for the history of the end of humanity.

By 1826, the last man was a well-established figure of cultural fascination. Sussman and Snyder follow the narrative back to 1806, with the publication of the anonymous novel *The Last Man, or Omegarus and Syderia: A Romance in Futurity*. However, the roots of the last man motif can be traced back earlier, to Kant’s late-eighteenth century reflections upon the possibility of a universal history. In 1784, Kant published the essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent,” which predicts that republican forms of government will eventually dominate the world. For Kant, history is directed first by providence and then by humanity itself, as we collectively move towards greater self-awareness and self-governance.⁵ His argument is grounded in the belief that humanity’s moral and social development is the extension of an orderly natural world. At the end of humanity, when a panoptic universal history is revealed, the wisdom of God’s plan will be visible in both nature and human history. For indeed:

What does it help to praise the splendor and wisdom of creation in the nonrational realm of nature, and to recommend it to our contemplation, if that part of the of the great showplace of the highest wisdom that contains the end of all this is - the history of humankind - is to remain a ceaseless objection against it, the prospect

⁴ There appears to be some ambiguity as to when Schiller first made this observation. Kosseleck attributes it to 1784, the same year that Kant published “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective.” Amélie Rorty and James Schmidt’s more recent critical guide to Kant’s essay on universal history places the Schiller quotation two years later, in 1786. In either case, the phrase was picked up as a rallying cry for this new conception of time, history, and historical judgement.

⁵ Kurt Taylor Gaubatz’s “Kant, Democracy, and History” offers a helpful overview of Kant’s argument, as does Manfred Kuhn’s essay “Kant and Fichte on ‘Universal History.’”

of which necessitates our turning our eyes away from it in disgust, in despair of ever encountering a completed rational aim in it, to hope for the latter only in another world. (22)

Here, Kant questions the purpose of celebrating nature's splendor, if none of its orderly perfection is reflected in the culmination of human history. The despair that humanity is to remain obscured from God's wisdom of creation ultimately is what drives people to invest belief in the existence in a second world.

The Last Man directly realizes the fear that humanity will remain "a ceaseless objection" against modern understandings of historical progress. Shelley opens her work with a Kantian view of a republican future, but this system falls under the plague's relentless onslaught. Against a backdrop of profound ecological bounty (grapes "hung purple, or burnished green, among the red and and yellow leaves" while "unpruned vines threw their luxuriant branches around the elms" [70]), Shelley offers an explicit account of humanity's traumatic decline. It's not only human life at stake; the plague also devastates the world's political, cultural, and social systems, leaving England ravaged and empty by the novel's end. This total collapse gives Verney the privileged view of universal history. Yet, unlike in Kant's theorizing, there is no ordered rationality in the world left behind. Even from a retrospective vantage point, the plague's origins are obfuscated and out of reach, creating the impression of a chaotic and meaningless end to humanity. As Snyder writes, "we are confronted with the darkly inexplicable and by the novel's end are led to feel that nothing has been resolved. We witness collapse on a world-wide scale, but the precipitating causes of this catastrophe remain hidden and obscure" (437). The indeterminacy of the novel's conclusion poses a significant challenge to readers. As Kant predicts, there is a temptation to "turn our eyes away from it in disgust" (22) and ignore the

text's senseless vision of humanity's end. However, to look away from the novel's conclusion is to ignore Shelley's pressing critique of England's colonial project. Therefore, the question emerges: how do we respond to the novel's imperial critique without yielding to its annihilating vision of history and becoming passive participants in a system which Shelley condemns, or delegitimizing the very site of the author's critique? The answer, I propose, lies in our system of reading.

New Reading for *Neuzeit*

As Kosseleck has theorized, the French Revolution marked a new conception of historical time. *Neuzeit* represents a dramatic break from the past, as repeated patterns of history were replaced by modernity's linear drive forward. I argue that Shelley is advocating for a similar rupture in the early-nineteenth-century process of reading. In *The Last Man*, the aesthetic distance between reader and text is recast as a temporal distance, as literature is nearly always tied to futurity. The novel's characters enact a prophetic model of reading in which literature has the ability to shape, limit, and control affect and behaviour. In its ideal manifestation, this type of reading has a valuable stabilizing function; indeed, the late works of Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth all reflect a positive belief in literature's socializing power. However, Shelley's novel reveals the danger of this reading methodology, as characters become bound to increasingly damaging futures. Extended outwards, the same might be said of Shelley's reading audience. To read the novel passively, as a blueprint of the future, is to bind oneself to Shelley's annihilating vision of imperial collapse. The only way to circumvent this traumatic prophecy is to propose an alternative system of reading. In doing so, *The Last Man* is transformed from a vision of inevitable destruction into an actionable critique of England's early-nineteenth century colonial ambitions.

The first chapter of my thesis begins by analyzing the restrictive model of reading illustrated in *The Last Man*. At the novel's outset, books have a harmless, even positive, impact upon readers. However, as the plague ravages society, texts begin to have an increasingly harmful effect upon their audience. This is exemplified in one of the novel's final scenes, when last survivors Adrien, Clara, and Verney prepare to set sail for Greece. Verney recites the lines of Moschus's poem, "But when the roar / Of ocean's gray abyss resounds, and foam / Gathers upon the sea, and vast waves burst-" (440). He is quickly chastised for invoking the "evil augury" (440) of literature, but the damage is done. Almost inevitably, the trip ends with shipwreck on the ocean's "gray abyss," claiming the lives of Verney's traveling companions. It is significant that Verney is the sole survivor of this trauma, for he is the only character who illustrates an inclination to free himself from the literature's prophetic ties to imagine variable futures. Accordingly, Verney's status as the world's last man has as much to do with his reading practices as it does his unexplained resistance to the plague. His survival is dually significant, communicating to readers of *The Last Man* that alternative systems of reading are possible, and allowing him to literally author his own story. Verney's authorial status privileges him within the novel's system of reading; if readers are bound to texts' visions of the world, then authors have the power to imagine its outcome. Yet Verney adopts an incredibly conservative authorial position, trading autonomy for history's disciplinary authority. While readers in *The Last Man* are fettered to specific futures, its narrator is inextricably tied to his traumatic past. For the novel's audience, there is a temptation to yield to the novel's proleptic history, accepting the narrative as an unalterable view of the future. However, I argue there is a distinction between the type of reading illustrated in the novel, and the type of reading that Shelley demands of her audience. While the novel's clear diegetic drive and narrative framework demand readers to

legitimize Verney's account of the end, the text's aesthetics work against this interpretation, introducing the potential for literary and colonial reform.

Like Kant, I root my argument in the natural world, approaching Shelley's representations of the environment as the key to dismantling a damaging system of reading. Specifically, the novel experiments with competing aesthetics of ruin and artificial preservation, which highlight the fictionality of literature and the possibility of readerly intervention. The antiquarian aesthetic of the author's introduction situates the novel within eighteenth-century anxieties about repeated patterns of history, and the inevitability of civilizations' decline and fall. However, by the time of the novel's publication, this aesthetic had accrued an additional set of cultural associations. The mass popularity of antiquarianism, coupled with the proliferation of sham ruins, divorced the aesthetic from expectations of historical legitimacy. Instead, the driving force behind art and architecture of the period was to create the illusion of natural age.⁶ Shelley's introduction works in the same way: by drawing upon the markers of historical authenticity, she creates a compelling illusion that is ultimately false. Verney's narrative functions in much the same way, except instead of indulging an aesthetics of ruin, Shelley creates a landscape which is artificially paused. The post-apocalyptic world ought to be a portrait of decay but instead, the world continues on undeterred: architecture stands strong and unweathered, landscapes bloom in bubolic excess, and the animals continue the same rituals they have for millennia (Shelley 70). Although the plague drew humanity into a painful period of decline, the fall has not yet come. I interpret this strange environmental preservation as an opportunity for human intervention. The fact that there *is* an audience to Verney's history, even as a proleptic vision, introduces the hope of a changeable future. Much as Kant articulates the fear of a directionless world in order to

⁶ Joseph Heely's 1777 text *Observations on the Modern Taste in Gardening* offers an excellent practical breakdown of the aesthetic goals and characteristics of antiquarianism.

bolster his interpretation of universal history, Shelley illustrates this traumatic future of collapse to incite action in her readership. Ultimately, then, her novel advocates for a modern view of historical progress and, most significantly, human agency. While Kant may question how history *a priori* is possible, the answer is clear in *The Last Man*. The future is preordained to the extent that people act in service of outcomes that have been predicted in advance. Readers, then, are charged to act against the novel's apocalyptic ending to envision alternative futures for England.

The second chapter of my thesis applies this radically destabilizing conception of reading to the novel's dominant anxieties about early-nineteenth century colonial mobility. Again, I turn to Shelley's representation of the environment to understand the novel's imperial critique. I begin by illustrating how Shelley's imagery engages with the era's widely recognized mythology of imperial conquest (Banks; de Bougainville; Park). Like late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century descriptions of colonial space, the text's post-apocalyptic landscapes are lushly fertile, untouched by human occupation, and primed for European consumption. However, Shelley diverts from the late-Romantic colonial discourse in one key respect: rather than characterizing such geographies as unpopulated, rather than depopulated (Colin Calloway), the plague offers a traumatic history explaining their absence of bodies. This history also spells the end of England, whose island borders are disintegrated by the flow of trade, affect, and diseased bodies. The gradual erasure of nationhood illustrates a cultural anxiety about the cost of empire. In Shelley's novel, England and empire are mutually exclusive; the achievement of ideal colonial space is directly tied to the collapse of nationhood. Therefore, *The Last Man* leaves readers stranded within an apocalyptic vision of colonial space, with no obvious recourse for responding to its traumatic vision. It falls to readers to find their way out of this annihilating conclusion to transform this cultural narrative of colonial rapine and imperial collapse.

