

POETRY OF THE ABYSS:  
MID- AND LATE-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH POETS  
OF DESTITUTION

By

CARSON ROBERT BERGSTROM

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Department of ENGLISH

The University of British Columbia  
1956 Main Mall  
Vancouver, Canada  
V6T 1Y3

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## ABSTRACT

Modern criticism finds that English poetry written in the mid- and late-eighteenth century lacks the essential qualities of great poetry. The poetry belongs to an age of transition, caught between the final throes of neoclassic coldness and the later romantic warmth. The thesis argues that the concept "transitional age" needs deepening and expanding, and claims that criticism essentially misreads the poetry because it does not consider the particular historical background in which the poets wrote and which infuses their poetic consciousness. The thesis then redefines an age of transition as a rift or abyss, and based on Martin Heidegger's discussion of the abyss in his essay "What Are Poets For?", extends this image to an all-pervading metaphor of poetic vision, with critical importance to related concerns--time, darkness, light, mortality. The thesis then shows how two strong poets--John Milton and Alexander Pope--develop their vision of the abyss. In the first three books of *PARADISE LOST* Milton triumphs over the terror of the abyss; in *THE DUNCIAD* Pope sees the age plunging into the darkness of the abyss. These two preliminary analyses reveal several important features which bear on later arguments: the role of the Muse to the poet's identity; the central place which light and dark, as literal and as metaphorical experiences, play in the poet's

struggle with the abyss; and the difficulties which the new science created for religious faith and philosophical belief. After this preliminary work, the basic ground of a poetry of destitution is laid, with the abyss as the dominating force in poetic consciousness. The analysis moves to Edward Young's *NIGHT THOUGHTS* and shows how he battles the terror of the abyss by reversing the conventional hierarchy of Night and Light; however, the imaginative landscape no longer sits solidly in place but whirls through space, enveloped by darkness and light simultaneously. Young's style and method reflect the changed milieu. James Thomson's "A Poem Sacred To The Memory Of Sir Isaac Newton" details further the effect of the new science on poetry--he finds the Muses silenced and poets unworthy to delve into the abyss. William Collins shows a poet trying to establish an identity through a traditional form--the shepherd pastoral--but he finds that it fails him, and he turns to examine the essential qualities forming the strong poetic personality, a turn typical of poets in a destitute time. Gray receives less space than the others, but the same themes and images surface in his poetry.

Finally, the thesis argues that the poetry of the mid- and late-eighteenth century forms a valuable part of the literary tradition--in fact, the literary tradition is incomplete without it. The concept of the abyss places the poetry in the tradition.

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## INTRODUCTION

Edward Young's CONJECTURES ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITION begins with the remark that "we confess the follies of youth without a blush; not so, those of age."<sup>1</sup> Without pushing the analogy too far, one could apply his comment to many evaluations of eighteenth-century English poetry. Critics define the early eighteenth-century as the "Age of Exuberance," and giving it the full respect and honour which it deserves, appreciate its weaknesses and follies. After mid-century, however, the critics show less and less patience with its follies, especially the follies of poetry. Samuel Johnson, for example, remarks on the "mental disease of this generation" of writers; he finds little patience for much of the experimentation with form and versification of the time.<sup>2</sup> Although Johnson tempers his criticism, later critics call upon Johnson to support their unhappiness with mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry. Alan McKillop claims that Johnson considered the poetry of his age as "silly, affected and trivial," an opinion which gains assent from many readers who find an absence of a guiding body of principles or aesthetic doctrines somewhat disconcerting.<sup>3</sup> No one poet expresses a coherent, unified vision, nor does any single poet master his vocation to excel above the rest.

The period appears instead as somewhat schizophrenic, a loose collection of conflicting styles, temperaments, and talents which confront the reader with a confusing array of poetical statements and postures. As T. E. Blom notes, "these poets typically depict themselves as aliens whose existence in a world of confusing and contradictory values motivates a fond, backward glance to a never-to-be-recovered yesteryear of simplicity, order, health, and prosperity; or as irreverent, rebellious youths, testing their strength against the conventions of a past age."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the poets themselves reveal an ambivalence to the atmosphere of the times: although mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry abounds in references to the divine nature of poetry, the poets decry the quality of their own work. The writers of the period defend poetry at every turn, kneeling at the shrine of the past, while contemptuously dismissing the present. Mixed with this contempt goes a yearning for some great poet who will return poetry to its rightful seat in the hearts of men.

James Thomson describes this poetic ambivalence in an instructive fashion. In the preface to *WINTER* in *THE SEASONS*, Thomson presents a spirited, if verbose defense of poetry. He says that "Altho' there may be some Appearance of Reason for the present Contempt of [Poetry], as managed by the most part of our modern writers, yet that any Man should, seriously, declare against that Divine Art is, really, amazing."<sup>5</sup> Declaring against poetry, he adds,



denigrates "the very Soul of all Learning, and Politeness. It is affronting the universal Taste of Mankind, and declaring against what has charmed the listening World from Moses down to Milton."<sup>6</sup> After asserting poetry's eternal value for society, he appeals to his fellow man to "let Poetry, once more, be restored to her antient Truth, and Purity; let her . . . instruct, surprize, and astonish: and then, of Necessity, the most inveterate Ignorance, and Prejudice, shall be struck Dumb."<sup>7</sup> Poetry enlightens, says Thomson, and a society flourishes when poetry dispels the darkness and ignorance which always stand ready to oppress mankind. After this stirring remark, one anticipates that he will declare that his age seems ready to let poetry work its magic, but instead he deflates our expectations, saying that "this happy Period is not to be expected."<sup>8</sup> Since Pope was still writing at the time, Thomson's justification of his position provides an interesting view of the uneasiness of the period. Thomson claims that poetry needs an "illustrious Man, of equal Power, and Beneficence" to "rise on the wintry World of Letters . . . who, stretching his Views into late Futurity, has the true Interest of Virtue, Learning, and Mankind, intirely, at Heart."<sup>9</sup>

Thomson's statements illustrate several of the prevailing moods to which many mid- and late-eighteenth century poets give voice. Although a number of Thomson's contemporaries, like Joseph Warton and William Collins, envision poetry as a vital, indeed ontologically significant

force for man, they echo his sentiments that no poetic genius or spokesman stands out from the crowd. Moreover, they view their own poetry with ambivalence, worry about the validity of the poet's vocation, and wonder whether poetry still plays a significant role in the cultural life of society. To a large degree this ambivalence amongst the poets continues unabated throughout the entire period.

Despite the poets' reservations about their craft, the eighteenth-century reading public responded positively to the poetry, and despite Thomson's comments, the numerous editions and wide sales of many of these poets--Thomson's *THE SEASONS* included--attest to the value which these readers placed on poetry. Gray's "Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard" (1751), for example, went through eleven editions in two years. Edward Young's *NIGHT THOUGHTS* (1742) gained a wide acceptance amongst English readers, and the poem was translated into at least six languages. Young, in fact, retained a solid readership to the middle of the nineteenth-century. George Gilfillan, in an edition as late as 1861, praises highly Young's *NIGHT THOUGHTS*, and looks to it as "a searching, powerful sermon" distinguished by "its richness, originality, and exceeding boldness."<sup>10</sup> Goethe comments that the Ossian poems, which were extremely popular in both England and Germany, "charmed" him and his friends, and he claims that Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" (1770) affected him greatly.<sup>11</sup> Goldsmith, of course, maintained a wide and faithful audience in England. George

Crabbe found instant success, and even though he withdrew from the world of poetry and publishing for twenty-two years, his return met with similar success. As well, William Cowper made a respectful name for himself with *THE TASK* and "The Castaway." The mid- and late-eighteenth century reader, moreover, encouraged a number of interesting poets. Mark Akenside's "The Pleasures of Imagination" (1744), for example, was highly regarded in his time and met with great success. William Shenstone's "The Schoolmistress" (1748) found an appreciative audience as well.

Nonetheless, the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet's fear that his poetry would not stand the test of time seems to have been justified. Few of these poets maintain a wide breadth of appeal among modern readers. True, a poem here and there attracts attention--Collins' "Ode On the Poetical Character," Gray's "Elegy," and Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" being the three best examples--but readers rarely bother to acquaint themselves with a poet's entire canon. If one reads widely in the period, moreover, one easily concedes that the period produced much poetry of poor quality, notable more for its eccentricities than its poetic value. A good deal of the poetry of this period simply imitates neo-classic styles, and as Johnson points out again and again, it does not succeed in most cases. Much of Young's *NIGHT THOUGHTS*, for example, makes for tedious reading, and poems like Joseph Warton's "The Enthusiast" and James Beattie's "The Minstrel" create little to enthuse or

sing about. Indeed, the introduction to a standard eighteenth-century anthology, while noting that the poets of mid-century extended poetry's subject matter, argues that "this generation did its freshest work not in poetry but in the development of the novel of manners and sentiment."<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Carnall agrees, but he contends that while the age did interesting work in the novel--for instance, in adapting epic forms--it also managed to give "new life to the pastoral, the georgic, the satire, and the ode."<sup>13</sup> Carnall, who generally gives a positive report of these poets, admires them for their "respect for poetical kinds and the opportunities they nevertheless presented for modification and mutation."<sup>14</sup> Although these poets attempted to broaden the forms in which they worked, their overall reputation does not gain much by these efforts.

The most popular explanation for the generally poor reputation of this period calls attention to the peculiar position of the mid- and late-eighteenth century in literary history. Since neither a neo-classic nor romantic label covers the literature, the period must form a transitional stage in literary history. The diversity and lack of uniformity indicate the usual symptoms of transitional periods. According to this popular explanation, after the poetic heights reached in Renaissance and neo-classical poetry, an inevitable lull follows. Moreover, if one examines the upheavals occurring in philosophy, theology, society, and, perhaps most importantly, science, then the

interpretation apparently makes good sense. Yet for modern readers the argument as it stands in no way illuminates the difficulties to which these poets give voice. In fact, by explaining away the period as an age of transition, critics provide no fresher perspectives on the malaise of the period than the poets themselves managed. Young, in fact, tackled similar questions to those which Thomson's preface to *WINTER* raised and found that, "reasons there are why talent may not appear, none why they may not exist, as much as in one period as another."<sup>15</sup> Although unable to pinpoint the exact source of the malaise, he feels that it stems "not from divine destination, but from some cause far beneath the moon."<sup>16</sup>

Not all critics find the explanation about transitional periods convincing and, in some cases, calls go out to forge a new perspective. Northrop Frye, for example, approaches the mid- and late-eighteenth century as "an astonishingly interesting period of English literature."<sup>17</sup> Quite some time ago, Frye argued that dismissing the period as merely a transitional stage does not do the period justice. He feels that the period

has been unfairly treated by the critics, who have tended to see in it nothing but a "transition" with all its poets either reacting against Pope or anticipating Wordsworth. The period is unhappy and tormented enough, however, and it seems doubly unfair to reduce its most positive achievements to potential Romanticism. It is true that the poets of this age were reacting against the Augustans, but in view of the fact they did not know that the Romantic movement was to succeed them, it seems

better to look at them rather as attempting to put English poetry back on Renaissance rails.<sup>18</sup>

Frye's comment makes good sense, but he does not abandon the notion of poetic transitions altogether. Frye, like most observers, recognizes that between the eighteenth-century and our modern one, a profound gap or rift exists which separates modern history, including literary history, from the past. Frye argues that "a new kind of sensibility comes into all Western literature around the latter part of the eighteenth century."<sup>19</sup> This new sensibility or consciousness--Romanticism--"refers primarily to some kind of change in the structure of literature itself, rather than to a change in beliefs, ideas, or political movements reflected in literature," a change which Frye sees occurring in the "informing structures of literature," that is, in the myths which inform culture and reality.<sup>20</sup> Dominant cultural myths, of course, provide a vitalizing and inclusive belief structure, an imaginary construct which "explains" man's relationship with his environment. Before the mid- and late-eighteenth century, the poet could re-work and re-form his inherited myths into a cohesive and coherent poetic vision of reality, as do Spenser and Milton. However, for the poet living on the edge of this new sensibility, the discontinuity between past and present alters his basic relationship with the poetic tradition and gives rise to much of his torment.

Thus, a recurrent theme which runs throughout mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry concerns the poet's sense of himself facing the mirror of his poetic past. A poet of this age considers his own poetry vastly inferior to previous works; in the inevitable comparison with his poetic forefathers, he ranks himself well down the poetic ladder--even if the facts of the case do not merit it. Collins provides a good model of this attitude. Carnall, for one, argues that although Collins "was a devoted disciple" of Milton, his poetry, unlike that of his contemporaries who were content to imitate Milton's metres, figures, and style, "shows a large measure of independence" and "what he learned, he made his own."<sup>21</sup> Collins' poetry, however, abounds in disparaging comments about his work and his fears for poetry's future. He evaluates his poetry in terms of the master and, as such, finds his own wanting:

My trembling Feet his guiding Steps pursue:  
 In vain--Such Bliss to One alone  
 Of all the Sons of Soul was known,  
 And Heav'n, and Fancy, kindred Pow'rs,  
 Have now o'erturn'd th' inspiring Bow'rs,  
 Or curtain'd close such Scene from ev'ry future  
View.<sup>22</sup>

Collins' fear that he has been cut off from the "inspiring Bow'rs" of his tradition, as well as the feeling that there are no contemporary poets who reach Milton's stature, emerges, as we said earlier, in other poets throughout the latter half of the century. We will return to a discussion of Collins' experience in due course. For now, let us note a

further example. The history and health of the literary tradition forms the central theme of Gray's "The Progress of Poesy" (1757). After discussing the greatness of Shakespeare and Milton, Gray turns to Dryden and admits his self-conscious awareness of Dryden's influence. In the final stanza, Gray wonders if any poet writing at the time possesses the courage to awaken the spirit of poetry: "Oh! Lyre divine, what daring Spirit/ Wakes thee now?"<sup>23</sup> Convinced of his inadequacy, Gray does not see himself as the "daring Spirit" who awakens the lyre.

Thus far, we have seen that this transitional period produces poetry marked by an obvious sense of self-consciousness. This introspective, self-conscious poetic provides an excellent opportunity for critical study of both the poet's relationship to his past and poetry written at a rift in literary history. Three exemplary studies--one by Walter Jackson Bate and two by Harold Bloom--explore with great acumen the poet's evolving personality, while at the same time enriching our appreciation of the gamble inherent in all creative acts. The title of Bate's *THE BURDEN OF THE PAST AND THE ENGLISH POET* explains itself. Bate's main thesis builds on a comment by Johnson in *Rambler* #86:

The burthen of government is increased upon princes by the virtues of their immediate predecessors. It is, indeed, always dangerous to be placed in a state of unavoidable comparison with excellence, and the danger is still greater when that excellence is consecrated by death . . . . He that succeeds a celebrated writer, has the same



difficulties to encounter.<sup>24</sup>

While Bate's thesis extends this burden to poets throughout history, he argues that mid- and late-eighteenth century poets experienced a heavier burden than previous poets. The famous battle of the Ancients and the Moderns which raged early in the century, for example, called attention to the richness of the poetic tradition, and the poet after mid-century receives constant reminders of his great classical ancestors--Homer, Virgil, Horace--and his equally authoritative English forefathers--Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton. As well, figures like Dante, Dryden, and Pope exert a strong influence over later poets.<sup>25</sup> Given the overwhelming pressure of such literary greatness, the mid-century poet considered his own poetry of little value, as we have already seen; the possibility, moreover, that he might write something of original or imaginative value seemed remote. Young, for example, sees that the artistic wealth of the past leaves little room for further greatness. In his CONJECTURES ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITION, he argues that "illustrious examples engross, prejudice, and intimidate. They engross our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they prejudice our judgement in favour of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they intimidate us with the splendour of their renown, and thus under diffidence bury our strength."<sup>26</sup> Young sees that transcending the past means that the poet must search for the sources of originality because only originality will

combat the "great inferiority" of present poetry.<sup>27</sup> The antidote to despair, however, creates a "catch-22" for the poet. The "great inferiority" of poetry occurs precisely because the poet no longer seems strong enough or imaginative enough to find the sources of originality: wherever he turns, the spectre of the poet of old stands before him. A similar experience occurs with Collins. Collins exalts the Fancy or imaginative powers above all other faculties, but he cannot escape from the influence of his poetic forefathers. Bate sees the later Romantic glorification of originality and imagination as distinctly poetic qualities growing out of such earlier attempts to counter poetic despair. The Romantic finds a solution by opening up an "active debate or dialogue within the human psyche of the past with the present."<sup>28</sup> Bate calls this dialogue a "creative use of the past."<sup>29</sup>

According to Bate, however, the poet often develops a negative sense of identity because of the burden of the past. Bate notes that a poet of this period felt that he was "somehow becoming increasingly powerless to attain (or was in some way being forbidden to attain) the scope and power of the earlier poetry that he so deeply admired."<sup>30</sup> Naturally, such a feeling raises important questions for the poet about the validity of his vocation; in fact, Bate argues that the underlying anxiety during this period was "the artist's relation to his own art."<sup>31</sup> This anxiety goes deeper than a sense that the poet lives in an age of

declining artistic values. He develops a pervasive feeling of hopelessness because it seems that little or nothing remains for the poet to do: he can no longer lay claim to a vocation.

Harold Bloom's *THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE* and *A MAP OF MISREADING* explore similar themes to those of Bate. Bloom's studies, however, bear only an ancillary relation to the mid- and late-eighteenth century. His studies involve what he calls "strong poets" whom he defines as "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death."<sup>32</sup> In Bloom's eyes, few if any poets from our period merit this appellation. Nonetheless, Bloom's analysis merits discussion because he differs in his evaluation of the burden of the past from Bate. As well, his theory of poetic development has spawned a small school of "anxiety" critics in eighteenth-century studies.

In *THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE* Bloom declares that poetic history and poetic influence go hand in hand:

Poetic history . . . is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.<sup>33</sup>

In order to clear space, the poet must come to terms with the major figure or figures who dominate his literary tradition. In fact, Bloom states bluntly that "poetic incarnation results from poetic influence."<sup>34</sup> Incarnation

means that the poet successfully appropriates his precursor. Nevertheless, the poet who incarnates himself knows that his poetic identity results from influence--and this creates further anxiety. The entire creative process, therefore, involves literary history and cannot take place without it: creation needs anxiety. Bloom claims that appropriating the precursor "need not make poets less original; often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better."<sup>35</sup> Whereas Bate argues vaguely that a poet may overcome his burden "from whatever cause," Bloom goes beyond Bate to claim that the burden itself carries the solution within it.<sup>36</sup> Ostensibly, Bloom agrees with Carnall and Frye: neither the burden of the past nor the anxiety of influence necessarily leads to the poetic lull which the mid- and late-eighteenth century experienced.

Although the work of Bate and Bloom shows that the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet's relationship to his tradition was undergoing complex and profound changes, neither really discusses the poetry of the period. No picture emerges of how the tradition failed the poets of this period, nor how it helped them. No image of the poet emerges which helps us understand the poet's dilemma as reflected in the poetry. In fact, their work essentially seeks to illuminate the dilemmas of later writers and not those of poets writing during this transition. We therefore must deepen our understanding of how poets responded to this period of transition.

We need to establish a valid approach for reading poetry born in the rift. First and foremost, we must approach this poetry as poetry which BELONGS to a definite age, emerges from that age and, most importantly, expresses the experience of the poets of that age. If we accomplish this we will recognize that a surprising achievement of the age often goes unnoticed, or if noticed, insufficiently valued. One of the most important accomplishments of the poets of the mid- and late-eighteenth century is that they left a record of poetry written in the throes of despair and destitution. They wrote in the depths of an abyss, and this abyss underlies much of the poetry of the age. To a large degree, the unobtrusiveness of the abyss in poetry obscures an appreciation of the importance and power of it, and hence the poetry in which it occurs. Indeed, the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet's primary struggle, which intensifies the important struggle with his precursors and produces much of his anxiety about poetry's possibilities, occurs because of his sense of the abyss.

But what, after all, constitutes the abyss? Where does one find it? How can one define it? First, a poet conceives of the abyss and reacts to it in complex and personal ways. Poetry in general abounds in references to the abyss, and depending on the circumstances, a poet may develop his vision of the abyss from, respectively, a geographical analogy, an appeal to an emotional state, an abstract notion, a combination of all three, or in other ways

peculiar to the poet's own experience. Both Gray and Thomson, for example, say that the abyss contains secrets which only a great imaginative mind, a "strong poet," possesses the strength to unravel; without great strength, a poet succumbs to the terrors of the abyss. Young, as we shall see later, seems to triumph over the abyss, yet he also indicates that he remains in it. At the end of Gray's "The Bard," the poet-persona of the poem leaps into the abyss and dies. No poet, to be sure, reacts to the abyss in the same manner as another poet, but each develops images, metaphors, and themes which emerge from his confrontation with the abyss and help define it: darkness, light, loss, pain, mortality, time, identity, indeed, a great number of "conventional" poetic commonplaces. The complex interweaving and layering of these commonplaces establishes a metaphoric structure of mind all the poet's own. Moreover, as a poet responds to the abyss and formulates an imaginative vision of it, he affects other poets. Mid- and late-eighteenth century poets, for example, looked to Milton and Pope to help guide them through the abyss, and as we shall see later, both Milton and Pope use the abyss at crucial stages in their poetry. Their respective attitudes towards the problems created by the abyss produces in turn a number of important repercussions for the work of later poets.

In order to explicate (and expedite) the analysis of the abyss in mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry, one needs a context, a frame of reference from which to examine

the poetry. Martin Heidegger, in an essay entitled "What Are Poets For," discusses the concept of the abyss based on late eighteenth-century German poetry. Heidegger's essay ranges far beyond the purview of this study to include late nineteenth and twentieth-century poets, notably Rilke, but he does provide us with some key terms and concepts which allow us to approach the mid- and late-eighteenth century in a positive manner. A line from Friedrich Hölderlin's poem "Bread and Wine" (1800) provides the impetus for Heidegger's essay, which as the title suggests, explores a number of questions central to ones already raised in this essay. Hölderlin asks the question: "and what are poets for in a destitute time?"<sup>37</sup> According to Heidegger, Hölderlin defines the word "time" as meaning the Christian era, an era which begins with "the appearance and sacrificial death of Christ" (PLT. p. 91). The death--a world historical event--marks "the beginning of the end of the day of the gods" (PLT. p. 91). The death of Christ completes a sequence of god-deaths which began with Herakles and Dionysos. Heidegger argues that for Hölderlin the age is "defined by the god's failure to arrive, by the "default of God" (PLT. p. 91). That is, after Christ's death, no god appears on earth bringing word of the gods. The end of the gods means that the "Night is falling," and Hölderlin thus defines his age as "the world's night" (PLT. p. 91). As we shall see, night, darkness, and related cognates carry important metaphorical weight for understanding the poets of destitution. The terms do not

merely refer to the time of day or to the rotation of the earth's cycles; they help define an onto-poetic structure of mind.

The "default of God," moreover, intensifies the poet's sense of pain and loss, of helplessness and mortality. In particular, the poet feels that the historical process itself denies man the basic belief that human existence leads toward some valid, teleological end. The time, as Bate found it, becomes destitute. The "god's failure to arrive" means that the god no longer illuminates the world with "divine radiance" (PLT. p. 91). The Light gives way to darkness. The poet, accordingly, feels that a union of man, poet, and God no longer exists, a disjunction which invalidates everyday human experience; however, when he speaks about the rift between man and God to alert man to the despair of the time, no one listens. Because for the most part men fail to recognize the default of god, the time "becomes ever more destitute" (PLT. p. 91). As Heidegger describes it, the time "hangs in the abyss" (PLT. p. 92).

Heidegger argues that when an age displays such uncertainty, it denotes "the complete absence of the ground" (PLT. p. 92). No solid ground exists upon which to found belief or faith. Hanging thus, the age can go either way; the age may become darker or lighter, that is, lose faith or gain faith in God's presence. And, as long as the age "hangs in the abyss," it conceals the meaning of God and man's ways: obscurity, not insight, characterizes man's vision.



Nonetheless, a strict necessity governs the poet in such a time; faced with the abyss, the poet cannot turn away so as to escape it. Heidegger notes that "in the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured" (PLT. p. 92). When the poet realizes that the abyss will not disappear, he approaches it knowing that he must "reach into the abyss" (PLT. p. 92). Reaching into the abyss, more than anything else, creates the poet's sense of identity in a destitute time.

Most importantly, the poet, before all other men, cannot wait for God to illuminate the world for him. Thus he reaches into the abyss "sooner than other mortals" (PLT. p. 93), an act which can only be described as daring. Yet reaching into the abyss in no way dispels it, nor does it appear any less dangerous or foreboding; the poet's exploration reveals, first and foremost, the fact of his own mortality. Hence the poet, anxious about his mortality, seeks for the truth which illuminates the rift between life and death, the abyss underlying all mortal existence. Indeed, without the abyss a true revelation of this primary dialectic cannot exist. Heidegger, in fact, notes that "the abyss holds and remarks everything" (PLT. p. 93), including the way to godhead. When the poet explores the abyss, he discovers "the traces of the fugitive gods" and "comes to know the marks that the abyss remarks" (PLT. p. 93). These marks and traces lead back to the godhead, to the realm of "the holy" (PLT. p. 94). However, part of the poet's anguish

and dejection during this time occurs because he seeks for traces in an abyss which not only provides the source of illumination, but also reveals his own godlessness and mortality. He searches for a way back to divine radiance, to use Heidegger's terms, "amidst the darkness of this world's night" (PLT. p. 92).

The abyss thus constitutes an essential force within poetry, a force which inspires both content and form. The abyss emerges in the poetry of the mid- and late-eighteenth century in a number of interesting, although sometimes obscure, places. Indeed, except for Young's NIGHT THOUGHTS, most of the poems chosen for this study do not represent the best known works in a poet's canon: Thomson's "A Poem Sacred to the Memory of Sir Isaac Newton," Collins' PERSIAN ECLOGUES and ODES, and several of Gray's minor poems. Each of these poems shows in some important way how the poet of the mid- and late-eighteenth century experiences the abyss and the destitution of his time.

However, before exploring the importance of this concept in mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry, certain key passages in Milton and Pope require discussion in order to establish more fully the importance of the abyss to poetry. Both Milton and Pope confront the abyss, and because the results of their confrontations differ, they show how the vision of the abyss changes. The poets who follow in their footsteps respond to the way Milton and Pope experience the abyss, and from mid-century on the

relationship of the poet to the rift changes quite markedly. Whereas Milton, for example, actively engages the abyss, the poet of mid-century rarely if ever confronts the abyss directly; instead, he reveals the presence of the abyss in other, more obscure ways. Most importantly, when the poet's relationship to the abyss changes, so do many aspects of his relationship with his literary tradition. One example of such a change relates to the poet's image of his Muse. Both Milton and Pope show in their invocations to the Muse important aspects of this primary poetic alliance: when Milton calls the Muse, he invokes the aid of divine powers to contain the rift, Pope's reaction to the Muse displays some equivocation, and later poets respond to the change in the Muse's status. Establishing the concept of the abyss for our later arguments thus requires an important excursion through Milton and Pope.

## BACKGROUNDS TO THE ABYSS: MILTON AND POPE

More than Milton's other poetry, PARADISE LOST exerts a pervasive influence on the periods following its publication. There are, obviously, a number of reasons for this influence: its great theme and boldness of plan; its masterful manipulation of poetic devices; its great intellectual and imaginative energy. As Johnson says, PARADISE LOST encompasses "a design so comprehensive that it could be justified only by success."<sup>38</sup> But Milton accomplishes something more daring and significant in the eyes of the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet. He writes about the abyss--and he does it openly and confidently. Milton possessed, as Johnson notes, "a lofty and steady confidence in himself"<sup>39</sup> capable of creating order out of disorder and dispelling darkness and gloom.

Milton's confidence no doubt owes much to his Renaissance heritage, and a short sketch of his age would not be out of place here. First, and perhaps most importantly, Milton shares a heritage which envisioned man as a being especially favored by God's benevolence. Man formed an important part of the divine plan and he based his relationship with God on a solid ground of science and faith. Renaissance man saw his age as one of light and

truth--the darkness of the occultist medieval period had been shrugged off at last and a new world promised divine potential for man.

A more frightening vision of man's existence, however, slowly replaced this beatific, benevolent conception of the universal plan. As reasons for this change, one can point to the theories of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, theories which were altering man's perception of space and time, life and death. Many at first considered these laws as evidence of the concern for man which God had taken in ordering the universe. For example, the botanist Nehemiah Grew stated in 1682 that "all Nature is as one Great Machine made by and held in God's hand."<sup>40</sup> Pascal, who exhibited a good deal of anxiety over the new science, could say that the universe "is the greatest perceptible mark of God's omnipotence."<sup>41</sup> But omnipotence in no way guarantees benevolence, especially when the new universe placed God such an inconceivable distance from man. Man saw his universe expanding into something immeasurable and incomprehensible, except in the greatest abstractions of mathematics. Pope later sees that the darkness of his age partly occurs because "Mystery to Mathematics flies."<sup>42</sup> Men felt as if God were receding from the "known" universe and becoming less personal and responsive to their daily lives, less benevolent, an abstract, cold, and impersonal deity. Blake will later call such a God "old Nobodaddy."