My conclusion ties together the various threads that run through this project. I frame my theory of reading and Shelley's colonial critique as competing temporal drives: critical reading draws us forward, towards *Neuzeit* and modernity, while the author's imperial concerns illustrate a nostalgic longing for the past. Ultimately, I argue that the novel's move towards modernity is more compelling than its regressive desire for national insularity. In doing so, I offer the *The Last Man* itself as a key text upon which to practice Shelley's new system of critical reading.

Chapter I | Proleptic Rupture and Aesthetic Pause: A Model for Reading *The Last Man*

Literature and reading are fundamentally entwined; each allows the other to come fully into being. Benedict de Spinoza wrote that “the Mind is determined to will this or that by a cause that is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity” (48). In *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley draws upon this circular view of thought and behaviour to challenge socializing function of literature that was propagated by the early-19th century turn towards “State Romanticism” (Anne Frey). By interrogating how literature creates readers and how readers reciprocally imbue texts with meaning, Shelley recasts this conservative view of reading into a dangerously prophetic enterprise, where characters are inextricably bound to the texts they consume. However, there is a chasm between the type of reading modeled within the novel, and the sort of reading Shelley demands of her audience. The novel’s layered claims of historicity tempt readers to fall into the model of reading that Shelley critiques in *The Last Man*. And yet, the competing “last man” narrative ruptures this passive mode of reading, as readers must reconcile their status as impossible witnesses to the end of time. The text’s annihilating conclusion raises a central question: how do we read against the novel’s prolepsis to envision alternative futures? The answer lies in Shelley’s aestheticized portraits of the natural world.

The novel’s relentless plague narrative has generated significant scholarly attention for Shelley’s complex representations of suffering bodies.⁷ Meanwhile, discussions of the novel’s environment have been limited to historical perspectives emphasizing actual early-19th century experiences of ecology, trade, and global disease. This chapter re-centers the environment within scholarship on *The Last Man* by introducing aesthetics as a core means of understanding Shelley’s landscapes. Positing that the text’s environment has metaphorical, in addition to historical, value, I analyze the novel’s landscapes as an aesthetic commentary on reading.

⁷ Siobhan Carroll and Ranjita Chatterjee offer two of the most recent examples of this scholarship.

Shelley's author's introduction draws heavily upon the Romantic era's fascination with antiquarian ruins, contextualizing her project within the aesthetic's concerns about linear time and historical decline. However, Shelley abandons this ruined aesthetic in the novel itself, offering fantastically bucolic landscapes as the backdrop to plague's totalizing annihilation. Despite the novel's apparent anxieties about decline, the fall never comes. Instead, the world's landscapes are perfectly preserved, suggesting an opportunity for reversal or rebirth. Shelley's aesthetic representation of a pause between her vision of decline (of humanity, of Empire, and of nationhood) and the absolute moment of collapse introduces the possibility of human agency. For readers, the artificial stillness of Shelley's post-apocalyptic is incentive to read the text in a new way. By forsaking the early-nineteenth-century vision of reading as a conservative, stabilizing enterprise in favour of an aesthetic vision that privileges agency and intervention, Shelley empowers her readers to reject the annihilating future that waits before them. Instead, the novel's environmental denial of ruin allows readers to reframe its diegetic decline as a potentially radical call to action.

Reading in *The Last Man*

In *The Last Man*, reading is a stabilizing enterprise, imbued with the socializing power to teach, limit, and control behaviour. Characters are passively bound to the ways of being modeled within texts, to the extent that they are unable to deviate from the norms, affect, and experiences simulated through writing. Indeed, these bonds are so powerful that, within the diegesis of Shelley's novel, literature takes on a prophetic dimension. This method of reading represents a conservative ideal: friendship, love, and community are taught and continually reinscribed through literature, creating a populace bound by shared national values and ideals. However, the stabilizing model of passive reading is problematized in *The Last Man*, as the prophetic bonds of

literature invoke increasingly dire consequences for the novel's characters. Accordingly, readers of *The Last Man* are prompted to distance themselves from the mode of reading modeled within the novel, and construct an alternative method for accessing Shelley's text.

In *The Last Man*, the act of reading appears to bind characters to specific futures. Benedict de Spinoza's philosophy of *affectio* and *affectus* offers a useful terminology for framing this relationship between texts and their readers. In his philosophy, *affectus* is an affection "of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (70). Glossing Spinoza, Giles Deleuze defines it as "the lived transition or lived passage from one degree of perfection to another, insofar as this passage is determined by ideas such as *affectio*." Within *The Last Man*, literature is an *affectus* that acts upon the bodies of its readers, cultivating new futures and ways of being in the *world*. The relationship is intimate, transformative, and above all limiting: in transitioning readers to new "degrees of perfection," literature eliminates the possibility of deviant routes and alternative futures. In place, books take on a prophetic quality, allowing the characters in Shelley's novel to literally read their futures. The key narrative moments in *The Last Man* are foreshadowed by scenes of reading, from the idyllic communion between Verney and his wife, to Verney's infection with the plague, to the devastating shipwreck that leaves Verney alone at the novel's conclusion.

This model of reading can be contextualized within the late-Romantic turn towards authorial and institutional conservatism, or what Anne Frey terms "State Romanticism." Following the Napoleonic Wars, the British government expanded its scope through a proliferation of civil agencies and statistical studies, both at home and within its ever-expanding imperial empire. Frey writes that "for the late Romantics, the diffusion of state functions . . .

allows the state to extend its authority over regions it had not previously superintended: both geographical regions, like the Scottish highlands, and conceptual regions, like the individual conscience and emotional life” (3). Literature, with its ability to imaginatively recreate foreign lands and directly impact individual affect, was an important vehicle for both of these initiatives. Shelley’s ambivalent representations of reading in *The Last Man* can be interpreted as a critical reaction against the State Romanticism emerging in the 1820s. While the late works of contemporaries like Coleridge, Southey, and Wordsworth illustrate how literature can be used to teach behaviour, moderate emotions, and form national identity, Shelley illuminates the danger of literary *affectus*. Through increasingly catastrophic representations of reading, she advocates for a critical reading methodology that challenges literature’s socializing power to imbue it with a destabilizing capability.

At the novel’s outset, reading is a source of steadying companionship, socializing Verney to become a loving husband and friend. For instance, Verney feels an “excess of passionate devotion” (77) before his marriage to Idris, but reading circumscribes his feelings into a socially appropriate form. By superimposing Idris’ image onto his literary ideals of Antigone, Shakespeare’s Miranda, and Byron’s Haidee, Verney hones his conception of womanly value and romantic love. Ultimately, his desire is rewarded: Verney marries Idris, ushering in a new epoch of happiness at Windsor. This idyll is best captured by the image of the family spending “whole days under the leafy cover of the forest with our books” (90). For Verney, whose “sole companions” were previously “books and loving thoughts,” (77) this domestic scene of reading signifies the fulfillment of his readerly imaginings.

Although Verney is rewarded in his relationship with Idris, literature’s ability to manage affect, mediate desire, and model behaviour takes on an increasingly damaging position as the

novel progresses. The climactic moment of Verney's infection with the plague is an ideal representation of its dangerous power. Although virtually every scholar of *The Last Man* has given some attention to the scene where "a negro half clad" tackles Verney and literally breathes the "death-laden" plague into his body (336), few, if any, scholars have given due attention to the scene of reading that prefigures the event. Earlier in the novel, "a craving for excitement" (259) leads Verney to read *Journal of the Plague Year*, written by Daniel Defoe and illustrated by Arthur Mervyn. The images evoked by this text "were so vivid" that Verney "seemed to have experienced the results depicted by them. . . . This indeed was the plague" (229). Like his romantic imaginings, Verney's reading about the plague is associated with heightened affect. Verney is overwhelmed by the sensations evoked through text to the extent that he believes them to be real. He describes the images from Defoe's book if they are real, plague-riddled bodies lying before him: "I raised his rigid limbs, I marked the distortion of his face, and the stony eyes lost to perception. And I was thus occupied, chill horror congealed my blood, making my flesh quiver and my hair stand on end" (259-60). In Verney's logic, reading brings characters to life or, more precisely, it makes literary bodies real.

Verney's reading practice gains a degree of dangerous legitimacy when contextualized within Defoe's own views of authorship and reading. In *The Compleat English Gentleman*, published almost a century before *The Last Man*, Defoe identifies literature as a superior epistemology. He writes:

[Man may] make a tour of the world in books, he may make himself master of the geography of the university in the maps, atlases and measurements of our mathematicians. He may travell by land with the historians, by sea with the

navigators. He may go round the globe with Dampier and Rogers, and know a thousand times more doing it than all those illiterate sailors. (225)

In supplanting empiricism with reading, Defoe champions the same model of reading that is depicted in *The Last Man*. The characters' habits in *The Last Man*, then, are not merely confined to the pages of Shelley's novel, but instead reflect a long genealogy of authors and thinkers who valorized this reading methodology.