God, of course, remained the divine creator, the maker, but more and more he was seen as a first cause who, once having started the machine, now simply watches the universe wheel through its appointed motions. As the conception of universal motion altered, so changed man's perspective of his place in God's plan and his image of himself. Renaissance writers, for example, felt this change in perspective, as their writings demonstrate quite dramatically. Poems like Thomas Traherne's "Wonder," George Herbert's "Vanity," and Henry Vaughan's "The World" express a sense of God's light shining upon the earth and mankind; most importantly, these poems display a confidence that earthly life leads to the realm of the holy, to perfection. Moreover, even if the poet's mood turns melancholic, as happens in so many Renaissance poems, the poet maintains a faith that God offers eternal salvation as recompense for mortal suffering. Vaughan's "They Have All Gone" and "Man," Herbert's "Death," and Ben Jonson's "To Heaven" provide excellent examples of such faith. In short, the Renaissance poet justifies the pain and death of existence because he believes in the ultimate goodness of the universe--and of himself. Shakespeare's last play, *THE TEMPEST*, provides a vision of mankind emerging from its dark medieval past into, as Miranda says, a "brave new world." She declares to Prospero:

O, wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,

That has such people in't!43

Man possesses beauty and grace, and the world strikes Miranda as a miraculous, wonderful place. For the Renaissance man, then, the earth holds the promise of an earthly paradise of beauty and order, one where the laws of science support his overall image of the universe.

Later writers, however, view man and the universe in a less positive light. Writers like Swift and Rochester emphasize man's animal nature over his divine qualities. David Hume, for example, also regarded the brave new world in a different light from his Renaissance precursors. He counters those philosophers who say that "everything is full of God" with the argument that "this theory of the universal energy and operation of the Supreme Being is too bold ever to carry conviction with it to a man sufficiently apprised of the weakness of human reason and the narrow limits to which it is confined in its operations."<sup>44</sup> He argues, furthermore, that the "scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but the power or force which executes the whole machine is entirely concealed from us and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of the body."<sup>45</sup> In short, Hume sees only uncertainty in the relationship between man and God; he sees, in fact, nothing in nature or the mind which leads to a conviction that God exists or, similarly, that man possesses anything in his nature which links him to God. He regards the notion of the

soul--the divine spirit in man--as a fiction. Indeed, he finds no "principle in all of nature more mysterious than the union of soul with body."<sup>46</sup> Hume completes a sceptical philosophy whose early English voices belong to Bacon and Hobbes.

In short, from the early Renaissance to the eighteenth-century, a sense of disjunction or separation between God and man occurs. Milton writes *PARADISE LOST* as the abyss begins to widen. The poem announces its intention to "assert Eternal Providence,/ And justify the ways of God to men."<sup>47</sup> Milton obviously believed that the men of his age needed to hear that God's eternal plan was justified, was an ordered part of "Eternal Providence." The age needed to re-affirm, like Hamlet, that "There's special providence in the fall of a sparrow."<sup>48</sup> Yet Milton's declaration contains an ambiguity which needs clarifying. After all, regardless of how man may feel, God's actions should allow of no reproach, should require no justification; on the contrary, man needs to justify his ways to God. Man's "First Disobedience" (I. 1. 1), as Milton notes, structures our relationship with God, a relationship inscribed in Biblical history. Milton's rhetorical strategy, however, serves an important purpose. By reversing the hierarchy between God and man, with man asking God to justify himself, Milton forces man to re-evaluate his relationship with God, and to see that human pride cripples man's basic desire to accept his proper relationship to God. Milton thus forces man to



seek his true humility. Moreover, if one recalls Heidegger's comment that the poet sees his sacred task as the illumination of man and God's ways, then Milton's ambiguous pronouncement suddenly clarifies itself. Milton takes a stand between man and God in order to illuminate the primal ground of a relationship which he sees becoming obscure, and by drawing attention to the "reversal" of the hierarchy, he marks the widening of the rift between man and God even as he attempts to close it. Milton's courage at this critical point characterizes his stance throughout the entire poem, as Johnson says; and as Milton invokes his Muse, he establishes his identity and confidence in the face of the abyss, a confidence which we already noted mid- and late-eighteenth century poets were incapable of maintaining about their own work.

Milton confidently identifies his "Heav'nly Muse" (l. 1. 6) as the one who

didst inspire  
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,  
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth  
Rose out of Chaos.

(I. 11. 7-10)

That is, Milton's Muse shares God's powers, or even is God himself, and the poet whose Muse possesses the power to dispel chaos and create order shares in the same power. But Milton does not choose his Muse--the inspiration for his voice--capriciously; he bases his relationship with the Muse on a well-thought out belief that only a solid faith in God's word will triumph over the terror of the abyss.

Indeed, as even his earliest poetry shows, Milton develops his poetic identity, his voice, by confronting the abyss. For example, Milton argues in his early Latin poem "That Nature Is Not Subject To Old Age" that man falls into error because "His insane mind dare make its own/ acts the measure of those of the/ gods" (ll. 6-8). The laws of nature which man may discover through the operation of his reason count for nothing compared to "those that are written upon/ eternal adamant" (ll. 9-10), an argument which Milton will reassert in *PARADISE LOST* to justify God's ways. Man errs by supposing that his mind can comprehend a world which "Rose out of Chaos," and his continual error only imprisons him in an abyss of ignorance until the "perishing hours" (l. 11). Milton responds to the changing conceptions of the universe by asserting that the "new" laws in no way alter God's eternal plan. God still watches over the universe with a benevolent eye because he

has fixed the scales of fate with sure  
balance and commanded every in-  
dividual thing in the cosmos to hold  
to its course forever.

(ll. 38-41)

Milton maintains that the man who cannot grasp this essential oneness of the world's creation will, like Satan later in *PARADISE LOST*, "be cast down to terrify him in the/ lowest depth of the abyss" (ll. 33-34).

Milton's early poetry thus indicates that his poetic vision evolves from a recognition that the abyss constitutes an essential aspect of the imagination, one which expresses

a central experience in man's vision of the universal plan. Milton also shows how he triumphs over the terror of the abyss. First, he gives it a fixed locale, a geographical reference point, so to speak, which not only situates the abyss in his imagination, but helps structure the direction of his narrative. Second, because the boundaries in Milton's cosmos do not change, he can delineate two distinct realms--Heaven and the abyss--such that everything which he associates with evil--Chaos, Sin, Death, Hell, darkness, and so forth--forms a part of the abyss. Finally, Milton develops an analogy between the abyss and the mind of man: the mind itself forms a sort of cosmos which, if man fails to keep it lighted, plunges him into the terrors of the abyss. Part of the poem's power, in fact, lies in Milton's ability to portray the terror of the abyss while affirming that divine radiance always illuminates the world. In the invocation to PARADISE LOST, Milton says to his Muse:

Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first  
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread  
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss  
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support.

(I. 11. 12-23)

Milton admits that he needs the divine Muse to aid him at this important juncture in the poem: Books I to III of the poem involve a descent into the abyss and an exploration of the way out. And, as the metaphor of darkness in the passage declares, the abyss also forms a part of the poet's mind, a part over which he must attain mastery before he ascends to

Light. Most importantly, Milton turns his confrontation with the abyss into triumphant art. As a poet whose strong imagination leads him to the godhead, Milton possesses, like God, "Almighty Power" (I. 1. 44), power to confront evil.

Thus, after the invocation Milton hurls Satan

headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Sky  
With hideous ruin and combustion down  
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell  
In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire.  
(I. 1. 45-48)

In this one act Milton fixes the realm of darkness, a place defined by "No light, but rather darkness visible" (I. 1. 63). Milton begins here because Hell, the abyss which "holds and remarks everything," leads to light, indeed, in some way holds that light within itself; he follows Satan into the abyss because, as Heidegger says, the poet, before all others, reaches into the abyss and there finds the traces leading to the godhead.

In fact, an argument can be made that Milton dons the mask of Satan in order to explore the abyss and, in so doing, shows the way out of it for his fellow man. If one takes into account the part which Satan plays in Milton's overall eschatology, one need not say, as Blake and Bloom do, that Milton belongs to Satan's party; rather, one needs to understand what qualities Milton requires to succeed at the dangerous task of exploring the abyss. He requires qualities similar to those which mark Satan off from all others. Satan's strength derives from "the unconquerable Will" and the "courage never to submit or yield" (I. 11.

106-108). Milton, of course, must never "submit or yield" to the terrors of the abyss, and he needs an "unconquerable Will" to remain firm in his belief in God's eternal goodness.

The analogy between Satan and the poet's task, in fact, develops even further. Heidegger tells us that the poet, "sooner than other mortals," explores the abyss (PLT. p. 93). After the great councils in Hell, only Satan shoulders the task of seeking an escape from the abyss. Satan, only Satan, shall

tempt with wand'ring feet  
The dark unbottom'd infinite Abyss  
And through the palpable obscure find out  
His uncouth way, or spread his aery flight  
Upborne with indefatigable wings  
Over the vast abrupt.

(II. 11. 404-409)

Even if the way out of Hell abounds with danger, Satan dares the journey because he seeks Light. The poet, who feels the same pains as all fallen men, also knows that "long is the way/ And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light" (II. 11. 433-434). Moreover, even if one ascends from the abyss onto solid ground, further dangers threaten: absolute security exists only in the absolute. When Satan stands on the edge of "unessential Night," it threatens him "with utter loss of being" and, even if he escapes his present danger "what remains him less/ Than unknown dangers and as hard escape?" (II. 11. 440-444).

When Satan "Explores his solitary flight" (II. 1. 633), he meets four important figures: Sin, Death, Chaos, and

Night. Each figure illuminates an aspect of the abyss: understanding the significance of each figure marks a step toward accepting the justice of God's eternal plan; indeed, before he can climb out of the abyss, the poet must understand and triumph over each figure. Sin and Death occupy a pivotal place in Milton's eschatology of the abyss. Death, of course, is mortality, the knowledge of which forces man to accept his limitations and the fact of his fallen nature. Sin, mother of Death, holds "the fatal Key, / Sad instrument of all our woe" (II. 11. 811-812) which opens "Th' infernal doors" (II. 1. 881) wide between Hell and Chaos. Sin plunges one into spiritual Chaos and the fear of ever-lasting pain, that is, Hell. The consciousness of sin thus makes one aware of mortality and human limitations and, given Milton's argument concerning the fatal fall, these two initial traces necessarily open the way to a fuller comprehension of the relationship between man and God.

As soon as Satan, Sin, and Death pass through "Th' infernal doors," the entire abyss faces them. Milton develops a profound image of "the hoary deep" (II. 1. 891) which spreads out before them. He describes the abyss, so to speak, through Pascalian eyes:

a dark  
 Illimitable Ocean without bound,  
 Without dimension, where length, breadth, and  
 highth,  
 And time and place are lost.

(II. 11. 891-894)

Two entities rule the deep--"eldest Night/ And Chaos, Ancestors of Nature" (II. ll. 894-895). The realm of Chaos and Night, unilluminated by divine radiance, provides a vision of a godless universe, a vision which terrifies because it lacks purpose and hope. Milton, of course, can imagine the terror which such a vision produces, and he presents that vision powerfully. But, since the universe ultimately possesses divine order for Milton, Chaos and Death serve to remind him of the eternal power of God's vast design: God fixed the realm of Chaos and Night, and as Milton shows, a resolute faith in God's benevolence destroys the terror of the abyss. He dares the terrors of the abyss because, as a poet secure in his conception of his poetic character, he knows that God lights his way. He feels secure that "God and good Angels guard by special grace" the poet (II. l. 1033).

Books I and II of *PARADISE LOST* establish the primacy of the abyss to Milton's overall poetic design. Moreover, his confident handling of the material indicates the certainty of vision which he possesses. Later mid- and late-eighteenth century poets revere Milton precisely for this reason. Milton accomplishes a number of things at which later poets can only marvel. He spans worlds with ease; he dispels chaos and creates order. From his initial invocation, which appealed to the Muse to "illumine" the darkness of his mind, to his exploration of the abyss through the mediary of Satan, Milton's imaginative energy

prevails over all dangers. Throughout the first books, in fact, Milton pointed out the dangers which beset both Satan and himself as they came closer to Light.

Milton, however, needs greater strength to fulfill his task. He finds it in the invocation to BOOK III, one of the most magnificent apostrophes in the English language:

Hail Holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,  
Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam  
May I express thee unblam'd? since God is Light  
And never but in unapproached Light  
Dwelt from Eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.  
(III. 11. 1-6)

The equation of God and Light re-affirms the same point which Milton makes in "On The Morning of Christ's Nativity." Still, it seems peculiar that the invocation opens with a question--"May I express thee unblam'd?" With what, after all, could Milton be blamed? Milton, however, asks as one who, reaching into the abyss, sees that the poet, like God, creates order out of chaos. Milton, as we saw earlier, descends into the abyss to illuminate the nature of God's ways, and in so doing establishes order, but his question betrays a fear that his actions may appear presumptuous in God's eyes. After all, in approaching Light, he nears the godhead, and if Bloom's arguments about anxiety and creation hold true, then the invocation makes a significant statement about Milton's conception of himself as a poet. He knows that to succeed as a poet he must appropriate his precursor, God, and his innocuous sounding question expresses this realization. He cannot, of course, appropriate God, and so



he moderates his position through encomiastic statements and, most importantly, by emphasizing his mortal and limited existence. He says that man needs Light because it always acts as a positive principle which teaches man the truth of God and inspires him to sing the glory of God. Milton notes that Thamyras, Homer, Tiresias, and Phineus were all, like himself, blind, yet they won renown. They experienced the Light, Milton explains, that inspires inwardly, where man needs it most because the greatest darkness, the real abyss, lies in the mind. Thus, although Milton cannot "see" the external world of nature, the "Book of Knowledge fair" (III. 1. 47), he calls upon Light to illuminate his mind:

So much the rather thou Celestial Light  
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers  
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence  
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell  
Of things invisible to mortal sight.  
(III. 1. 51-55)

After this call to Light Milton's poem moves to the home of "Th' Almighty Father from above" (III. 1. 56). That is, he confidently ascends to Heaven, triumphing over the terrors of the abyss, a poet whose imagination dares the universe itself.

Milton's triumph over the abyss thus plays a central role in the basic design of PARADISE LOST. For the purposes of this essay, further analysis and examples are unnecessary. The most important points stem from Milton's development of the abyss: the way he establishes his identity in the face of it; the great confidence which he

maintains throughout; and the relationship that he establishes with his Muse in order to help define his poetic identity. Milton experiences no "default of God"; the track to the godhead shines clearly through the abyss. The time is not yet destitute. Milton could still say that "the present age . . . is to us an age of ages wherein God is manifestly come down among us, to do some remarkable good to our church or state."<sup>49</sup>

Milton's poetry attests to the strong imagination's power to dispel the darkness and terror of the rift. Although mid- and late-eighteenth century poets find that they cannot overcome the terrors of the abyss, it should be added that they faced difficulties which Milton escaped; after Milton, the poetic strategies available for containing the abyss do not always work and, as a result, the traces to the godhead become obscure and hidden from view. Pope, a "strong" poet in most ways, cannot contain the abyss, and for several reasons which will become clear later, he merits a special position in this study. First, he approaches the abyss quite differently from Milton, and hence he provides an important step in the evolution of the abyss from Milton to mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry. *THE DUNCIAD*, for example, presents a particularly instructive vision of poetry written at a point when a poet can no longer contain the abyss. Second, Pope's presence hangs over the poets of the mid- and late-eighteenth century in a sometimes strange and confusing manner. He enjoyed a reputation as one of

England's greatest poets. Johnson, for example, asks: "if Pope be not a poet, where is poetry to be found?"<sup>50</sup> Yet Johnson qualifies his statements and finds that, despite Pope's excellence in almost every poetical characteristic, other poets before him possess one quality in a greater degree. Johnson says: "Of genius, that power which constitutes a poet; that quality without which judgement is cold and knowledge inert . . . the superiority must, with some hesitation, be allowed to Dryden."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Warburton claims that "wherein Pope excelled, he is superior to all mankind," but he does "not think Pope at the head of his profession."<sup>52</sup> Young charges Pope with not soaring high enough. Pope's problem, as we shall see, was his failure to hold fast to a vision of divine Truth; he fails to illuminate the abyss. This development bears exploring because Pope apparently possesses all the virtues necessary to keep darkness at bay. His *ESSAY ON CRITICISM*, for example, exudes poetic confidence. Throughout the *ESSAY*, Pope demonstrates his poetic powers and asserts his faith in the existence of poetry which speaks truth. Indeed, he speaks authoritatively in all his works. Pope's attitude to poetry, however, and not his skill, reveals the basis for Young's dissatisfaction.

In *WINDSOR FOREST*, for example, a clear vision of Pope's relationship to poetry emerges, a relationship which in part leads to the destitution of later poets. First, Pope's Muse in *WINDSOR FOREST* bears no resemblance to

Milton's. His encomium to Granville calls forth the Muses in a conventional manner which, given that Pope claims that he first began writing the poem when he was but sixteen, seems understandable. His youthful exuberance, to be sure, shows no anxiety about his poetic tradition. The easy way he adapts conventions indicates his firm belief in the continuing value of his tradition. Indeed, the tradition strengthens his poetic vision by directing his youthful energy and providing his imagination a firm ground to build on. Pope's imagination creates and re-creates in poetry a vision of life ever new, ever real. For example, Pope asserts at the beginning of WINDSOR FOREST:

The Groves of Eden, vanish'd now so long,  
Live in Description, and look green in Song.  
(ll. 7-8)

Pope carries this belief through the entire poem. Like the young Milton in "That Nature Is Not Subject To Old Age," Pope affirms his belief in the eternal order of all creation. Windsor Forest forms the backdrop for Pope's ecstatic vision of a nature which

Not Chaos-like together crush'd and bruis'd,  
But as the World, harmoniously confus'd:  
Where Order in Variety we see,  
And where, tho' all things differ, all agree.  
(ll. 13-16)

Earl R. Wasserman notes that Pope inherits "the entire tradition of CONCORDIA DISCORDS," that is, Pope affirms that any disorder which man sees forms a part of a greater order which he cannot comprehend.<sup>53</sup> In AN ESSAY ON MAN, Pope argues that "Order is Heav'n's first law" and that "All

Nature's diff'rence keeps all Nature's peace" (IV. ll. 49-56). Wasserman shows how the poem mirrors the optimism of the time; the poem, to be sure, portrays the political hopes which many Englishmen had for the nation, but Pope's optimism goes deeper. He experiences his age as a triumphant one: no trace of darkness, no abyss, frighten Pope or his Age. As Basil Willey notes, the early eighteenth-century exudes "a sense of relief and escape, relief from the strain of living in a mysterious universe, and escape from the ignorance and barbarism of the Gothic centuries."<sup>54</sup> Society felt itself freed of "the fogs and glooms of history."<sup>55</sup> Sound laws of nature--divine laws--explained the workings of the universe. Pope pays heed to these changes when he notes that "in Ages past" the country seemed "A dreamy Desart, and a gloomy Waste" (ll. 43-44). The early eighteenth-century, Willey says, had "not yet become dark with excessive light."<sup>56</sup>

Pope characterizes England's early history as a succession of tyrannies and dismal times, when "ev'n the Elements a Tyrant sway'd" (l. 52). Mixing pagan and Christian imagery with myth, he completes his history with an apostrophe to the River Thames as it flows through Windsor Forest. Windsor Forest, now a metaphor for all England, becomes the source of all poetry and imagination, an inspiring bower, a new Olympus. Windsor Forest, Pope contends, provides a place where one wanders through the wood, reflects, and "Attends the Duties of the Wise and

Good" (l. 250). At this point Pope expands the theme of the poem beyond its political aspect, and the tone changes accordingly. Pope's theme becomes more poetic; he calls man to reflect on his mortality, and in his plea that man look into the heavens, he speaks to man of his essential relationship with the godhead. Death does not terrify Pope, however, because he sees the heavens as a comforting home: he claims that he can "Survey the Region, and confess her Home" (l. 256).

The effect of Pope's vision transforms Windsor Forest into a sacred paradise vivified by the poetry of past poets. He imagines himself walking through the now consecrated forest:

I seem thro' consecrated Walks to rove,  
I hear soft Musick dye along the Grove:  
Led by the Sound I roam from Shade to Shade,  
By God-like Poets Venerable made.

(ll. 267-270)

However, Pope's mood changes when he realizes that both Cowley and Denham, "Since Fate relentless stopp'd their Heav'nly Voice" (l. 277), sing no more in England. Invoking a pastoral convention, Pope wonders "Who now shall charm the Shades where Cowley strung/ His living Harp?" (ll. 279-280). If a mid- or late-eighteenth century poet had posed Pope's question, it would have produced immediate despair and resignation. But Pope affirms that poetry still lives in England, still finds a voice amongst the living:

But hark! the Groves rejoice, the Forest rings!  
Are these reviv'd? or is it GRANVILLE sings?  
'Tis yours, my Lord, to bless our soft Retreats,

And call the Muses to their ancient Seats;  
 To paint anew the flow'ry Sylvan Scenes,  
 To crown the Forests with Immortal Greens.  
 (ll. 281-286)

Through the living voice of Granville, poetry maintains its link to its "ancient seat" and maintains the light of God on earth; indeed, Pope asserts that Granville's voice is the voice of prophecy:

The thoughts of Gods let GRANVILLE's verse recite,  
 And bring the scenes of opening fate to light.  
 (ll. 425-426)

The voice of prophecy, as Pope expressly notes, shines a light on the future. Pope sees that the poet's task requires that he reveal the future to man, which means to assure man of the eternal providence and truth inherent in God's plan. Such a task requires a bold Muse. Pope, however, claims no such talent for himself, preferring a more "humble Muse" (l. 427) to that of Granville; he refuses to don the poet's mantle which he so obviously deserves and, thus, undermines his "alliance" with the Muses.

Throughout his career Pope preferred the "humble Muse" persona. Pope's detractors, among them Edward Young, viewed this preference as part of his failure to assume his full poetic identity and apply his talents to their full potential, a failure which lessened his powers as a poet. As Young says, "we stand much obliged for his giving us an HOMER, yet had he doubled our obligation, by giving us a POPE."<sup>57</sup> Young contends that Pope does not soar to the godhead. And if one examines several of Pope's invocations,

one sees him discarding the traditional relationship of poet and Muse, relying on human, not divine sources of inspiration. The circle of light which his poetry throws becomes smaller. In the context of this study, Pope's withdrawal marks a critical development for later poetry.

Pope's *AN ESSAY ON MAN* provides a good example of Pope's withdrawal. The poem owes a debt to *PARADISE LOST* in that the stated intent of Pope's poem sounds similar to Milton's. Pope, to be sure, intends to "vindicate the ways of God to Man" (EOM. p. 16); however, Pope's *ESSAY*, unlike Milton's poem, will not attempt to unravel the secrets of the abyss and thereby justify the ways of God to man. Whereas Milton develops an imaginative landscape which encompasses both Heaven and Hell, Pope tells his reader that man's vision cannot grasp anything beyond his own small circle. Pope, moreover, does not utilize the traditional invocation to the Muse as did Milton. Instead, he calls his friend St. John to guide and support him; he calls for human, not divine light. Indeed, his vision of human nature, as Pope notes at the end of the *ESSAY*, emerges from his friendship with St. John, his "guide, philosopher, and friend" (IV. l. 390), not from the "Oracle of God" (I. l. 12). Thus, Pope breaks one of the most enduring relationships in his poetical tradition--the poet and his divine Muse--and in so doing says that the Muse no longer offers inspiration for his poetic task, and as we shall see,



Pope's "Muse" does not go unnoticed by later poets. The ESSAY opens with Pope's call to St. John to

Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner things  
To low ambition, and the pride of Kings.  
Let us (since Life can little more supply  
Than just to look about us and to die)  
Expatriate free o'er all this scene of Man.  
(I. 11. 1-5)

The movement and the tone differ from Milton's active, searching poetic in PARADISE LOST, and the invocation indicates the change in poetic perspectives. Given Pope's admiration and respect for his poetic past, this movement appears as an intriguing and perplexing act, but it fits Pope's concerns in the poem. He wants to show that man forms but a small part of the entire universe; hence, he emphasizes man's relative position in the overall scheme of things and calls man's desire to know all as "Presumptuous" (l. 35). Man, if he wants to discover God's ways, should "trace him only in this own" (l. 32).

Pope's doctrine leads to an obvious dilemma. Because Pope insists that "The bliss of Man" means that man should not "act or think beyond mankind" (I. 11. 188-189), a belief that the earth represents "the circle mark'd by Heaven" (I. 1. 86) becomes impossible to hold. That is, man cannot "trace" God in his image because such insight lies beyond his limited mental powers. Pope's vision, in short, darkens rather than brightens man's sojourn on earth. The second epistle, in fact, presents the image of man hanging between

an unknowable Hell and an unknowable Heaven--in an abyss of sorts--which man can neither fathom nor escape:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of Mankind is Man.  
Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A Being darkly wise, and rudely great:  
With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride.  
He hangs between.

(II. 11. 1-7)

Despite the oxymorons which attempt (but fail) to harmonize and moderate the vision, certain quarters argued that the ESSAY espoused a doctrine of "blind determinism."<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, as Warburton notes, Pope felt compelled to publish "The Universal Prayer" after the ESSAY in order to make the meaning of the ESSAY clear to those who suspected it "of a tendency towards Fate and Naturalism."<sup>59</sup> "The Universal Prayer" affirms, like PARADISE LOST, that "God is pay'd when Man receives, / T'enjoy, is to obey" (ll. 17-20). Warburton sums up Pope's position by arguing that the ESSAY enforces the principle of "religious acquiescence, and confidence full of Hope and Immortality."<sup>60</sup> Pope's Argument to the ESSAY, however, claims that the ESSAY works on the following principles:

Of Man in the abstract.--I. That we can judge only with regard to OUR SYSTEM, being ignorant of the RELATIONS of systems and things, Ver.17,&c. II That Man is not to be deemed imperfect, but a Being suited to his PLACE and RANK in the creation, agreeable to the GENERAL ORDER of things, and conformable to ENDS and RELATIONS to him unknown.

(p.503)

True, Pope sees the Great Chain of Being as "the chain of Love" which, "Combining all below and all above," forms an ordered, benevolent universe (III. 11. 7-8). The difference between Pope's statement here and Milton's argument lies in Milton's appeal to God's promise of salvation: man knows what awaits him at the end. Pope argues that man lives in a system whose relations serve causes beyond man's grasp, causes "conformable to ENDS and RELATIONS to him unknown." In short, by the time Pope wrote the ESSAY, many readers were no longer so sanguine about the universal scheme that they could approve the philosophical tight-rope between determinism and free-will which Pope walks in the ESSAY.

A passage from light to dark, therefore, occurs from WINDSOR FOREST to AN ESSAY ON MAN. In WINDSOR FOREST, divine light illuminates man's existence, and poetry plays a central role in man's relationship to the heavens. In AN ESSAY ON MAN, the light is apparent only, and poetry teaches man that he can never know God. Pope remains optimistic, but his conception of man's potential seems ill-founded; although he places his faith in God's ultimate benevolence, he sees little possibility that man may find his way to the godhead. And, as Pope's career passes, he puts less and less faith in mankind.

For example, in the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" Pope paints a particularly vivid image of a man tired of society, who wants only to shut himself off from the mad world: "Shut, shut the door, good John! fatigued, I said" (1. 1).

Pope characterizes the world outside as a place where "All Bedlam, or Parnassus, is let out" (l. 4). Moreover, two years before the "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot," Pope's first version of THE DUNCIAD appeared. Darkness, chaos, and dullness begin to dominate the imaginative landscape. As Martinus Scriblerus of the poem states, the poem tells of "the restoration of the reign of Chaos and Night, by the ministry of Dulness their daughter, in the removal of her imperial seat from the City to the polite World."<sup>61</sup> Pope's later DUNCIAD completes the movement toward darkness which, as we saw earlier, WINDSOR FOREST began.

Again, Pope's invocation proves most instructive. Pope says:

The Mighty Mother, and her Son, who brings  
The Smithfield Muses to the ear of Kings,  
I sing.

(I. 11. 1-3)

The bluntness of this statement, while heightening the satire, underlines the importance of Pope's task. He explores the abyss more seriously and consciously in THE DUNCIAD than in any of his previous works. THE DUNCIAD, in fact, descends into the darkness of the abyss--and remains there. Pope does not, like Milton, emerge from the abyss to trumpet his poetic faith. Instead, he reveals how the time reached its level of destitution, why the darkness spreads, and by offering no way out of the abyss, he alerts his fellow man to the danger of the time.