Verney's decision to "raise" the body from *Journal of the Plague Year* takes on a Frankensteinian overtone, as Defoe's plague victim becomes re-animated through the process of reading. Just as one may tour the world through books, Verney can also tour the monstrosities of a plague-riddled body via Defoe's writing. Verney's visceral physiological aversion to the dead body's rigid limbs and distorted countenance parallel his own moment of infection later in the novel. Describing the moment of contagion, Verney writes that a man "wound his naked festering arms around me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome" (336). The rigidity of Verney's body echoes the corpses' stiff limbs in Defoe's text, while his "horror" at the "festering arms" embracing him evoke earlier revulsion at the corpse's distorted face.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel between the scenes is the suggestion of paralysis. When reading about the plague, "chill horror congealed [Verney's] blood" (259). This image is suggestive of scabbing, as though Verney's blood is seeking to form a protective barrier against the impact of Defoe's text. More telling, however, is its associations with immobility. Congelation (from the Latin roots *con-* "together" and *gelare* "freeze") describes slowing down, thickening, and ultimately setting. In a sense, Verney's future is coagulating before him in response to the affectus of Defoe's novel. As a passive reader, Verney accepts literature as truth

and, in doing so, imbues it with a prophetic power. His fate appears set from the moment he imaginatively raises the plague. Of course, the legitimacy of this prophetic power is undermined by the fact of Verney's survival. When Verney becomes the last man on earth, he explicitly disrupts the relationship between reading and futurity once so prominent in the novel. His survival is not the result of strange exception (Robert Lance Snyder), inoculation (Alan Bewell), or sheer randomness (Peter Melville). Instead, it is a result of Verney's growth as a critical reader. While the other characters remain passive readers, shackled to certain futures, Verney escapes these bonds to write his own personal and literary narrative.

Alternative Relationships to Literature

Verney's shift in reading methodology is made clearest in the final third of the *The Last Man*, when the novel's apocalyptic setting puts the characters' reading habits in stark relief. Aspects of their reading style that were camouflaged against the familiar, if futuristic, backdrop of England in the first sections of the novel are revealed as limiting and dysfunctional against the backdrop of a world on the brink of collapse. On this new frontier, books are emptied of their socializing function, leaving only an aesthetic and affective experience that terrifies the characters.

At one point, the characters stop reading entirely. According to Verney, "there were few books that we dared read; few that did not cruelly deface the painting we bestowed on our solitude, by recalling combinations and emotions never more to be experience by us" (431). Here, Verney persists in finding truth in literature rather than real life. While the world is merely a "painting," the emotions evoked through text are painful, raw, and real. As Elizabeth Effinger rightly argues, "literature provides no balm, no salve against the vacuous horror of their diseased existence. The aesthetic distance offered by such escapist fiction . . . is no longer curative but

rather disfiguring” (21). The concept of distance is crucial in this scene, as the characters are deterred by temporal as well as aesthetic distance. Up to this moment, reading has driven the plot forward; now it carries readers back into the past. Emptied of their didactic value, texts offer no obvious model for living and thriving in an apocalyptic world. And yet, the clear chasm between literary and lived experiences doesn’t deter the characters from reading literature in a prophetic way. Ultimately, only Verney is able to break away from this model of reading to critically differentiate between the reality of his world and the fictionality of texts. This is what saves him as the last man, while his final companions drown at sea.

The final group scene illustrates Verney, Adrian, and Clara deciding to travel to Greece. This plan prompts Adrian to quote Moschus’s poem: “When winds that move not its calm surface, sweep / The azure sea, I love the land no more; / The smiles of the serene and tranquil deep / Tempt my unquiet mind-” (440). As elsewhere in the novel, here Adrien uses these literary lines as a blueprint for his own desire and excitement for the azure sea. A conflict arises when Verney goes on to quote the poem’s following lines: “But when the roar / Of ocean’s gray abyss resounds, and foam / Gathers upon the sea, and vast waves burst-” (440). While Verney appears unaffected, able to differentiate between the affective pull of poetry and his actual future, Adrien and Clara yield to the poem’s *affectio*. They chastise Verney for the poem’s “evil augury,” but these protestations come too late. In *The Last Man*, literature can foretell the future and Moschus’s poem has already precipitated the shipwreck. Adrien and Clara’s fears are validated when a “fierce gale bore the rack onwards, and they were lost in the chaotic mingling of sky and sea” (443).

Verney’s status as last survivor can, therefore, be linked to his status as a reader. While the others feared and submitted to the poem’s augury, Verney is an active respondent to both the

poem and the storm. He fights for survival against his readerly fate, “breasted the surges, and fling them from me, as I would the opposing front. . . When I had been beaten down by one wave, I rose on another” (444). The physical, confrontational, and direct diction reveals Verney’s autonomy; he is no longer constrained by literature’s prophetic bonds. Thus, Verney’s final victory over nature can be understood as a triumph of reading. By cultivating a critical distance from the poem, Verney is able to shake off its prophetic bonds and redefine his future.

Verney’s Historiography

Verney’s centrality within the novel is a reflection of his unique ability to liberate himself from the affectus of literature to envision alternative futures. Shelley takes this readerly autonomy to its literary extreme by framing Verney as the author of *The Last Man*. As the sole survivor in a world annihilated by pestilence, Verney commissions himself to write a history of the end of humanity. His new status as historian grants him certain privilege within the model of reading illustrated in the novel; if readers are bound to literature’s prophetic bonds, then authors should have the power to influence the future.

However, Verney adopts a remarkably conservative authorial position. Despite the ostensible power of authorship implicit in Shelley’s depicted model of reading, Verney is not an autonomous player in this system. While readers are bound to specific futures, Verney, as author and historian, is tied to a specific vision of the past. Influenced by the great literary histories written before him and his own traumatic experience of the plague, the creative aspects of writing are suppressed in favour of compulsive retelling. Lee Sterrenburg argues that, “as a narrator, Verney is forced into the role of an apocalyptic prophet, who warns of a dire fate he can neither forestall nor alter” (340). He faithfully records a history of the plague, unable to rewrite its devastating effects. Near the conclusion of the novel, Verney self-consciously laments:

What would become of us? O for some Delphic oracle, or Pythian maid, to utter
the secrets of futurity! O for some Oedipus to solve the riddle of the cruel
Sphinx! Such Oedipus was I to be . . . to lay bare the secrets of destiny, and
reveal the meaning of the enigma, whose explanation closed the history of the
human race. (Shelley 426-27)

Verney is our Delphic oracle and Pythian maid, who foretells the future with absolute certainty because it is his past. It seems as though this apocalyptic conclusion is unavoidable for readers of *The Last Man*: we have raised our plague, just as Verney raised his through reading.

In the novel's last paragraph, when Verney is about to set out alone in his new world, he has the opportunity to overturn the old models of reading and aesthetic evaluation which appear so damaging within the novel's diegesis. Instead, he picks out the works of Homer and Shakespeare to comfort and guide him on his journey, implicitly sustaining the old literary canon and model of reading. It's obvious that Verney aspires for his own writing to be included with this pantheon of great literary histories, shaping future generations' behaviour and identity through a mythologized link to the past. If, as a reader, Verney wanted to break down the affective bonds between text and reader, the opposite is true for Verney as an author.

Verney's musings on writing are almost exclusively focused upon the intimate relationship between author and reader. "What will become of *us*?" Verney queries, in a desperate lament to an unseen Delphic oracle (426, emphasis added). His need for community is visible throughout the latter half of the novel, as Verney hopefully imagines a lonely wanderer like himself, a "friend" to ease his suffering (456). On the most conspicuous wall of every plague-emptied town, he faithfully paints "Verney, the last of the race of Englishmen, has taken up his abode in Rome. . . . Friend, come! I wait for thee! - Deh, vieni! ti aspetto!" (456).

However, in the broader context of the story, these imaginings read more like the hopeful delusions of a man “without love, without sympathy, without communion with any” than a plausible outcome to his experiences (463). The plague’s totalizing effects are too extreme, the narrative drive towards death is too unswerving, for readers to invest much belief in Verney’s hopeful visions of regeneration. Writing, then, becomes Verney’s alternative site of companionship.

Despite its apparent impossibility, Verney devotes much energy towards envisioning an audience for his history. The questions “for whom to read?—to whom dedicated?” are central to Verney’s authorship, incorporating future readers as if they are new friends (466). When introducing the central figures in his life, Verney warmly writes: “and now let the reader . . . be introduced to our happy circle” (90). He goes so far as to envision his readers’ actual conception (“will not this world be re-peopled, and the children of a saved pair of lovers” [466]) illustrating the depth of attachment and desired intimacy between his text and its readers. The imagined audience serves as Verney’s community, as writing comes to occupy much the same function that reading did early in the novel: an outlet for forming affective and experiential connections through which to socialize one’s feeling, behaviours, and ways of being in the world. Tellingly, it is only once Verney disengages himself from the act of writing that “again I feel that I am alone” (467).

Verney is alone and, despite his wistful imaginings, it seems unlikely that there will ever be an audience for his work. The challenge posed by the “last man” narrative has long been a point of contention for readers; for a novel that, in many ways, devotes itself to deconstructing, examining, and valorizing the act of reading, the premise of the text is remarkably inhospitable to a reading audience. The plague’s triumphant conquest almost guarantees that Verney’s text

will remain eternally unread, rendering it closer to a private journal than a public history. As Walter Ong theorizes, “the case of the diary, which at first blush would seem to fictionalize the reader least but in many ways probably fictionalizes him or her most, brings into full view the fundamental deep paradox of the activity we call writing” (20). The act of reading *The Last Man* brings Shelley’s narrative conceit is brought into the open. As one contemporary review of the novel concluded, Verney’s authorial position “is not imagination, but sheer absurdity.”⁸ The fictionality of Verney’s tale comes into full view, and consumers of the novel are forcefully reminded by their own status as readers. Therefore, the true challenge to readers of the *The Last Man* is deciding how to fictionalize ourselves as an audience.

The challenges posed by Verney’s story are anticipated in the author’s introduction, where Shelley offers a creative framework to overcome the temporal constraints of his narrative. In the introduction, Shelley explains that the tale was discovered in Naples in 1818, inscribed upon hidden leaves in the form an ancient Sibylline prophecy. As an early review of the novel explains, within this framework, “a history of the last man, 247 years hence, becomes as credible, as the history of the first several thousand years ago.” Essentially, it allows readers of the novel to assume the same comfortable reading position that they do when reading the canonical literary histories of Shakespeare and Homer. The text’s renewed claims to historical truth make it easier for readers to overcome the impossibility of the “last man” narrative and fall into the conventional late-Romantic model of didactic, stabilizing, and complacent reading. Indeed, it is in the introduction that the prophetic ties of reading are explicitly realized: the novel is framed as a prophetic vision of our future, and the act of authorship is reduced to transcription and translation.

⁸ This review was published under the title of “*The Last Man*” in the *The Panoramic Miscellany or Monthly Magazine and Review of Literature, Sciences, Arts, Inventions, and Occurrences* in March 1826.

However, these same assertions of prophetic history explicitly contextualize the novel within the Romantic cultural enthusiasm for antiquarianism. The entire novel, from the author's introduction through Verney's narrative, is characterized by a sense of picturesque artificiality that belies its repeated claims to historical truth. Shelley's discovery of the Sibylline prophecy is wrought with gothic sensibility; she and her companion descend deeper and deeper into an unexplored ruin until they discover a "wide cavern with an arched dome-like roof" (5) with an aperture overhead, which lets in "the light of heaven" (5). The only sign that life had touched this ancient space is the skeleton of a goat, which must have fallen through the ceiling opening. She fancifully speculates that "ages perhaps had elapsed since this catastrophe; and the ruin it had made above" (5). Through this atmosphere, Shelley gestures towards the Romantic fascination with ancient history and ruins. However, by 1824, when the novel was published, the delight in antiquity was all but divorced from actual historiography. Visual (or in Shelley's case, literary) claims to age no longer indicated actual historical authenticity. Instead, the aesthetic was tied to a contemporary and regionally specific identity. As Susan Manning explains, "neither academic nor metropolitan in origin, antiquarian activities were characteristically locale- and region-based," functioning to create "a regionally based sense of cultural continuity" (46-7). Thus, while Shelley resists the State Romanticism practiced by her peers, her vision of readerly reform maintains a degree of conservative nationalism. Shelley is writing for an audience of English readers with early-19th century-concerns; as my broader argument suggests, *The Last Man* can be interpreted as a pointed commentary on Britain's outward project of imperial expansion and its detrimental impact upon English nationhood.

Ultimately, Shelley's introduction serves a dual purpose: it both entices and repels readers from legitimizing the novel's claims to truth. Timothy Ruppert argues that the novel's

prophetic context “allows Shelley to unsettle hierarchical linear understandings of human temporality and so to present history as founded on indecisively or disruptive time” (144). I interpret it differently: the prophetic framework enables Shelley to maintain a facsimile of linear time, in that it accords her “last man” narrative a degree of futuristic believability. Indeed, prophecy is fundamentally suggestive of a preordained outcome, evoking a model of reading wherein text is fated to come true. However, this quasi-believability springs directly from Shelley’s participation in the era’s faux antiquarian aesthetic, which late-Romantic readers already knew to approach critically.

The ruined follies so popular in England during this period are a microcosmic example of the Romantic cultural fascination with faux ruins, to form a compelling visual parallel to Shelley’s introduction. In *Observations on the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1777), Joseph Heely describes the complex process of creating a believable folly:

To keep the whole design in its purity — to wipe away any suspicion of its being any otherwise than a real ruin, the large and massy stones, which have seemingly tumbled from the tottering and ruinous walls, are suffered to lie about . . . in utmost confusion. This greatly preserves its intention, and confirms the common opinion of every stranger, of its early date; while, to throw a deeper solemnity over it, and make it carry a stronger face of antiquity, ivy is encouraged to climb about the walls and turrets. (172-73)

Shelley’s prophetic framework functions much like a sham ruin, presenting the illusion of linear temporal progression and historical legitimacy to cultivate both affect and action in her readership. Drawing upon the core characteristics of the late-eighteenth-century folly — historical deception, picturesque disarray, and an intimate bond with nature — her introduction

functions in a similar fashion, and to similar effect. Explaining the impact that architectural “deceptions” have upon their viewer, Heeley writes that “upon first glimpse of this becoming object, which adds much dignity to the scene, one cannot resist an involuntary pause - struck with its characters, the mind naturally falls into reflections, while curiosity is on the wing, to be acquainted with its history” (172-3). This description of the follies’ aesthetic magnetism could just as easily describe the impact of Shelley’s introduction. She too seeks an “involuntary pause” from her audience, followed by a natural slip into reflection, curiosity, and suggestibility. Both author and architect are driven to create a believable work of art that is compelling for its truthfulness. The burden is on the audience, then, to differentiate between pretensions of historical authenticity and actual reflections of truth. Shelley is creating a literary folly that, like its architectural counterparts, has more to say about contemporary England than any imagined past.

In this sense, the novel demands to be understood as one would a gothic ruin, with its affective, aesthetic, and temporal multiplicities. As Joseph Wittreich writes, “prophetic works are, by definition, fragmentary, the particles of a vision that receives articulation and definition only to the extent that an author of a prophecy is able to make its fragmentary parts cohere” (51). As the prophecy’s “decipher” (6), Shelley dedicates herself to forming a coherent narrative out of the Sybil’s disjointed prophetic scribbles, much as a Romantic viewer might dedicate himself to imagining a pile of rubble as a perfect, ancient whole. However, it would be imprecise to passively equate Shelley’s introduction with architectural ruin, without acknowledging the medium in which she works. Andrew Piper described Romantic readers as operating in a “new media reality” (4), dominated by the excess and proliferation of printed texts. By “giving form and substance to the frail and attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl” (6), Shelley becomes an active

participant in this new media paradigm. It is telling that she describes her work as “adaptation and translation,” (6) since earlier in the introduction Shelley clarifies that these leaves were written in English. Therefore, the act of translation must refer to the process of moving between media, from naturalistic sibylline leaves to the newness of Romantic print. Like the novel’s genre, the print medium is also fragmentary. At this time, literary culture was defined by a sense of “too-muchness” (Piper 5), as readers could not possibly keep up with the massive proliferation of media that was circulating with faster speed and higher urgency. Accordingly, Romantic readers consumed fragments of a global outpouring of text; the fundamental disjointedness of this experience could be read as representative of progress, or indicative of spiraling decline. Thus, the novel’s palimpsestic experiences of fragment unseat the novel’s illustrated mode of reading by destabilizing literature itself. Fragmentary and ruinous, the author’s introduction to *The Last Man* frames the novel as an artificial relic of partial truths and aestheticized history.

Aesthetic Artifice and the Possibility of an Alterable Future

Shelley’s experimentation with ruin continues throughout Verney’s narrative. While the author’s introduction embraces the Romantic fascination with ruins, the novel presents a more complex relationship with history. The post-plague landscape appears artificially frozen in time, as signs of decay and collapse are replaced by theatrical illusion, picturesque stillness, and temporal compression. These qualities underscore the landscape’s artifice and indicate the possibility of reading alternative futures in the novel. Essentially, the pristine apocalyptic landscape reaffirms the distinction between the dominant type of reading modeled in *The Last Man* and the type of reading required by the novel. Shelley expects readers to recognize the fictionality of her imagery to fracture the predictive bonds between reading and futurity.

Verney explicitly describes the plague-ridden landscape as “an empty stage” (308) upon which he and the handful of final survivors play out a grotesque charade of normal life. Their routine is to migrate from city to city, discovering new props for this continuous act. Clara, cast as the “little queen” (429), chooses to “array herself in splendid robes, adorn herself with sunny gems, and ape a princely state” (429). This game of pretend illustrates the artificiality of post-plague life. For Clara, still filled with “youthful vivacity,” these luxurious garments promise wealth, beauty, and happiness. Her perpetual practice of playing dress-up reveals a desire to capture these qualities for herself. However, clothing has been emptied of signification in this new world order: “the wretched female . . . [arrays] herself in the garb of splendour,” while the wealthy maiden dies in poverty in “the squalid streets of the metropolis” (319-20). The illusion that Clara is chasing has already been revealed as artificial and meaningless, leaving only “vacant space” (308) in its place. During the last wave of the plague, Verney views a figure singing and waltzing through an abandoned mansion’s ballroom, dressed “in glittering robes and shawls fit for a woman” (333). Upon closer inspection, the child is revealed to be an abused orphan of the plague, with a “sullen expression” and “stern brow.” Verney’s brief misreading of the scene captures, in brief, the complexity of understanding Shelley’s future world. The novel’s characters are driven by a compulsive need to legitimize the normalcy of such a world, but as readers we recognize the futility of their quest.