The first stanzas of Book I indicate that Pope sees the desolation as already well advanced. Pope calls on the muses of Dulness to

Say, how the Goddess bade Britannia sleep,  
And pour'd her Spirit o'er the land and deep.  
(I. 11. 7-8)

The danger that dulness will spread over the land always exists, as Pope well knows, because "born a Goddess, Dulness never dies" (I. 1. 18). An eternal power, she takes her place in the genesis of any mythological ordering of the universe. Pope presents her genealogy in a familiar Christian/Miltonic cosmology:

In eldest time, e'er mortals writ or read,  
E'er Pallas issu'd from the Thund'rer's head,  
Dulness o'er all possess'd her ancient right,  
Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night:  
Fate in their dotage this fair Ideot gave,  
Gross as her sire, and as her mother grave,  
Laborious, heavy, busy, bold, and blind,  
She rul'd, in native Anarchy, the mind.  
(I. 11. 9-16)

The significance of the lines lies in the relationship between the first and last lines. For Pope, the light of Reason and civilized order overthrows dulness with the advent of writing and reading, that is, learning. Learning, because it dispels dulness, provides a source of continuous power for Pope. Language and writing, moreover, form the basic medium of learning: they create and sustain civilization. His satiric attacks on the Grub Street hacks stem from his fears that such writers destroy learning--they spread darkness because they debase language and learning. Thomson's statements in the preface to *WINTER* about the low quality of the writing of the time express similar concerns.

Pope sees his whole Age relaxing vigilance against "the cloud-compelling Queen" (I. 1. 79) who ruled the mind in "native anarchy."

Thus, Pope's gathering together of the Grub Street wits who serve Dulness illustrates the madness of the coming darkness, and he battles the darkness in his satiric descriptions of how these "poets" work, write, and create. Firmly in the grasp of Dulness, these poets produce works notable only for their appalling level of workmanship; neither form nor content saves them. Pope's description, seen through the eyes of the Queen of Dulness herself, expresses graphically his contempt:

Here she beholds the Chaos dark and deep,  
Where nameless Somethings in their causes sleep,  
Till genial Jacob, or a warm Third day,  
Call forth each mass, a Poem, or a Play:  
How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,  
How newborn nonsense first is taught to cry,  
Maggots half-form'd in rhyme exactly meet,  
and learn to crawl upon poetic feet.

(I. 11. 55-62)

A worthy candidate, each wit parades before Dulness, each vying for the crown. Pope describes how one of these poets finds his inspiration, and why he writes: his inspiration comes from his debts; he writes because he needs money. Such a writer, hints Pope, writes in an abyss of spirit which he does not even recognize:

Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!  
Plung'd for his sense, but found no bottom there,  
Yet wrote and flounder'd on, in mere despair.

(I. 11. 118-120)

Reaching into the "vast profound," the abyss, does not uncover traces of the godhead for this writer, but yields only "Nonsense precipitate" (I. 1. 122).

The abyss remains a mystery, unilluminated by the efforts of the diabolical Grub Street crew, and one of the most telling escapades occurs when a challenge goes out for the wits to dive into Fleetditch, a satiric symbol of the abyss wholly appropriate to these writers. First, Oldmixon

stands,  
And Milo-like surveys his arms and hands;  
Then sighing, thus, "And am I now threescore?  
Ah why, ye Gods! should two and two make four?"  
He said, and climb'd a stranded lighter's height,  
Shot to the black abyss, and plung'd down-right.  
The Senior's judgement all the crowd admire,  
Who but to sink the deeper, rose the higher.  
(II. 11. 283-290)

Smedley follows, dives deep, disappears. Another follows and "buoys up instant, and returns to light:/ He bears no token of the sabler stream" (II. 11. 296-297). Others follow with similar results. No writer appears capable of winning a "token" from the abyss, and not one appears to understand the significance of his poverty of spirit. In short, they fail to meet the challenge of the abyss; in fact, they meet the problem of the age in the most superficial of ways: poetry merely provides a means to an end. Pope's satire presents a clear image of what he sees happening to the abyss, to poetry, to learning, to truth, and he astutely notes that the Grub Street writers attend, not to the sources which lead to the godhead, but to the gods of gambling and vice, degeneracy and dulness.

Books III and IV extend the power of Dulness even farther and the possibility that a valid poetry might emerge to battle the dulness grows increasingly dimmer. Dulness counsels her followers to institute the best methods for spreading dulness throughout the land. First and foremost, she tells them to "be proud, be selfish, and be dull" (IV. 1. 582). The fourth book, which Pope added in 1742, extends the presence of dulness well beyond the earlier books: Dulness rules all. Pope intensifies the drama of this development by opening Book IV with an impassioned plea for a little light:

Yet, yet a moment, one dim Ray of light  
 Indulge, dread Chaos, and eternal Night!  
 Of darkness visible so much be lent,  
 As half to shew, half veil, the deep Intent.  
(IV. 11. 1-4)

Yet Pope cannot fight off the superior power of Dulness, and she ascends her throne. Beneath her "Science groans in Chains, / And Wit dreads Exile, Penalties, and Pains (IV. 11. 21-22). Dulness finally overpowers the forces of Light and for Pope the age not only "hangs in the abyss," it has plunged into it. Pope manages to stand outside the destitution because he sees it clearly enough, but he no longer possesses the strength necessary to maintain a poetic vision in the face of powerful foes. In the last stanza of the poem, Pope catalogues the powers forcing art into silence. The final thirty lines of the poem, although they present a formidable quotation, bear repeating because they describe Pope's final vision explicitly and eloquently:

In vain, in vain--the all-composing Hour



Resistless falls: The Muse obeys the Pow'r.  
 She comes! she comes! the sable Throne behold  
 Of Night Primeval, and of Chaos old!  
 Before her, Fancy's gilded clouds decay,  
 And all its varying Rain-bows die away.  
 Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,  
 The meteor drops, and in a flash expires.  
 As one by one, at dread Medea's strain,  
 The sick'ning stars fade off th'ethereal plain;  
 As Argus' eyes by Hermes' wand oppress,  
 Clos'd one by one to everlasting rest;  
 Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,  
 Art after Art goes out, and all is Night.  
 See skulking Truth to her old Cavern fled,  
 Mountains of Casuistry heap'd o'er her head!  
 Philosophy, that lean'd on Heav'n before,  
 Shrinks to her second cause, and is no more.  
 Physic of Metaphysic begs defence,  
 And Metaphysic calls for aid on Sense!  
 See Mystery to Mathematics fly!  
 In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.  
 Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,  
 And unawares Morality expires.  
 Nor public Flame, nor private, dares to shine;  
 Nor human Spark is left, nor Glimpse divine!  
 Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restored;  
 Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
 Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
 And Universal Darkness buries All.

(IV. 11. 627-656)

## POETS OF DESTITUTION

## YOUNG AND THOMSON

The end of THE DUNCIAD provides a clear separation between the Enlightenment and beyond. It marks the mid- and late-eighteenth century off as the age of destitution.

Indeed, the "Universal Darkness" which displaces the light either closes off the abyss to the poets of the coming age, or it envelops them so completely that they never wholly escape from the abyss. At such a time, Heidegger says, the traces of the godhead "are well-nigh obliterated" in the darkness (PLT. p. 95). No god walks the earth doing good works for church and state, shining the divine light across the darkness of the poet's mind. The disappearance of the god marks the end of the poet's unselfconscious faith that his imagination forever heals the abyss between life and death, earth and Heaven. Thus, the anxiety of influence and the burden of the past which the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet confronts involve more than the fear of poetic forefathers or the fear that nothing remains to be written. It involves something like Frye's disjunction of the myths

which structure society's conception of reality, but the disjunction takes place at a personal, primal level of awareness. Indeed, the extreme self-consciousness which manifests itself in mid- and late-eighteenth century writings indicates that the poets of the time felt deeply the pain of discontinuity and separation. The poetic experimentation and the rise of the novel both reflect the struggle to accomodate this new sense of reality.

Ian Watt, for example, draws attention to an important development occurring in the eighteenth-century. He argues that the literary changes of the time were "analogous to the rejection of universals and the emphasis on particulars which characterizes philosophic realism."<sup>62</sup> He sees, moreover, "a tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality," and suggests that novelists like Fielding, Defoe, and Richardson "did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend or previous literature" because they no longer found universal principles a realistic barometer of human nature.<sup>63</sup> Fielding, no doubt, would probably find such a comment too extreme and would likely take issue with Watt's analysis, as his preface to *JONATHAN WILD* makes clear.<sup>64</sup> The basic shortcoming of Watt's argument stems from his view of the way writers respond to their environment. Thus, while his comments help define the problem, he presents the writers in a far too passive light, as if they were responding merely to a changing philosophical tradition and not actively involved in developing the new temperament

themselves. The most pressing concern for the poet at this time was to establish not only an identity in a changing world, but to re-establish his relationship with his literary tradition; he needed to preserve the fundamental relationship while renewing imaginative vigour and creative vision.

Edward Young's *THE COMPLAINT: OR NIGHT THOUGHTS* presents one of the most spirited and vigorous attempts to develop a personal vision during this transitional period. In the same year that Pope published his final version of *THE DUNCIAD* with its important fourth book, Young published the first book of his poem and titled it, "On Life, Death, and Immortality." His poem explores the destitution of the time with considerable acumen, and his imagery, metaphors, and tone express the complexity of his experience. His vision moves from the abyss to heaven in the space of a line, and the poem itself covers a wide range of subjects. Young's development of the image of Night, for example, shows him grappling with the effects of the new science on man's vision of immortality in a fascinating way; he expresses his fear and doubt, yet exults in a vision of God and immortality. Surprisingly, most commentators on the poem fail to appreciate the depth and profundity of Young's vision. Rather than examine the development of the overall imagery and tone, most critics expend their energies lamenting and decrying Young's "Romanticism," "worldliness," "immorality," or "melancholy."<sup>65</sup> The shrillness of the commentary indicates their inability to read Young's poetry

as poetry distinct and relevant to a particular historical era. This was not always the case. At least as late as the middle of the nineteenth-century, Young's poem received high praise. In his edition of 1861, Gilfillan says about Young's poem:

The subject of this wonderful strain was one which, in its novelty, dignity, and depth, challenged the very highest exercise of the very highest faculties; and had Young risen to the full height of his great argument, he had become the greatest of all poets.<sup>66</sup>

However, since Gilfillan's time, Young has found few sympathetic ears. Few would argue, as Gilfillan does, that "some of his passages are unsurpassed in the language of men."<sup>67</sup> Nor would many argue that Young deserves the praise due a first-class poet. His diction labours at times and his repetitions jar; moreover, the heavy subordination and suspended argumentation, the profuse punctuation, and the emotional excess confuse readers. The poem appears to abound in poetic faults of such magnitude that one wonders how Young managed to reach as many readers as he did. Still, one should remember that the nine NIGHTS were first published serially. Young's readers looked forward to each new chapter; the repetitions reminded them of earlier themes, and these themes moved them. His poetry spoke of an experience relevant to their own. Johnson, for instance, could deplore Young's diction, while admiring the design and overall tone of the poem. Johnson says that the NIGHT THOUGHTS derive their excellence not from "exactness, but copiousness; particular lines are not to be regarded: the

power is in the whole, and in the whole there is a magnificence . . . of vast extent and endless diversity."<sup>68</sup>

Young's poem, as the title indicates, announces the destitution of the time. He writes much of the poem from somewhere deep inside the abyss, from its very nadir perhaps, in a primal darkness; as well, he presents every aspect of his experience in a personal and often powerful voice. However, unlike Milton or Pope, Young struggles with the darkness, as Heidegger says, "amidst the darkness of the world's night" (PLT. p. 93). Struggling through darkness, Young displays complex and often contradictory attitudes about man's possibilities. In one place he expresses fear, anxiety, and scepticism about life, and in another he declares eternal confidence, hope, and faith in the universe. Young's juggling of these contradictions creates much of the difficulty in following his arguments, but his method belongs to his experience of destitution. Because he sees his task as one of re-uniting God and man, he attempts to show, ultimately, that God remains abroad, even if all evidence seems to indicate otherwise. Young's poetry, to be sure, does not move with the same assurance and faith in the power of poetry to dispel desolation as Milton's because he lacks the imaginative unity necessary for such an act, but his abrupt reversals of mood and argument--from joy to despair, certitude to doubt--represent one of the most interesting features of the poem. Unless we appreciate these reversals, we miss the essential experience from which the poem emerges. For the purposes of this essay, a close look

at "Night First" suffices to make clear Young's basic method and concerns, and the last Night or "The Consolation" sums up nicely Young's vision.

Since Young's poetry charts mental topography quite different from Milton and Pope's, his controlling metaphors and imagery differ likewise. Whereas Milton calls upon the heavenly Muse of Light, Young appeals to Night. In Milton and Pope, of course, Night symbolizes chaos and disorder. Young, in contrast, represents Night as a positive feature of his cosmology, and his encomiums to Night provide powerful and provocative illustrations of poetry born of desolation. For example, at the beginning of the poem, Young addresses Night as his "sable goddess."<sup>69</sup> Then, like any poet calling upon his Muse, he describes her virtues and pleads for inspiration from her. Her strength, beauty, and power urge him toward positive action. He declares that during "This double night" (I. l. 44) of destitution, his fellow men do nothing while he attempts to find a solution to his desolation: "My soul, which flies to thee, her trust, her treasure/ . . . while others rest" (I. ll. 41-42). Instead of resting Young seeks, like Milton asking God's grace to shine into the darkness of his mind, the power that will illuminate his darkened world. In only one of many attempts to give Night qualities of Light, Young asks Night to transmit "Through this opaque of nature" at least "one pitying ray,/ To lighten and to cheer" (I. ll. 41-45).

Young's metaphoric use of Night as divine Muse builds on a deeper appreciation of the value of the device than the

critics might at first suspect Young capable. As Milton draws his imaginative energy from Light, Young grounds his entire poem on his vision of Night: it provides the inspiration to his reflections. The poem begins with Young incapable of achieving "balmy Sleep" (I. 1. 1). "Wretched," he awakens from "short (as usual) and disturb'd repose" (I. 1. 3-6). Young thinks that those "who wake no more" (I. 1. 7) must indeed be happy, but not, he adds with Hamlet-like awareness, "if dreams infest the grave" (I. 1. 8). His dreams, unlike the sleep of untroubled men, disturb his sleep and provide no rest from the day's pain: "'tis only change of pain" (I. 1. 14). Young, however, finds some solace for his troubled mind in his vision of Night because

Night,  
Even in the zenith of her dark domain,  
Is sunshine to the colour of my fate.  
(I. 1. 15-17)

Early in the poem, then, Young hints at the comfort which man can draw to himself even during a destitute time; as often, however, he declares that he feels both despair and hope.

Young balances the complexities of this dual sensation of desolation and joy with great skill. During moments of joy, a deep distress intrudes into his experience, and although he does not explicitly state it, his mood early in the poem hints that some sort of "default of God" has occurred. For example, at one point he intimates that somehow the very universe itself "made a pause" (I. 1. 24) and seems about to stop, as if Nature herself no longer



possesses the will to continue. Young sees the apocalypse and he welcomes it because at least then his pain will come to an end. "Creation sleeps" (I. 1. 23), he says, so "let her prophecy be soon fulfill'd;/ Fate! drop the curtain; I can lose no more" (I. 11. 21-27). Young does not call Milton's "holy Light" to save him at this moment, nor does he voice a desire to do so.