Indeed, even the backdrop to their grotesque charade appears false and illusory. The “empty mansions” (332) lurking in the background appear like two-dimensional facades, as readers rarely gain interior perspective into their depths. It is only once Verney is truly alone that we gain full access into this domestic sphere. He enters a dwelling which reminds him of home: wood is piled high on the hearth, the table set in preparation for a meal, and a couch covered

with inviting snowy white sheets. The atmosphere of warmth, familiarity, and domestic order nearly “deceived” (453) Verney into believing that he has discovered another survivor. Alas, his “delusion” (454) is shattered when he examines the meal that is laid out: “the bread was blue and moldy; the cheese lay a heap of dust. . . . Every utensil was covered with dust, with cobwebs, and myriads of dead flies: these were objects each and all betokening the fallaciousness of my expectations” (454).

Shelley’s image of the undisturbed table is reminiscent of a *vanitas*, a genre of still-life painting that displays symbolic objects as a *memento mori*, or reminder of death’s inevitability. The genre’s popularity peaked in the early-seventeenth century Netherlands but its echoes were felt throughout British painting for centuries afterwards. English painter Benjamin Blake’s 1823 *vanitas* “Still life,” which depicts dead game, a dark bottle, and a cabbage displayed on a rustic table, captures the same recognition of life’s transience that Shelley’s image conveys. In both works, rotting food is the most overt manifestation of death, transforming a bountiful table into a “death feast” (454). However, despite this explicit reminder of age and decay, both images are remarkably stable in their representation of decomposition; they are snapshots in time, leaving it to the audience to imagine the gradual progress of mold and decay. While this is stillness typical of a still-life painting, static in its composition and form, it registers as unusual in *The Last Man*.

Writing has the power to move us - in ways of thinking about the world (as illustrated by the characters in the novel), affectively (as readers of *The Last Man* might experience) and, most basically, through time and space within an imagined literary world. However, Shelley transforms literature’s fundamental mobility to craft a scene of utter stillness. The dusty meal stops Verney in his tracks, fracturing his happy illusion and forcing him to recognize the falsity of his existence. It is significant that this scene takes place indoors, deep inside the previously

inaccessible domestic realm. In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Heidegger delves into the concept of dwelling, following its etymological roots to the High German and Old English *bauen*, Old Saxon *wuon* and the Gothic *wunian*. Ultimately, he concludes that dwelling means “to stay in a place . . . preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. . . The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving” (149). It is notable that Heidegger inflects his discussion of spatiality with an element of time: dwelling is to stay in place, both physically and temporally. Shelley’s *vanitas* captures Heidegger’s sense of dwelling, highlighting the qualities of stasis, interiority, and stability. Indeed, the cottage’s dimly lit interior almost recalls the protective womb-like cave where Shelley initially discovered the Sybil’s untouched prophetic leaves. For readers, the scene foregrounds the strange degree of preservation characterizing the post-apocalyptic world: meals are untouched, architecture is spared from deterioration, and the environment flourishes unhindered by humankind’s eradication. Beyond the dusty meal, “nothing was in ruin” (332) on Verney’s lonely stage.

The plague, which has violently eradicated the entire human race, leaves the rest of the world “in trim and fresh youth” (332) and utter stillness. The conspicuous lack of ruin in the post-apocalyptic world merits new scholarly attention, particularly considering Shelley’s relish in the aesthetic in the author’s introduction. Decay and ruin are natural fixtures in the novel in the scenes that take place before the plague; it is only in the post-apocalyptic world that Shelley eradicates the natural processes of age, decay, and dereliction. For instance, when Raymond enters the pestilent city of Constantinople, it collapses in spectacular ruin. His entry into the Golden City is meant to be a triumphant finale to his triumph over the Turks on behalf of the Greeks. Instead, it is the fulfillment of Evadne’s prophecy: “Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction—O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!” (181). This sepulchral curse is

realized in the most dramatic fashion possible, as the city collapses in masses of “falling ruin” (198). Shelley lingers over these scenes of destruction, emphasizing the immediacy of its destruction.

Upon discovering Raymond’s mangled body Verney averts his eyes, seeking some respite from its devastation. Instead, he sees “various articles of luxury and wealth, singed, destroyed—but shewing what they had been in their ruin—jewels, strings of pearls, embroidered robes, rich furs, glittering tapestries, and oriental ornaments, [that] seemed to have been collected here in a pile destined for destruction” (200). This image of destroyed wealth foreshadows the pristine luxury items that lay abandoned in the post-apocalyptic world. Of course, they differ in one key respect: the jewelry, garments, and ornaments in Constantinople are noted for their destruction, while these same items in post-plague Europe are perfectly preserved for Clara’s games of dress-up. The lack of ruin in the novel’s post-apocalyptic landscape indicates the possibility of a changeable future. Unlike Evadne’s prophetic ravings, which end in clear and ruinous destruction for Raymond, Shelley’s prophetic vision doesn’t imply the same degree of causal inevitability.

Ruins indicate a straightforward view of time and history. They serve as a reminder of time’s inevitable impact and death’s eventual enclosure: new buildings are weathered by wear, neglect, and willful intervention, until they reach the state of decay so fetishized by architects, artists, and audiences during the Romantic era. Shelley’s refusal to incorporate ruins’ natural presence in her apocalyptic vision creates a landscape that appears artificially stilled, even cryogenically frozen in time. By choosing to eradicate this element from her post-plague landscape, Shelley resists linear conceptions of time and history. Ruppert and I agree that Shelley “assays various notions of literary and temporal continuity to show that humankind’s fate [...] is

never foreordained” (144). Likewise, this indeterminate future indicates a rejection of the model of reading where literature becomes determinate of a reader’s present and future. The material landscape is paused at the end of *The Last Man*, which opens the possibility of envisioning alternative futures. To do as Shelley encourages, and recognize the artificiality of her apocalyptic world, is to fundamentally rupture literature’s prophetic bonds and offer up an alternative mode of reading.

Chapter II | Historicizing Eden: The Post-Apocalyptic Landscape as a Site of Imperial Conquest

In *The Last Man*, readers are largely limited to the ways of being modeled within text, creating a circular experience of reading, writing, and thinking about the world. Shelley, through her aesthetics of ruin and preservation, seeks to overturn this predictive cycle of literature and introduce an alternative model of reading literature. The novel's allusions to artifice delegitimize its validity as blueprint for real world action, and open the possibility of envisioning alternative futures. Through this system of reading, *The Last Man* is transformed from a distant prophetic vision into an actionable critique of early-nineteenth-century England. As I have outlined in the previous chapter, the collapse of humanity and the post-apocalyptic environment are curiously divorced in the novel. The landscape is free of ruin and decay, creating a fantastical sense of paused time that implies the possibility of human intervention. In this chapter, I re-contextualize these qualities in light of Shelley's ambivalence concerning Romantic England's colonial expansion. Endlessly productive, requiring no labour, and available for occupation, the post-apocalyptic landscape is deeply reminiscent of the early-19th century ideal of colonial space.

Paul Cantor was the first to argue that, "of all the forces in the modern world Shelley links to the plague, none is more important than imperialism" (195). The majority of post-colonial scholarship concerning *The Last Man* examines the plague as Shelley's main site of imperial critique. Anne McWhir and Siobhan Carroll argue that the plague's miasmatic transmission is a visceral reminder of the world's increasingly borderless nature, while Anne Mellor and Audrey Fisch interpret Verney's moment of infection as a collapse of colonial distance. These readings interpret the plague as a traumatic symptom of England's program of colonial conquest; the novel's increasingly graphic narrative serves as both a metaphorical

expression of Shelley's anxieties concerning imperialism, and an allusion to the actual disease sweeping the globe during this period. Alan Bewell argues that "colonial experience was profoundly structured by disease, both as metaphor and reality" (2), and post-colonial critics of Shelley's novel strive to acknowledge the dual signification of Shelley's plague.

Yet, the plague is not only a symptom of imperialism. It also functions as a direct metaphor for imperialism itself. The plague's insatiable appetite for death empties the world of diseased bodies to create the colonial ideal: fertile, labourless, and available for imperial conquest. Shelley's post-apocalyptic vision and the early-19th century dream of colonial space diverge in one key respect: while imperialists propagated a myth of timeless edenic newness, Shelley writes a traumatic history for this space. England's project of outward imperialist expansion is inverted by the plague's relentless drive inwards, as diseased colonial bodies come flooding back to England seeking refuge from the island nation. However, the plague is a relentless consuming force that clears the nation of bodies. Ultimately, the plague accomplishes what Romantic England's project of colonial expansion failed to do — it realizes the ideal of fertile, labourless, edenic space. However, in a devastating reversal, this history unfolds on British soil, transforming these dreams of empire into the destruction of nationhood. *The Last Man* leaves readers in a land that is ecologically fertile, yet barren of community, offering up a dismal vision of England's imperial future. Shelley's linkage between empire and apocalypse creates an opportunity for readers to exercise the critical reading methodology encouraged by the novel's aesthetics.

Imperial Mobilities: The Plague's Contracting Scope

In *The Last Man*, the plague's transmission is explicitly linked to the interconnected world championed by Romantic imperialists. In a system where national borders are superseded

by global networks of connectivity, the plague illustrates England's vulnerability to outside penetration. At the plague's outset, Shelley clearly emphasizes its universal scope, and the ease with which it traverses routes of trade and travel to envelop the world. Its apparently miasmatic transmission heightens this sense of a stealthy, indefensible global assault. The plague is characterized as an epidemic that resists quarantine: "the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased. If infection depended on the air, the air was subject to infection" (Shelley 231). Siobhan Carroll argues that this atmospheric cosmopolitanism was dictated by "Shelley's contemplation of 1816's international ecological crisis and by her consideration of Britons' responsibilities towards colonial members of their expanded empire" (9). Shared humanity is recast as shared ecology, and the environment becomes a medium through which to examine anxieties about imperial interconnectedness.

Verney's first sign of the plague's reckoning is the appearance of a "black sun" that eclipses the sky, causing night to fall "sudden, rayless, entire" (224). Verney describes this meteorological phenomenon as occurring in "every country," emphasizing the world's global connectivity in the face of environmental, or air-bourne, assault. However, immediately preceding and proceeding this statement, Verney clarifies that this black orb never cast[s] its shadows on England. Verney and his countrymen only hear about this dark luminary from stories "brought to us from the East, . . . from Asia, from the eastern extremity of Europe, and from Africa as far west as the Golden Coast" (224). Verney concludes this passage with the dismissive observation "whether this story were true or not, the effects were certain" (224). Verney's directly contradictory statements illustrate his discomfort about England's status in an interconnected world. Verney discredits the black sun's presence over England, framing it as a rumoured Eastern phenomenon. However, these rhetorical attempts at distancing England from

the East prove futile against the actual onslaught of the plague. As Ranita Chatterjee argues, “in these resulting effects of the Plague’s tyrannical rule, we see that her power is neither localized nor traceable. This apocalyptic Plague functions more like the Law that exists through and in the sovereign and with the capacity to rule over and control human bodies” (39). It is significant that the black sun is the plague’s only environmental harbinger in the novel. Beyond this rumored event, the plague exclusively affects human bodies; it is a curse of humanity, intent on colonizing the entire globe.

Ultimately, it is neither nature nor law but commerce which marks Verney’s first direct impact from the plague. Like a trail of dominoes knocking each other down, the plague illuminates the points of connection within Romantic Britain’s international economic system. “Bankers, merchants, and manufacturers, whose trade depended on exports and the interchange of wealth, become bankrupt” (234) in the face of the plague’s progress, and “even the source of colonies was dried up, for in New Holland, Van Diemen’s Land, and the Cape of Good Hope, plague raged” (234). Here, Shelley distinguishes between the myth of colonial space, and the post-apocalyptic reality of this ideal. The idea of colonies drying up directly contradicts their status as endlessly fertile sites of possibility and progress. Only after the plague devastates these nations does ideal colonial space become perfectly realized, with the destruction of the world’s population making room for an ecological revolution. Just as Romantic imperialists sought to rewrite and re-illustrate colonial space to conform it to their narrative of paradisiacal newness, the plague aggressively transforms the world to satiate its desires.

As previously suggested, the plague isn’t merely communicated by these imperial points of connection; it itself is a colonizing force. In a reverse colonial migration, the plague drives the world’s population into England. Emigrants from North America come streaming back to

Europe, and “several hundreds landed in Ireland” (295). From there, the North Americans and Irish embark for England, via Scotland. Paul Cantor understands this immigration as an “Empire Strikes Back” moment, wherein “the refuse of the British empire [come] pouring back into the home country (196). Their journey follows England’s path of imperial expansion; these diseased bodies are literally bringing home the problem of colonial conquest. In a moment of insight, Adrian remarks that “the evil is come home to us, and we must not shrink from our fate” (244). He refers to the plague and yet, within this context of migratory reversal, the evil could also refer to the sins of empire. The plague forces England to acknowledge the consequences of its imperial endeavors, all collected neatly within its island borders. The narrative scope of *The Last Man* is thus reduced from a global, even atmospheric scale, to a national tragedy. As the plague progresses, taking with it more and more bodies, the novel’s scope narrows even farther to focus on the experiences of the last survivors and, finally, the last man itself.

This gradual breakdown of scale cumulates in the intimate scene of Verney’s infection:

I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. (336-37)

Apparently deviating from the plague’s system of air-borne transmission, Shelley represents Verney’s infection (or “inoculation,” [313] as Alan Bewell writes) as a visceral moment of

bodily contact (Snyder 444). For Peter Melville, this encounter is “distinctly inconsistent with the plague’s epidemiology” (826), suggesting that there is “no rhyme or reason for the last man’s enduring fortitude” (826). I push against these interpretations, which posit Verney’s moment of infection as a moment of exception, and instead understand it as the logical progression of the novel’s gradually diminishing scope. Shelley’s narrative breadth gradually decreases, from the entire world (united by economic and meteorological systems), to England as an island refuge, to a makeshift community of survivors. Ultimately only Verney is left, his memories and reflections becoming the full scope of the novel. The plague’s transmission, then, is a reflection of this progressive narrative intimacy.

This infected African represents the dangerous mobilities incited by the plague. The encounter between Verney and the African can be understood as an unanticipated contact zone between the colonizer and colonized. As Mary Pratt explains, contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). Conventionally, the African would be in the subordinate position, as a target of England’s colonial aggression. However, in this scene Shelley complicates and reverses the typical power dynamic; it is the African who inhabits Verney’s country and controls his movement, as he “held me down with a convulsive grasp,” and “wound his naked festering arms round me” (336). Together, they form an intimate tableau, which can be viewed as a grotesque parody of the imperial motif of a kneeling racialized figure offering up gifts to Britannia. However, rather than upholding the greatness of England, the African’s gift causes it to fall: Verney “fell on the sufferer . . . and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals” (337). In this moment, the scope of Shelley’s novel is reduced to their exchange, and all the world’s air is condensed within their breath. Readers become observers to a sight otherwise

impossible to behold: the miasmatic transferral of the plague. Anne McWhir argues that Shelley's anti-contagionism "transforms a relatively straightforward discourse of cause and effect into one of mystery, uncertainty, and insidious influence" (N. pag.). When the African exhales the plague into Verney's body, the mystery is momentarily unveiled: the plague isn't merely airborne, it is the air itself.

Death "mingled with the atmosphere, which as a cloak enwraps all our fellow-creatures—the inhabitants of native Europe—the luxurious Asiatic—the swarthy African and free American had been vanquished and destroyed by her" (426). Verney's reference to the plague's world-wide devastation serving to illustrate how the world has contracted in response to the plague. At first, Verney explicitly describes this new world as "a colony, which borne over the far seas, struck root for the first time in a new country" (383). Verney's metaphor of rooting the colony in a new land echoes the pro-imperialist trope of a giant tree (Britannia) whose roots expand outwards in every direction, naturalizing England's maritime empire as an organic extension of its national soil (Baker 95). However, in keeping with the rest of Shelley's novel, Verney ultimately rejects this metaphor in favour of a Burkean anti-imperialism.

The Post-Plague Landscape as Colonial Ideal

In the final scene of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Verney stands at the edge of the Tyrrhenian Sea to examine the kingdom stretching before him. The plague has rendered him de facto ruler of a post-apocalyptic world that stretches from "the verdant land of native Europe," through "tawny" Africa, "the fierce seas of the Cape," and "the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean" (469). This image recalls a scene from some fifty years earlier, when English explorer and botanist Sir Joseph Banks confronted another coastline as the precipice of a new world. Upon encountering Tahiti in 1769, Banks wrote that the island "was the truest picture of an

Arcadia of which we were going to be Kings” (117). As Banks’ and Verney’s shared feelings of awe and ownership suggest, there exists a connection between the Romantic dream of colonial space and Shelley’s aesthetic vision of a ruined world.

During the Romantic period, colonial spaces were constructed as edenic sites of imperial potential. Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century explorers, natural scientists, writers, and politicians established a myth of colonial space which emphasized its natural fecundity and available potential. Shelley engages with this myth in *The Last Man* through her representation of post-apocalyptic space. The post-apocalyptic landscape and the Romantic myth of colonial space share three central characteristics: they are robustly fertile, require no labour, and are primed for occupation by virtue of their emptiness. By applying the idealized qualities of colonial space to the post-plague landscape, Shelley queries the implications of conceptualizing colonial space as a new garden of Eden by highlighting the dangerous implications of this myth.