Young's reflections bring him quickly to a moment of crisis, and he approaches his crisis in a novel and suggestive way. He asserts that the human mind draws order and inspiration from ancient Night: man builds a solid ground of faith only by creating out of darkness and silence. Young says:

Silence and darkness: solemn sisters! twins  
 From ancient Night, who nurse the tender thought  
 To reason, and on reason build resolve  
 (That column of true majesty in man),  
 Assist me: I will thank you in the grave.  
 (I. 11. 28-32)

"Silence and darkness," not holy Light, "didst put to flight/ Primeval Silence" (I. 1. 36-37), according to Young, and he sees them as appropriate powers of inspiration during an age of Night. In fact, Young adds that it was the combined force of these two powers "whose word from solid darkness struck/ That spark, the sun" (I. 11. 39-40). The reversal of powers here turns the epic tradition upside down, but since order first arises out of Chaos and darkness, the image works. When the poet creates a lighted space for himself, he does so because the darkness first inspires him.

After establishing a bond with his Muse Young feels confident enough to confront his main theme: mortality. This theme entails reflections on time, death, immortality, pain, and love. Heidegger argues that when the age hangs in the abyss, the poet learns that death remains a mystery for men, as does the nature of pain and love. He says that during a destitute time "mortals are hardly aware and capable of their own mortality . . . . Death withdraws into the enigmatic. The mystery of pain remains veiled. Love has not been learned. The time . . . lacks the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death and love. This destitution is itself destitute because that realm of being withdraws within which pain and death and love belong together (PLT, pp. 96-97). Young knows that the "great questions" of life in his age remain concealed behind a facade of hope and progress, a facade growing thicker and more opaque as each day passes. Man, he says, "here buries all his thoughts;/ inters Celestial hopes without a sigh" (I. 11. 135-136). A whisper to such men will not do. Thus, most all of the NIGHT THOUGHTS revolve around Young's struggle to comprehend the role of death and to transmit his feelings to his reader.

Although most of Young's arguments simply repeat themselves, a changing and valuable perspective embellishes each "NIGHT." Admittedly, the repetition which occurs in the NIGHT THOUGHTS makes reading the poem a difficult experience. Several critics point to the repetition as part of Young's obsessive, melancholic, diseased personality. The

repetition, however, belongs to the overall design and thematic concerns of the poem. The NIGHT THOUGHTS, while an emotional and subjective testimony, addresses a younger man--Lorenzo--and thus structurally the poem imitates a dialogue, one which allows Young to express a larger social vision than most critics realize. Young tries over and over to convince Lorenzo that he must change the way he lives. He needs, like the rest of his generation, to learn virtue. The dialogue, in fact, follows the form of "natural" argumentation, and the repetition provides a sense of urgency and a strong force of realism. Young raises the problem of repetition himself, in fact, perhaps in answer to a comment by Lorenzo about his strident arguments and defends himself to both Lorenzo and the critics:

Dost ask, Lorenzo, why so warmly press'd  
By repetition hammer'd on thine ear,  
The thought of death? That thought is the machine  
The grand machine, that heaves us from the dust,  
And rears us into men. That thought, plied home,  
Will soon reduce the ghastly precipice  
O'er-hanging hell, will soften the descent,  
And gently slope our passage to the grave.  
(V. 11. 683-689)

Everything which surrounds mortality deserves repetition, says Young, because man needs awakening from his sleep-in-life. Young believes that "The thought of death shall, like a god, inspire" (III. 1. 309) man to reflect on the things in life which awaken him to his mortality.

Young sees, however, that awakening man to his mortality produces both positive and harmful effects. For example, he considers the contemplation of time necessary to any understanding of mortality because, potentially, time

leads one to an understanding of the relationship between man and divinity. Young hints that, when he hears the bell toll, the voice of divinity whispers to him and he feels "the solemn sound" go through him "As if an angel spoke" (I. 1. 57-58). Thus, taking note of time, he argues, "Is wise in man" (I. 1. 57). Yet time, he recognizes, also terrifies man, for it emerges in consciousness as a sense of loss: "We take no note of time/ But from its loss" (I. 1. 55-56). As man counts the hours, eternity stretches before and behind him in an unfathomable, unknowable, infinite line. Man suffers, most of all, from his relative experience of time; he cannot fathom its abyss. Time tolls, says Young,

the knell of my departed hours:  
Where are they? With the years beyond the flood.  
It is the signal that demands despatch:  
How much is to be done? My hopes and fears  
Start up alarm'd, and o'er life's narrow verge  
Look down - on what? a fathomless abyss;  
A dread eternity! how surely mine!  
And can eternity belong to me,  
Poor pensioner on the bounties of an hour?  
(I. 11. 55-67)

Time therefore makes man self-conscious of his existence; it awakens him to the realization of his own mortal limitations, an insight which Young describes as looking down into an abyss. Young's method, in fact, forces man to look into the abyss, a method which Marshall Brown argues makes one "conscious of the variability and relativity of values," and in stressing time's place in consciousness, Young asks that man appraise the values by which he lives and daily learn that the vicissitudes of life destroy the equilibrium which he strives to achieve.<sup>70</sup>

The relativity of time, in fact, leads to a relativity of all experience. In a passage which obviously owes much to Pope's AN ESSAY ON MAN, Young examines the nature of human experience and finds it contradictory and enigmatic:

Distinguish'd link in being's endless chain!  
Midway from nothing to the Deity!  
A beam ethereal, sullied and absorb'd!  
Though sullied and dishonour'd, still divine!  
Dim miniature of greatness absolute!  
An heir of glory! a frail child of dust!  
Helpless immortal! insect infinite!  
A worm! a god!

(I. 11. 74-81)

Young's reaction to the image of the Great Chain differs greatly from that of Pope: here the Chain forms an "endless chain" which locates man "Midway from nothing," that is, seemingly anywhere, from "Helpless immortal" to "insect infinite." Young's vision, like Pope's, holds out the possibility of great potential, but it as easily leads to a sense of hopelessness. Confronted with the abyss, Young often finds himself

Alternately transported and alarm'd!  
What can preserve my life, or what destroy?  
An angel's arm can't snatch me from the grave;  
Legions of angels can't confine me there.

(I. 11. 87-90)

He seems caught in a web of insecurity, awakened only to fear and absurdity. Time, however, reveals one certainty to Young--he will die. As for the rest of time's enigmas, Young realizes that he cannot solve the riddles through a vision of eternity or infinity, or at least he cannot do so at the moment. He says that "'Tis past conjecture; all things rise

in proof" (I. 1. 91). The problem of doubt remains; the nature of existence stays concealed behind a wall of pain.

Indeed, Young's emotional dilemma, the reason for his doubt, centers on the pain of loss. Young admits that his pain stems from his memories of the death of loved ones. His memories of things past lock him into an earth-bound vision of life and death. Pain impresses on man the relativity of experience as much as time. At this point in the poem Young develops a vision of the essential relationship between pain, love, and death, and although he does not illuminate this relationship fully, he provides an interesting argument. He claims that, even as mortal man endures the pain of existence, his soul shows him that a place of bliss exists beyond mortal life. Immortality means that one never loses a loved one: "Why then their loss deplore that are not lost" (I. 1. 107)? Dismissing earthly life as an illusion, Young declares that

All, all on earth is shadow, all beyond  
Is substance; the reverse is Folly's creed:  
How solid all, where change shall be no more!  
(I. 11. 120-122)

Death frees man and allows him to "spring to life/ The life of Gods, O transport! and of man" (I. 11. 133-134). Indeed, drawing on the wisdom of his Christian poetical tradition, Young later asserts that man's "immortality alone can solve/ The darkest enigmas" (IX. 11. 104-105) of life. Man overcomes the problem of pain, love, and death when he lives in a world "where time, and pain, and chance, and death,

expire" (I. 11. 145). The solution to the ravages of time lies in man's immortal nature: eternity and infinity are qualities of immortality and not those of mortality.

However, the central problem remains: the immortal world which Young describes lies beyond the abyss; he lives in the mortal world, which he said earlier hangs over the abyss, and he needs to find his way out.

Young seems close to achieving a solution to his dilemma, but his mood changes abruptly and he effects one of his famous reversals. He denounces his vision of immortality. Such a consolation, he admits, stems from a too simple belief in dreams and wishes. He states:

Night-visions may befriend (as sung above):  
Our waking dreams are fatal. How I dream'd  
Of things impossible! (could sleep do more?)  
(I. 11. 163-165)

Young finds that his dream of immortality includes a fantasy of death; he dreams of the moment of death, and "at death's toll . . . / Starting I woke" (I. 1. 172-173). Like Keats' nightingale, Young's "ghostly thought" (I.1. 185) fails to provide a convincing consolation. He cannot escape the terror of knowing that death potentially owns each moment; as he says, "Each moment has its sickle, emulous/ Of Time's enormous scythe" (I. 11. 193-194). The vision of immortality does not, after all, reveal the nature of death or solve the problem of pain.

Young confronts this seemingly inexplicable point in a poignant manner. He struggles to understand the death of

three loved ones and expresses his confusion over death's "peculiar rancour" (I. 1. 211). A long list of life's miseries and terrors follows to support Young's claim that "endless is the list of human ills" (I. 1. 283). The meaninglessness of life, the death and destruction which characterize everyday existence, Young sees as "God's image disinherited of day" (I. 1. 245). That is, when man learns that pain lies at the center of existence, the Light loses its power to fill him with the spirit of God. Man deserts God. For Young, a poet in a destitute time, only Night still holds the promise of a holy reunion with the divinity.

Young's meditations on mortality raise enigma after enigma; his mood turns more and more to a profound pessimism and misanthropy. Why should he concern himself with man, Young asks, when man, "All promise" (I. 1. 413), never seems to change, when "man, fool man! here buries all his thought" (I. 1. 135). Young sketches out the course of the average life: promising to change throughout his life, a man "Resolves; and re-resolves; then dies the same" (I. 11. 413-423). Still, Young feels certain that some aspect of man's life explains this behaviour. He turns again to the relative and subjective limitation of all human experience and finds that man forsakes God because "he thinks himself immortal./ All men think all men mortal, but themselves" (I. 11. 424-425). The event which should turn man towards reflection on his mortality and make him aware of the central problem of existence, his death, only makes him shun



the question of death even more. Young makes this insight a central doctrine of his philosophy, and in so doing shows a deep appreciation of the psychological structures of the mind. What makes more sense than that each man believes he will live forever? Believing himself immortal, each man forgets about his mortal life and thus foregoes the safety of his soul. As Young says later in the poem:

Tell me some god! my guardian angel! tell,  
 What thus infatuates? what enchantment plants  
 The phantom of an age 'twixt us, and Death  
 Already at the door? He knocks, we hear,  
 And yet we will not hear. What mail defends  
 Our untouch'd hearts? what miracle turns off  
 The pointed thought, which from a thousand quivers  
 Is daily darted, and is daily shunn'd?  
 We stand, as in a battle, throngs on throngs  
 Around us falling; wounded oft ourselves;  
 Though bleeding with our wounds, immortal still!  
 We see Time's furrows on another's brow,  
 And Death intrench'd, preparing his assault;  
 How few themselves, in that just mirror, see,  
 Or, seeing, draw their inference as strong!  
 There, death is certain; doubtful here: he must,  
 And soon; we may, within an age, expire.  
 Though grey our heads, our thoughts and aims are  
 green.

(IV. 11. 616-633)

In short, says Young, because man refuses to reflect and learn from time and death, "So dies in human hearts the thought of death" (I. 1. 432). When man no longer entertains the thought of death, he ushers in the darkness of the abyss.

Near the end of "Night First" Young seems no closer to a unified poetic vision strong enough to enable him to ascend from the abyss, and he debate both the quality and necessity of his poetry. And, although he claims that he

writes "with wakeful melody, to cheer/ The sullen gloom" (I. 11. 441-442), his ruminations contain little to cheer.

First, Young declares that no one listens to his melodies; then he admits that his own poetry fails to capture the essence of true poetry. When he needs real poetic genius to fire his soul, he reads Homer and Milton. As a poet of some talent, Young feels that he can "roll their raptures, but not catch their fire" (I. 1. 450). A striking feature of Young's passage, however, emerges when he discusses Pope. Earlier we saw Young's ambivalence towards Pope, but here he explicitly identifies Pope's main failing. His reason for doing so underlies much of the despair of the last half of the eighteenth-century. Pope failed to pursue the track to the godhead; he failed to maintain, for Young, the light of truth and the vision of immortal man. Young says that Pope

made Maeonides our own.  
 Man too he sung: immortal man I sing;  
 Oft bursts my song beyond the bounds of life;  
 What, now, but immortality, can please?  
 O had he press'd his theme, pursu'd the track,  
 Which opens out of darkness into day!  
 O had he, mounted on his wing of fire,  
 Soar'd where I sink, and sung immortal man!  
 How had it bless'd mankind, and rescu'd me!  
(I. 11. 453-461)

A more succinct evaluation of Pope's peculiar relationship with the mid- and late-eighteenth century cannot, perhaps, be found.

Young, however, realizes that he must try to rescue himself from despair, and much of the poem provides various "solutions" to his dilemma, all of which he undercuts for

one reason or another. Despite this apparent failure of vision he understands, most importantly, that as a poet he must still sing his poetic song. Even in darkest night, and perhaps more so than at other times, Heidegger argues, the poet must "attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" (PLT. p. 94). The poet's song preserves whatever link remains between man and God, and man's language, his poetry, calls him to his nature, his mortality. Heidegger asserts that, even during a destitute time, "the mortals are" (PLT. p. 96). He means by this ambiguous statement that man exists because "there is language. Song still lingers over [man's] destitute land. The singers's word still keeps to the traces of the holy" (PLT. p. 96). At the beginning of the ninth "NIGHT" Young declares his willingness to continue singing. He notes, as in the first "NIGHT," that he chases "the moments with a serious song./ Song soothes our pains; and age has pains to soothe" (IX. 11. 14-15).

Because the opening of "The Consolation" begins on such a positive, even conventional note, one might expect Young to reverse the structural hierarchy of the poem and assert the primacy of light over dark, presenting a traditional poetic consolation for life's pain. Young indeed attempts such a reversal but, try as he might, he never manages a total reversal to light. This "failure" presents one of the most interesting aspects of his poetry because it shows the difficulties which the new science presented to poetic thinking; in the ninth "Night" Young confronts the new

science, and despite the logic of the new universal laws, tries to assert his faith in a divinely ordered universe. In a universe where the earth no longer sits solidly in its place, but whirls through unbounded space somewhere around God, Young's metaphorical world no longer remains static or even clearly delimited. Marshall Brown finds that in Young's world "everything is intermediate, nothing absolute; everything is in flux, nothing fixed."<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, even when Young ascends towards Light, the Night surrounds him at every step. Night becomes a permanent mark of his topography; indeed, even as he attempts to quit the realm of darkness, Young needs the Night to support him in his final effort. He says:

Canst thou, O Night! indulge one labour more?  
 One labour more indulge! then sleep, my strain!  
 Till, haply, wak'd by Raphael's golden lyre,  
 Where night, death, age, care, crime, and sorrow,  
cease;  
 To bear a part in everlasting lays;  
 Though far, far higher set, in aim, I trust,  
 Symphonious to this humble prelude here.  
(IX. 11. 20-26)

The invocation reveals Young's curious attitude toward his Muse. At one moment it inspires him with creative power, but in the next he claims that it was only a surrogate Muse, his real desire being to find Light: he plumbed the depths of the abyss, like Milton, in order to climb out of it.