This perception of colonial space extended well beyond the South Seas, reverberating through most exploration narratives of the period. Upon reaching “the majestic Niger” in July 1796, Mungo Park “hastened to the brink, and having drunk of the water, lifted upon my fervent thanks in prayer to the Great Ruler of all things, for having thus far crowned my endeavour with success” (99). Park’s exuberant reaction to the Niger echoes Banks’ response to Tahiti, as both men express a sense of divine entitlement over the rich landscape. While Banks imagines himself King of the Tahitian landscape, Park thanks the Lord, who has “crowned” (99) his endeavor. As the parallel between Banks’, Park’s and Verney’s expansive sense of environmental ownership suggests, there is a connection between Romantic sites of colonial potential and Shelley’s vision of apocalyptic ruin.

When French explorer Louis de Bougainville visited Tahiti in 1768, he likened the island to “the Elysian fields” (245). Amazed by the “many prospects and beautiful landscapes, covered with the richest productions of nature” (244), de Bougainville’s lush descriptions of the island introduced Tahiti as a space of ecological excess. Although Bougainville claimed that Tahiti’s disordered beauty “was never in the power of art to imitate” (244), visual art played a significant role in establishing this myth of an edenic Tahiti within the European imagination. John Webber’s oil on canvas painting *View of Otapia Bay in Otaheite (Tahiti)* (1787) exemplifies the European aesthetic tradition of fashioning colonial spaces into Edenic visions. John Webber was one of several artists to travel with Captain James Cook during his voyage around the South Seas and the Pacific Ocean from 1776 to 1780. His painting emphasizes the island’s vibrant natural beauty and extravagant vegetation. Two female figures garbed in white walk in the image’s left foreground, appearing as virginal extensions of this primordial landscape primed for British, masculine conquest. This visual representation Tahiti as a fertile island paradise contributed towards a broader myth of colonial space: endlessly fertile, and ready for English consumption.

A year after Bougainville, during his first voyage to Tahiti upon the HM Bark *Endeavour* in 1769, Banks also emphasized the landscape’s robust fertility. In his journal, he describes “Cocoa nut and Bread fruit trees loaded with a profusion of fruit” (117), evoking a clear image of tree boughs brought low due to the weight of their fruit. Shelley captures these qualities in her descriptions of post-apocalyptic nature: “grapes, overripe, had fallen on the ground, or hung purple, or burnished green, among the red and yellow leaves” (70). This description of botanical excess recalls Banks’ and Bougainville’s visions of Tahiti, with both images suggesting a degree of ecological availability. The unharvested coconuts, breadfruit, and grapes (which have already begun to fall to the ground and rot) act as an enticing invitation to consume. However, the

consumption of fruit is tied to the consumption of landscape: while Romantic imperialists laid claim to Tahiti's island "arcadia" (Banks 117), the imperial plague aggressively colonizes England in *The Last Man*. Emptied of human bodies, Shelley's post-apocalyptic landscape thrives independently of human intervention. Verney describes "unpruned vines [that] threw their luxuriant branches around the elms" (Shelley 430) and "chestnuts, to which the squirrel only was harvest-man" (430). These scenes of "plenty" (430) emphasize an absence of labour — the vines grow unpruned, while the chestnuts remain largely unharvested. Here, the flourishing post-apocalyptic landscape diverges from the reality of late-18th and early-19th century colonial space. While Shelley's novel perfectly captures the ideal of labourless fertility, the fantasy proved impossible for Romantic England.

Unmasking the Myth of Colonial Space

Joseph Banks' scheme to transplant Tahiti's native breadfruit tree throughout the British empire illustrates the distinction between Shelley's aestheticized ideal of endless fertility, and the reality of Romantic imperial endeavor. After his 1796 expedition to Tahiti, Banks lauded the breadfruit tree's high-caloric starchy fruit as a means of reducing labour in the British Empire. He wrote that "in this article of food these happy people [Tahitians] may almost be said to be exempt from the curse of our forefathers. Scarcely can it be said that they earn their bread with the sweat of their brow when . . . Breadfruit is procur'd with no more trouble than that of climbing a tree" (199). Bank's reference to "the curse of our forefathers" (199) rhetorically contributes to the idea of Tahiti (and colonial space more generally) as a prelapsarian space of labourless reward. The breadfruit tree was seen as a means of escape from the labour cursed upon man after Adam's fall. With the support of King George III, Banks spearheaded an operation to transplant the tree from Tahiti throughout the British Empire.

However, his plan to transplant the breadfruit tree, ostensibly premised upon a desire to reduce human labour, was fundamentally contingent upon the exploitation of Jamaica's slave population. The breadfruit tree was expressly intended to feed the African slaves labouring in the colony's sugar industry. As the Royal Gazette optimistically reported in 1793, the introduction of breadfruit to Jamaica "will constitute a remarkable era in its annals. In less than twenty years, the chief article of sustenance for our negros will be entirely changed" (130). While an estimated fifteen thousand slaves died of malnutrition between 1780 and 1787, English demand for sugar grew insatiably (Clarkson 130). Consumption doubled between 1740 and 1775 (Mintz 95) and, by the 1780s, Jamaica was the largest sugar producer in the English-speaking Caribbean, responsible for five-eighths of England's imports (Chenoweth 6-7). By reducing the labour needed to produce food for themselves, slaves could direct their energies more fully towards the demands of the sugar industry. In essence, the benefit of the breadfruit tree wasn't the reduction of labour in and of itself, but its ability to redistribute labour more efficiently towards the goals of Empire. Thomas Gosse's painting *Transplanting Breadfruit from Otaheite* (1769) is one of the few images to depict this diffusion of imperial labour. His painting captures the liminal points of connection unifying England's network of imperial influence: the South Pacific Ocean (the domain of European explorers) lapped against the shores of Tahiti, while native Tahitians work with English men to transfer plant specimens onto a rowboat to be disseminated throughout the British Empire. Unlike the post-plague ecology in *The Last Man*, which is genuinely devoid of human intervention, the Romantic quest for an imperial paradise was built upon a largely hidden network of dispersed labour and exploitation.

The bodies in this network of colonial labour had to be concealed on both legal and symbolic grounds. England justified its colonial conquests by the Roman legal principle of *res*

nullius, whereby things that are unclaimed remain common property until someone claims them.⁹ The principle is typically applied to unoccupied land put to agricultural use. For this legal logic to function, sites of colonial potential had to be figuratively emptied of preexisting bodies. These bodies also had to be hidden for the colonial myth of edenic newness to persist. George Robertson's landscape paintings of Jamaica, introduced to England in 1774, illustrate this effort to erase the presence of racialized bodies in colonial spaces. Commissioned by sugar planter and historian William Beckford of Somerley to produce six landscape paintings, Robertson travelled to Jamaica in 1772. Images of plantation life in the British West Indies were uncommon during this period, and Robertson's drawings were greeted with enthusiasm upon his return to England in 1774. His images were quickly reproduced by engravers, including Thomas Vivares, James Mason, and Daniel Lerpiniere, allowing them to be widely circulated throughout Romantic England. At the bottom of each engraving, the lettering reads: "Drawn on the Spot, & painted by George Robertson." Like Verney's claims to eyewitness accuracy, Robertson's claim to have created these images "on the spot" gives them an impression of verisimilitude. However, the picturesque landscapes represent a highly aestheticized vision of colonial life, obscuring the exploitation of slave labour in Jamaica's sugar industry.

Only one out of Robertson's series of six paintings directly depicts buildings involved in sugar production. In *A View in the Island of Jamaica, of Roaring River Estate belonging to William Beckford Esq. near Savannah la Marr* (1778), plantation buildings nestle snugly against the backdrop of rolling hills, while African slaves dot the foreground of the image (see fig. 1). The landscape is an Anglo-Jamaican hybrid which establishes Jamaica as a natural extension of

⁹ While many scholars discuss *res nullius* and suggest that it was a way of justifying colonialism from the 16th century to the 20th century (for instance Nicholas Canny, Ken MacMillan, and Anthony Pagden), Andrew Fitzmaurice pushes back against this conception to suggest that it only came into wide use as a reified tool of law in the 18th century.

England, legitimizing its claim to the land. The foregrounded bodies aren't intended to be understood as distinct individuals, but rather as pastoral extensions of the picturesque landscape. Although Robertson represents African bodies in this work, he actively hides the image of the labouring slave body — only one man is depicted working, and he is obscured from view by shadows. The smoke rising from a mill building in the background is the only other cue that labour is occurring within this landscape. As James Walvin outlines, sugar “required labor which was itself shipped across the Atlantic . . . , labor which was alien, . . . , was unaccustomed to the stinging peculiarities of sugar’s laboring system; it was a labor which died in horrifying numbers, which rebelled and resisted as a matter of course” (127). And yet, this understanding would be lost on Robertson’s audience, who was largely unfamiliar with the process of processing sugar cane, and the harsh realities of slave life in the British West Indies. Thus, the narrative of England’s colonial space is ultimately upheld, enabling its myth of edenic newness to flourish.

Shelley pushes against this myth by challenging the assumption that ecological abundance and ostensibly unoccupied spaces indicate paradisiacal newness. Instead of accepting the dominant narrative that colonial spaces were “unpopulated, not depopulated, always empty, not recently emptied” (Calloway 246), Shelley writes a traumatic history explaining the lack of bodies in the novel’s pseudo-colonial post-apocalyptic space.