Unlike Milton, however, Young remains firm that "Night inspir'd" (IX. 1. 1016) him to the vision "That nature is the glass reflecting God" (IX. 1. 1007). After his exploration of Night, he throws aside the terrors of the new

science and declares his adherence to "a true astrology" (IX. 1. 1049), one which imagines the firmament as "the garden of the Deity" (IX. 1. 1042). Young sees clearly that the conception of the universe brought about by science "quite engulfs all human thought;/ 'Tis comprehension's absolute defeat" (IX. 1. 1106-1107), but he affirms that, whereas one might see "a wild disorder here" (IX. 1. 1108), the planets and the other celestial bodies "Rove for ever, without error rove;/ Confusion unconfus'd" (IX. 1. 1116-1117). Night, in fact, "open'd" God's "Stupendous book of wisdom" (IX. 1. 1674-1675) to Young's imagination, enabling him to envision God more clearly than if he had called upon Light.

Indeed, after this declaration of independence, he describes himself as if waking from a sleep and climbing "Night's radiant scale" up "the steps by nature set/ For man's ascent" (IX. 11. 1710-1712) to the Heavens and immortality, "the great goal of all" (IX. 1. 2218). Young sees himself climbing beams of light of which "the last ripens into lustre strong,/ Of next approach to Godhead" (IX. 11. 2242-2245). He declares that he finds access to the godhead because he loves God, and "Love finds admission, where proud Science fails" (IX. 1. 1860). As he approaches the godhead, Young's language expresses more and more the joy of his rapturous experience; he affirms the relationship between the voice of the poet and the voice of divinity, describing his vision as a healing one, a blessing:

What words are these--and did they come from  
heav'n?

And were they spoke to man? to guilty man?

What are all mysteries to love like this?

The songs of angels, all the melodies

Of choral gods, are wafted in the sound;

Heal and exhilarate the broken heart;

Though plung'd, before, in horrors dark as night.

Rich prelibation of consummate joy!

Nor wait we dissolution to be blest.

(IX. 11. 2365-2373)

Young draws the blessings of divinity to himself across the abyss of death and nurtures his heart with a vision of everlasting joy. He achieves this imaginative confidence and security, he tells us, because he lives with the consciousness of death, which saves him from the terror of a meaningless world. Young declares his readiness to say farewell to Night, asserting as he does so that he now experiences a complete unity of soul:

My soul! henceforth, in sweetest union join

The two supports of human happiness,

Which some, erroneous, think can never meet;

True taste of life, and constant thought of death!

The thought of death, sole victor of its dread!

(IX. 11. 2381-2385)

Young argues that this state of mind belongs to the consciousness of the just man; only the just man triumphs over the fear of the abyss because he confronts it and affirms its necessity to vision. He says to Lorenzo: "what, my small philosopher! is hell? 'Tis nothing but the full knowledge of the truth" (IX. 11. 2407-2408). After this revelation of the truth, a man's heart opens up and "the ray divine/ Glides swift into the bosom of the just" (IX. 11. 2422-2425).

Young's final vision of heaven, light, and bliss, however, never completely frees itself from the power of Night. Young's apocalyptic vision conceives of the New Heaven and New Earth as a place where "Midnight, universal Midnight! reigns" (IX. 1. 2434). A curious metaphorical reversal of Night and Light occurs which does not really reverse the hierarchy; indeed, the metaphorical hierarchy no longer seems to exist. However, given that the attainment of wisdom requires the Night, it fits perfectly into Young's teleology. Young accepts that the new universe forms part of God's plan for man. Thus, man must learn to live with God's ultimate wisdom, and since the holiest time belongs to deepest night, Young astutely envisions the time of greatest insight occurring in darkest night. At the same time, the echo of the final lines of Pope's *DUNCIAD* here provides a nice irony: whereas Pope leaves the world to "Universal Darkness," Young attempts to turn that darkness into a positive vision of universal benevolence.

Young's *NIGHT THOUGHTS*, even with its obvious defects, provides an important and penetrating testimony to poetry of destitution. After Milton and Pope, Young certainly develops one of the most fascinating and original visions of the abyss. Young explores the abyss in a manner wholly appropriate to his sense of the time; in his night imagery he evokes a profoundly moving vision of the abyss. True, his imagery lacks the sustained and imaginatively complete vision of Milton, but it conveys an emotional immediacy and

desperation born of honest emotion. Furthermore, Young's emphasis on each man's relationship to his own mortality places him at a critical junction for poets of the abyss. He urgently calls attention to life's central enigmas, although without fully illuminating them, and he shows that man's destitution results from his confusion about love, pain, and death.

As a poet of destitution, Young shows the difficulty that a poet confronts in trying to achieve a full and poetically convincing vision in a universe seemingly set adrift. He responds to this difficulty by developing a metaphorical landscape appropriate to his sense of the time, and also by finding a new source of imagination, a new Muse--Night. One should not underestimate this achievement. Young's Muse allows him to reconcile his imaginative vision of Heaven with the ramifications of the new science. In "an age more curious than devout" (IX. 1. 1852), Young counters scientific abstractions with love: love "not proud Reason, keeps the door of heav'n" (IX. 1. 1859). Young writes, in short, a poetry which develops an active, vigorous vision during a time of darkest Night.

In the eyes of many, however, science did not fail to open the doors to Heaven; as the scientific movement gained momentum in the eighteenth-century, it made its presence felt in all corners of endeavor, poetry included. Indeed,



the power and influence of the new science produces a burden on the poets of the mid- and late-eighteenth century no less significant and pervasive than the burden of the past or the anxiety of influence. Mid- and late-eighteenth century poets, for example, found their traditional roles as explainers and interpreters of Nature's secrets usurped by the new science. Science could explain--if it had not done so already--the vast workings of the universe, God's master plan. Furthermore, science not only explained the universe more accurately and honestly, but it accomplished this task without the embellishments of a grandiose language, one made imprecise by superstition, figurative language, and indistinct abstractions. Instead, as Bishop Sprat says, scientific language follows "a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness; bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can; and preferring the language of artisans, countrymen and merchants before that of wits or scholars."<sup>72</sup> Locke, of course, demands that the "frivolous use of uncouth, affected, or unintelligible terms, introduced into the sciences" be expunged.<sup>73</sup> Hume later argues that "All the colors of poetry, however splendid, can never paint natural objects in such a manner as to make the description be taken for a real landscape. The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation."<sup>74</sup> Thus, the poet found his stock in trade, his use of language, falling into disrepute. Many poets, to be sure, at first

wrote enthusiastically about the great progress in human knowledge and welfare promised by scientific reasoning; moreover, in its scrupulous adherence to facts and its precision in description, scientific diction offered, as McKillop tells us, a model for poetic practice.<sup>75</sup> The poet could describe Nature more precisely and realistically than ever before.

But the poet could assume a scientific persona only if he ignored the danger of scientific discoveries to poetry's long-cherished beliefs about God's universal plan, and if he refused to consider the threat which science posed to his poetic identity. As we saw earlier, the vision of the universe which science expounded sent shivers of fear into the hearts of many observers. The new laws might describe the universe accurately, which was comforting, but the new sense of infinite space and eternal time reduced man to the merest speck in the cosmic plan. Pascal provides a fine sense of the dilemma when he asks: "What is a man in the infinite?"<sup>76</sup> He finds that no proposition encompasses an adequate answer, and he turns instead to an emotional response: "The eternal silence of those infinite spaces fills one with dread."<sup>77</sup> Young walks a similar emotional tight-rope. Overall, few could ignore the disjunction between scientific realism and imaginative faith. Inexorably, irrevocably, the poet's relationship with the abyss, his Muse, and himself all change.

The introduction mentioned that Thomson's evaluation of the poetry of his time revealed an inner tension between poetry past and present. He discloses a similar tension between poetry and science, a tension critics rarely see in him. Critics, for example, seem content to fit him into recognizable categories devoid of emotional anxiety. A modern editor, for example, tells us that Thomson's readers "favored his expositions of scientific subjects, his frequent transitions from the particular to the general, from natural objects to Nature."<sup>78</sup> Thomson, we are told, "draws no sharp line between description on the one hand and scientific and philosophical exposition on the other."<sup>79</sup> The same editor adds that Thomson's poem on Newton "expresses his delight in the vision of a universe perfectly ordered by the natural law which is at the same time divine . . . . The influence of science encourages him in exact description and exploration of the world about him."<sup>80</sup> Thomson has thus provided an excellent paradigm of the eighteenth-century poet as critics often picture him. Yet his "A Poem Sacred To The Memory Of Sir Isaac Newton" reveals the essential ambivalence which the new science engendered in poetry. As we shall see, Thomson's attitude towards Newton's discoveries (NOT Newton the man) and how these discoveries affect poetry, exhibits a more complex emotional stance than traditional interpretation admits.

Thomson's poem appeared in May 1728, barely a month after Newton's death. The surface of the poem reveals little

anxiety, but when one looks closely, a second level emerges which indicates a high degree of anxiety. Although the poem ostensibly praises the greatness of Newton and the new science, Thomson shows how the scientist takes over the poet's role and provides--perhaps inadvertently--an epicedium for the Muses. Thomson begins conventionally enough when he asks if Newton could die and the Muses fail to rise and sing his praises:

Shall the great soul of Newton quit this earth  
To mingle with his stars, and every Muse,  
Astonished into silence, shun the weight  
Of honours due to his illustrious name?<sup>81</sup>

The Muses of poetry find themselves "Astonished into silence" because they can offer Newton little that he does not already possess. The Muses cannot, like Newton, "trace the secret hand of Providence,/ Wide-working through this universal frame" (ll. 15-16). Newton reveals the justness of the divine plan, blowing away the obscuring clouds which surround mortal existence. In fact, Newton "bound the suns/ And planets to their spheres" (ll. 17-18). Until Newton's revelations, unravelling the mysteries of the universe was "the unequal task/ Of mankind" (ll. 18-19).

Accordingly, when Thomson describes Newton's discoveries and compares them to those of "old Greece and Rome" (l. 31), he finds that none of these earlier conceptions stand comparison with Newton's. All previous descriptions of the world sound dull and mundane beside Newton's great scheme. Thomson envisions Newton breaking

free of the earth, exploring the abyss, shedding light over  
all he passes:

Then, breaking hence, he took his ardent flight  
Through the blue infinite; and every star,  
Which the clear concave of a winter's night  
Pours on the eye, or astronomic tube,  
Far stretching, snatches from the dark abyss,  
Or such as further in successive skies  
To fancy shine alone, at his approach  
Blazed into suns, the living centre each  
Of an harmonious system--all combined,  
And ruled unerring by that single power  
Which draws the stone projected to the ground.

(ll. 57-67)

Newton finds the way to the Light before the poets can even begin to imagine the new universe. Consequently, "The Heavens are all his own" (l. 82). When compared to Newton's laws, Milton's depictions of the heavens lose the power to move man to a conception of God's greatness--even though the passage obviously owes much to Milton. Thomson goes so far as to say that light "shone undiscovered" (l. 97) until Newton's refractive laws "Untwisted all the shining robe of day" (l. 98).

Although Thomson never forgets his high eulogistic theme, he touches on subjects portending dark significance for poetry. After declaring that Newton's laws render the Muses silent, Thomson correctly extends the depth of his insight to its logical conclusion: if the light of understanding shines only after Newton's discoveries, then the whole poetic tradition--Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope included--has inadequately answered man's deepest and most pressing questions. Poetry, says Thomson, belongs to a dream

of "Romantic schemes, defended by the din/ Of specious words, and tyranny of names" (ll. 24-25). Indeed, he wonders whether any poet "Dreaming in whispering groves by the hoarse brook" (l. 120) ever spoke the truth about Nature. Thomson suggests that in his age the scientist and not the poet reaches into the abyss before all other mortals. Newton the scientist triumphs over the abyss, and traces the steps back to godhead. Thomson, in an image reminiscent of Satan exploring his "solitary way," pictures Newton descending alone into an abyss "Deep in primeval gloom" (l. 129), and then flying upwards to guide his fellow mortals. He imagines Newton "ascending" from the abyss with his "lights at equal distances, to guide/ Historian wildered on his darksome way" (ll. 125-131). Thus, given the divine light which Newton radiates, Thomson doubts whether any poet (himself included) can do justice to the figure of Newton. Thomson hints that only Newton's fellow scientists--those capable of comprehending Newton's work--can follow Newton in the imaginative manner which the task demands. Thomson asks:

who can number up his labours? who  
His high discoveries sing? When but a few  
Of the deep-studying race can stretch their minds  
To what he knew.  
(ll. 132-135)

No poet can sing Newton's numbers, since poetry, no longer "deep-studying," sings in "fancy's lighter thought" (l. 135) about subjects which amuse but do not offer valid truths about life.

Thus, at the end of the poem Thomson asks that  
 Newton

look with pity down  
 On humankind, a frail erroneous race!  
 Exalt the spirit of a downward world!  
 O'er thy dejected country chief preside,  
 And be her Genius called!

(ll. 198-202)

The poem ends, significantly, in subdued, almost despairing tones, not all of which can be ascribed to the stated subject of the poem, Newton's death. Whereas one might expect an up-lifting consolation to follow the vision of truth revealed, it does not come. When Thomson claims that all that remains for him is to wait until "time shall be no more" (l. 208), his words evince a deep despair of spirit. Indeed, the consolation lacks that confidence which Milton displays at the end of "Lycidas." Moreover, unlike Pope's paean to Granville, Newton as the voice of prophecy fails to provide Thomson with a sustaining vision, one which inspires him to further inspiration. For Thomson, the way out of the abyss appears darker than ever, and, worse, his conception of himself, his identity as a poet, appears less certain than before he began to sing about Newton.