The ironic ending to Banks’ plan to transplant the breadfruit tree was that, despite being a scientific success (the tree flourished in Jamaica’s warm climate), it was a practical failure. The high caloric fruit was met with near-universal dislike in the British West Indies. On June 6, 1806, Alexander Anderson, the Superintendent of the St Vincent Botanic Garden (where some of the breadfruit specimens had been planted) wrote that breadfruit is “is neglected and despised, unless

by a few persons. They say that Negroes do not like it, and will not eat it, if they can get anything else . . . The fact is the planters hate giving it a place on their estates, as they regard it as an intruder on their cane land” (32). Whether it was because of by the slaves’ dislike of the tasteless fruit, so unlike anything else they would have encountered in Africa or Jamaica, or because the landowners’ reluctance to dedicate precious sugar cane land towards cultivating the tree, the breadfruit tree was ignored for the next fifty years. Its fruit was used to feed pigs, while the slaves for whom it was intended consumed an Afro-Indian diet of maize, yams, plantains and cassava.¹⁰ It was not until well after the Emancipation in 1833, when peasant farms began to become firmly established, that breadfruit became more widely represented in local diets. As David Watts observes, the acceptance of the breadfruit tree in Jamaica was a mid-nineteenth-century development, rather than a Romantic one.

Like Banks’ plan to transplant the breadfruit tree, motivated by the need to feed England’s imperial hunger, the plague is driven by a relentless need to consume. And in both cases, the driving hunger remains unfulfilled. Unlike the conventional conceptualization of hunger as a stimulus in a feedback loop prompting the body to seek food, *The Last Man* reframes hunger as a drive towards death. This linearity is incredibly impactful in a novel that largely privileges circular conceptions of temporal progression. In the previous chapter, I argued that the paused stillness of the post-apocalyptic landscape suggested the possibility of human intervention and transformation. The plague offers no such regenerative potential. Instead, it reads as a damning critique of England’s imperial ambitions which, as illustrated in the case of Banks’ breadfruit, will never be satiated by external nourishment. Instead, the plague turns these imperial ambitions inwards, consuming the nation itself.

¹⁰ John Parry (19) and David Watts (505) both write about the widespread dislike of the breadfruit tree.

In *The Last Man*, hunger is almost always referenced in relation to the plague, becoming an unavoidable precursor to death. The plague renders its sufferers “wild with hunger” (263), establishing an unbreakable bond between bodily hunger and consumption by the plague. For instance, Shelley describes diseased peasants “wandering separate from each other careless of hunger or the sky's inclemency, while they imagined that they avoided the death-dealing disease” (269). Their careless disinterest in bodily hunger is what allows them to maintain the illusion of immunity; to acknowledge hunger, in *The Last Man*, is to anticipate death. This is most clearly illustrated by the astronomer who was so engrossed by his work that, despite often being at the point of starvation, “neither felt hunger, nor observed distress” (289). It is only once he recognizes this bodily drive in the wake of his family’s death that he too falls to the plague.

In an interesting parallel, Death is personified as a hungry body, spurred by the same need for nourishment as those infected by the plague. However, unlike the plague sufferers, who are ultimately consumed by their illness, Death is successful in his hunt for nourishment. Mid-way through the epidemic, Verney remarks that “the hunger of Death was now stung more sharply by the diminution of his food” (320). Death’s hunger is uncontrollable, all-encompassing, and all-consuming. In effect, the plague is driven by his insatiable need to consume. In one of the novel’s penultimate scenes, Verney, Adrian, and Clara are engulfed in a violent tempest, during which their ship is “hemmed in by hungry, roaring waves, buffeted by winds” (441). Even at the end of the world, when Death has claimed almost every person on earth, he hungrily hunts for more victims. It is significant that Shelley frames this hunger as belonging to the earth itself; Death inhabits the “hungry, roaring waves” (441) which drown Adrian and Clara. This illustrates Verney’s precarious position within the post-apocalyptic world: its landscapes are welcomingly lush, fertile, and inhospitable towards human

congregation. For all its ecological abundance, this new Eden leaves Verney's appetites and need for connection unfulfilled.

The Cost of Empire: The Collapse of Nationhood for England's Colonial Ideal

The novel's ultimate irony is that the devastation caused by the plague turns Europe into a facsimile of ideal colonial space. Its landscapes are fertile, requiring no labour to cultivate or maintain their productivity, and utterly emptied of people. And yet, Verney is dissatisfied with this edenic vision of perfect imperialism:

But where was the bustle and industry characteristic of such an assemblage; the rudely constructed dwelling, which was to suffice till a more commodious mansion could be built; the marking out of fields; the attempt at cultivation; the eager curiosity to discover unknown animals and herbs; the excursions for the sake of exploring the country? Our habitations were palaces, our food was ready stored in granaries—there was no need of labour, no inquisitiveness, no restless desire to get on. (Shelley 383)

In a reversal of colonial rhetoric, he misses the “rudely constructed dwelling[s],” “the marking out of fields,” and “the attempt at cultivation” (383) associated with the establishment of a colony. In short, it is the absence of “labour” (383) which he finds most troubling in this post-apocalyptic world. Verney's anxiety about labour (and Shelley's indictment of imperialism) isn't a radical position — he makes no reference to the hidden slave labour fundamental to Romantic colonialism. Instead, it can be read as a conservative desire to return to an insular agrarian economic model, where English men and women work to sustain themselves on a local scale. Ironically, this is the same model that Robertson invokes in his attempt to make Jamaica appear more comfortably English in his picturesque landscapes.

In *The Last Man*, England and empire cannot coexist, as the achievement of ideal colonial space directly tied to the collapse of nationhood. When Verney leaves England, he elegizes “England, no more; for without her children, what name could that barren island claim?” (412). As Charlotte Sussman argues, Verney is “a kind of anti-Adam” at the novel’s conclusion: “not a powerful namer but a passive witness to global unnamings” (295). The process of unnamings is directly tied to the themes of authorship outlined in the first chapter. Verney creates a purpose for himself by writing a history of the plague. Through this process, he is able to differentiate between humanity, and its linear drive towards death, and the fantastical environment which captures the regenerative ideals of colonial space. However, upon completing this project, the boundaries between humanity and the environment begin to disintegrate and, as Chatterjee argues, “Verney reverts to a less than human state” (43). Verney explains that “my voice, unused now to utter sound, comes strangely on my ears. My person, with its human powers and features, seem to me a monstrous excrescence of nature” (340). In losing his voice, Verney loses the ability to vocalize his distinctness from the environment. Instead, he becomes awkwardly subsumed as a superfluous addition to the perfect, edenic, and emptied landscape. Thus, Sussman’s description of Verney as an “anti-Adam” is doubly prescient: not only does he experience humanity’s organic breakdown, he is also fated to remain forever alone. Verney will never be forced into labour like his forefathers because there is no Eve to tempt him into sin. Thus, the Romantic fantasy of a colonial eden is perfectly and terribly realized. However, Verney has already been cursed with his crushing knowledge of the history of mankind. Readers of *The Last Man* share in this vision of the devastating consequences of England’s imperialism.

Conclusion

The Last Man concludes with a conservative argument against England's project of colonial expansion. The systems of modern life which provide Verney with diverse foodstuffs like Indian corn and freshly picked oranges are recast as dangerous conduits for reverse migration and contagious disease. Shelley advocates for a return to England's agrarian past, a system she imagines to capture the early-Romantic ideals of intimate friendship, harmony with nature, and intellectual and emotional community. However, Shelley's nostalgic desire for a mythologized past is at odds with the destabilizing mode of her critique. The novel's aesthetics of artifice and ruin encourage readers to cast aside an outdated model of prophetic reading in favour of assuming a critically engaged audience position. This new reading methodology is tied to modernity's linear conceptions of time, historical progress, and human agency. When placed in dialogue with Kosseleck's conception of *Neuzeit*, the style of reading required by *The Last Man* expresses a similar sense of rupture from the past. For Shelley, readers are bound by neither history nor the future; they possess the ability to narrate their own responses to literature and being within the world.

Therefore, there is a fundamental tension between the core of Shelley's imperial critique and her radical means of expression in the novel. The text's yearning for England's island borders and distinct nationhood is profoundly antithetical to modernity, with its outward-facing and forward-looking imperial drive, and accompanying conception of reading. Readers of *The Last Man* are encouraged to cast a skeptical gaze upon the writings of Romantic colonialists like Joseph Banks, Louis de Bougainville, and Mungo Park, who helped to create the era's problematic myth of the ideal colonial space. Yet this critical perspective might also be reflected back onto *The Last Man* itself. As scholars like Banks and Bewell have illustrated, routes of

trade, traveling ecologies, and maritime contact had already inexorably connected the world in the early-nineteenth century. By 1826, there was no plausible means of rewriting the future to recapture Shelley's dream of an insular England (unless, of course, Shelley was willing to wait out a future apocalypse and begin again upon Verney's neo-edenic colonial wasteland). Accordingly, a fundamental challenge emerges: if Shelley believes that empire and nationhood are mutually exclusive, so too are the novel's conservative reaction against empire and its proposed system of reading. A rupture exists at the core of *The Last Man*, with the draw of modernity pitted against Shelley's imperial anxieties. Ultimately, it falls to newly empowered readers to reconcile (or abandon) the novel's competing impulses. This, in itself, may suggest that the forward drive of *Neuzeit* has already won out, ushering in a new era of reading, temporality, and imperial embrace.

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