Thus, in a manner characteristic of a destitute time, Thomson fails to recognize the full source of his sorrow. He seems but dimly aware of the jeopardy in which his work on Newton places the poetic endeavor; indeed, by showing that the poet no longer deserves the right to illuminate his traditional subject matter, he both distances the poet from

his most important source of inspiration and negates the poet's role in its social context. The mid- and late-eighteenth century poet, in other words, suffers not only from the burden and anxiety of the past, he suffers an alienation from his tradition more urgent than the "natural" anxiety of succession presented by Bate and Bloom. When Thomson finds the Muses "Astonished into silence," he announces their desertion of poetry, and as the century devolves, the Muses' silence deepens. Unlike Pope's optimism at the end of WINDSOR FOREST, time and again the many "progress" poems after mid-century end with the conviction that the sources of inspiration no longer flow in England. The silence of the Muses forces the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet to explore his relationship to his tradition, an exploration manifest in the self-conscious and introspective poetry characteristic of the period.

## II. COLLINS AND GRAY

William Collins' introspection pervades his poetry and provides one of its more interesting aspects. Indeed, few poets express the central concerns of the time as clearly as Collins, and few expend as much energy questioning their relationship to poetic Being. Collins, as it were, maps out



his quest for poetic self-identity, a quest which fascinates modern critics of Collins; his "Ode On the Poetical Character," in fact, gives birth to most of the critical comment about him. Paul S. Sherwin contends that "no other poet of his generation offers us more than Collins,"<sup>82</sup> and adds that Collins, "with the possible exception of Smart," remains "the most inventive poet in an era obsessively concerned with, but rarely distinguished by, Original Genius."<sup>83</sup> Basing much of his analysis on the "Ode," Sherwin develops an elaborate discussion of Collins' indebtedness to Milton. Indeed, applying Bloom's theory, Sherwin's *PRECIOUS BANE* explores the vagaries of Collins' anxiety of influence to its minutest particulars. Earl R. Wasserman explores Collins' sources as well, especially biblical ones, and develops an interesting and complex argument about the "Ode."<sup>84</sup> In fact, the "Ode" has spawned a lively debate over the proper or most exact sources on which Collins draws, sources which presumably underline the extent of his anxiety. However, most of the debate, failing as it often does to consider Collins' full subject matter, lies well outside the purview of this essay. Our interest lies more in how Collins approaches his particular despair as a poet of destitution. As well, we want to see why Collins never enters the abyss, but remains outside of it, a stranger to its "darkness visible." In order to comprehend the nature of Collins' destitution, we need to examine his experience of writing the *PERSIAN ECLOGUES*.

Collins published his PERSIAN ECOLOGUES in 1742--the same year as Pope's DUNCIAD and Young's NIGHT THOUGHTS. True, he spoke "contemptuously of them" later,<sup>85</sup> but they form his first substantial work, and unless we understand what Collins was trying to achieve with the ECLOGUES, the reason he wrote them, his later works, particularly the ODES, will remain obscure. Critics deal with the ECLOGUES in several ways. First, the poem provides interest as an example of the orientalist poetry popular in the eighteenth-century, which Collins' readers admired because, as a writer in the GENTLEMAN'S MAGAZINE explained, they included many of "the bold figures with which the poetry of the East abounds . . . the thoughts are appropriated, the images wild and local, the language correct, and the versification harmonious."<sup>86</sup> Second, the ECLOGUES, generally speaking, managed to extend "the subject matter of the pastoral by the introduction of exotic elements into English poetry," but such an achievement hardly merits special attention in an age characterized by literary experimentation.<sup>87</sup> A third argument explains that the ECLOGUES offered Collins "an escape from the inhibiting rationality and omnipresent social tone of much Augustan poetry."<sup>88</sup> According to Roger Lonsdale, however, both style and diction in the ECLOGUES "obey most of the conventions of the eighteenth century pastoral," a point supported by Richard Wendorf.<sup>89</sup> Specifically, Collins borrows freely from Pope's PASTORALS.

From such accounts of the poem, there seems nothing remarkable about the ECLOGUES to help illuminate the development of Collins' poetic vision. The poem, however, requires an analysis on two separate but related levels, each of which helps establish the significance of the ECLOGUES in the Collins canon. On one level several obvious structural details, seen in their proper light, show that Collins' early writing develops as a response to his sense of the destitution of the time, and not solely as a desire to imitate a poetic forefather. First, Collins eschews Pope's seasonal time-scheme in the PASTORALS for one more closely akin to the eighteenth-century man's experience of daily life, one organized in hourly blocks. Whereas Pope simply incorporates a daily time-scheme into his PASTORALS as part of the traditional pastoral narrative, Collins emphasizes the importance of the time-schemes to tone, theme, and development in his ECLOGUES by sub-heading each eclogue with a reference to time. Wendorf argues that Pope's time-scheme "is essentially Christian" while Collins' pastorals "are entirely secular."<sup>90</sup> However, since Collins asserts traditional Christian virtues in the ECLOGUES, Wendorf's distinctions add little to an appreciation of Collins' time-scheme. Pope's plan, significantly, follows an organic or natural time-cycle, one which encompasses past, present, and future in a continuous fullness of time, while Collins' time-scheme emphasizes a relative experience of time, one which sees no farther than the end of a day. His

ECLOGUES move from morning to midday to evening to end at midnight: the world Collins creates begins in light and ends in night. Finally, each ECLOGUE changes setting: a valley, desert, forest, and mountain respectively.

In the first eclogue Collins introduces a conventional figure, the poet-shepherd Selim. Selim sings during "The radiant Morn," that is, at a time of divine radiance.<sup>91</sup> Collins pictures Selim as a poet of confidence and power, an oracle of truth who keeps to the track of the godhead. Addressing young "Persian Maids" (I. 1. 1) and "Swains" (I. 1. 11), he teaches them the foundations of the virtuous life. Collins describes Selim as "Wise in himself" (I. 1. 9), and observes that his "songs convey'd/ Informing Morals to the Shepherd Maid" (I. 11. 9-10). Selim also teaches "that surest Bliss to find,/ What Groves nor Streams bestow, a virtuous Mind" (I. 11. 11-12). His advice on how to follow the innocent path, not surprisingly, echoes central Christian virtues: chastity, modesty, pity, meekness. He tells his young audience that "These are the Virtues that must lead to Love" (I. 1. 68). Conventional as Selim's advice sounds, Collins' choice of subject matter reveals a significant aspect of his early vision. Selim, the conventional poet-shepherd figure, chooses love as the ground of virtue--and he sees virtue as the cornerstone of the holy. In other words, like Young, Collins sees the importance of love to man's relationship with the gods, and he seems on the verge of revealing that relationship. As

Heidegger told us, a poet needs to reveal the nature of love or the time continues in its destitution.

In the first eclogue Collins shows a vague awareness of this need; he does not, however, develop his feelings to produce a convincing vision. Unlike Keats in his "Ode to Psyche," Collins stops short of a full revelation of love, as if he cannot validate his vision in the world about himself. The eclogue, in fact, bears out this suggestion. Collins writes the first eclogue in the past tense--Selim's poetry belongs to the past, to the Golden Age of innocence and bliss so beloved of poets. One wishes for the virtues of the past because they represent the good in itself; one clings to the vision with a faith in its inherent unity and truth. Collins, to be sure, ends the first eclogue on a happy note:

Thus sung the Swain, and eastern Legends say  
The Maids of Bagdat verify'd the Lay:  
Dear to the Plains, the Virtues came along,  
The Shepherds lov'd, and Selim bless'd his Song.  
(I. 11. 69-73)

But the happiness belongs to the past, and Collins in no way implies that his England enjoys such a state of love and virtuous bliss.

The second eclogue recounts the story of Hassan, a camel-driver who leaves his home and beloved Zara at midday "to follow far-fatiguing Trade" (II. 1. 32). He leaves, symbolically, when the sun shines its brightest and illuminates its greatest area. Having lived his life in the womb of bliss, behind the comfort of "Schiraz' Walls" (II.

11. 14), he ventures blindly into the darkness of the desert. Away from home and love he moves "in silent Horror o'er the boundless Waste" (II. 1. 1), and "With desp'rate sorrow wild" (II. 1. 11) laments his folly. Lost in the "dreary Desarts" (II. 1. 46) Hassan experiences the "Dread of Death" (II. 1. 66) and the pain of separation. The imagery locates us in similar metaphorical terrain to that of Young's NIGHT THOUGHTS. Like Young's poem, the second eclogue presents an image of man lost and forlorn. Collins' man, however, rejects the familiar world where he daily hears the "gentle Voice of Peace, or Pleasure's Song" (II. 1. 42) for a material world, here symbolized as the search for gold and silver. Analogically, Hassan's search mirrors the quest of eighteenth-century materialism and science for the earthly paradise, a paradise "without."<sup>92</sup> Although a spirit of materialistic optimism infects the time, Collins worries that the new philosophies of human nature do not pay attention to man's deeper yearnings. The new conceptions of human nature, the "private vices/ public virtues" view of society, lead away from wisdom, the wisdom that allows a man to live in simple and constant faith in his world. Thus, near the end of the second eclogue, Hassan learns that he must

Go teach my heart to love its painful fears,  
 Recalled by Wisdom's voice and Zara's tears.  
(II. 11. 83-84)

In this sense, Collins' second eclogue presents a reversal of the well-known eighteenth-century vision of an economic

utopia as Pope presents it in WINDSOR FOREST. Goldsmith, of course, writes his "The Deserted Village" for similar reasons to those of Collins. Both men see the blind search for material wealth leading into a spiritual desert.

The third eclogue takes place in a forest and during the evening. Similar to the first eclogue, the third presents an idealized, romanticized vision of love. However, Collins here pays less attention to direct moralizing and allows the overall image of the two lovers to speak for itself. In so doing, Collins makes a plea to his readers which, as it links the three eclogues thematically, also produces the moral which Collins wishes to express.

Abra--again, the portrait follows a conventional pattern--lives a blissful pastoral existence; like the earlier poet-shepherd Selim, she tends "willing Flocks" (III. 1. 11) while her song floats over the land. Abbas, a royal youth, "heard her Song,/ And sought the vales and echoing groves" (III. 1. 23-24) in order to woo Abra. This accomplished he "bore her from the Plain" (III. 1. 29) to "richer Scenes of golden Pow'r and Love" (III. 1. 34), that is, to his court. The word "golden" echoes Hassan's search for gold in the second eclogue, and we might expect Abbas' court to fulfill Collins' distrust of the new city philosophies. Abbas represents the type of man whose affairs belong to those of the world of material pursuits. However, Collins effects a "marriage" between the material and the spiritual in the figures of Abra and Abbas. Abbas succumbs

to the song of the poetess/oracle, marries her, and brings her to his worldly court. Collins, in fact, counsels Abra to let "Love delight thee, and with Abbas reign" (III. 1. 36). Collins senses, as it were, that the new science holds real power over the minds of men which puts the forces of poetry in jeopardy. He says that Abra "knew the Monarch, and with Fear obey'd" (III. 1. 26).

In order to succeed in the "marriage" of poetry and science, poetry must maintain its innocence, resisting temptation while moderating and reducing the materialist position. Thus Abra returns to the home of inspiration "oft as Spring renew'd the Plains with Flow'rs" and keeps her "shepherd's innocence" (III. 11. 41-43). Abbas, most importantly, often leaves "the care,/ And Thorns of State" (III. 11. 53-54) to follow Abra; in Abra's arms, amidst the bliss of peaceful nature, Abbas revitalizes the world of the heart:

Oft to the Shades and low-roof'd Cots retir'd,  
Or sought the Vale where first his Heart was  
fir'd;  
A Russet Mantle, like a Swain, he wore,  
And thought of Crowns and busy Courts no more.  
(III. 11. 55-58)

Collins describes such a life as "blest" (III. 1. 59), that is, as holy.

In the third eclogue Collins' idyllic vision appears to triumph over the destitution of the time. Indeed, the "marriage" makes a powerful plea to his fellow men to affirm the importance of human love as primary for the foundation



of a peaceful, ordered society. The third eclogue, regardless of its romantic and idyllic vision, takes a courageous poetic stand against superior forces which Collins sees as on the offensive. Thus, the first three eclogues serve a particular purpose for the young Collins. They attempt, so to speak, a shoring up action against potentially destructive powers, while trying to maintain an immature and obscure sense of poetic identity. Collins needs to create a world in his imagination which secures his identity against mysterious forces, forces which seem capable of reducing human action to the level of the inhuman. At this point, an exotic, naive poetry couched in the secure diction and style of a poetic forefather seemingly solves this imaginative need.

Given the steady and sustained vision in the first three eclogues, one might expect the fourth to round out the preceding ones in an ecstatic moment of vision. No such positive revelation occurs, however, and considering that the time scheme moves from light to dark, this lack of revelation should come as no surprise. The symbolic settings, as well as the time scheme of the poem, lead toward a world of less light and civilization at the same time as Collins tries to shore up that fragile world. Still, the radical change from the idyllic, optimistic tone of the third eclogue to the dark and despairing tone in the fourth eclogue catches one unaware.

The fourth eclogue takes place at midnight and, significantly, Collins defines the two principal figures--"two Brother Shepherds" (IV. 1. 7)--as fugitives. The eclogue begins in a setting reminiscent of the first and third eclogues, a place of holiness and light:

In fair Circassia, where to Love inclin'd,  
Each Swain was blest, for ev'ry Maid was kind!  
(IV. 11. 1-2)

Then the tone shifts abruptly: a sense of misery and desolation pervades the landscape, echoing the dreary desert of eclogue two. Only now the two shepherds, Secander and Agib, rather than leaving freely their blissful home, flee in terror and distraction. The fugitives take flight during "that still Hour, when awful Midnight reigns,/ And none, but Wretches, haunt the twilight Plains" (IV. 1. 3). The "awful Midnight" echoes the last lines of both *THE DUNCIAD* and *NIGHT THOUGHTS*, and Collins' tone and imagery present a similar landscape. Behind them the fugitives leave "Wide ravag'd Plains and Valleys" (IV. 1. 9) to find rest on the side of a mountain. The mountain, which Collins describes in similar language in his "Ode on the Poetical Character," holds special significance as a place of refuge.<sup>93</sup> The two shepherds symbolically seek refuge close to God; near the seat of divine power they feel secure enough to speak.

Agib explains the cause of their flight. Because fair Circassia's "Blessings tempt the Sword" (IV. 1. 31), the wicked Tartar invades "with Ruin in his Hand" (IV. 1. 25). Agib describes the Tartar as "Fix'd to destroy, and stedfast

to undo," and "By Lust incited or by Malice led" (IV. l. 64-66). In short, the Tartar represents those forces which work against the civilizing powers of culture. Whereas Collins only hinted at the destructive elements of these forces earlier in the ECLOGUES, now he states explicitly that they deform "our Land" (IV. l. 26). Secander laments that their "Persian Lord" (IV. l. 32), who sounds like the royal youth of the third eclogue grown old, does not defend them from the Tartar's malice. Instead, he remains oblivious to the danger which besets his state:

Far off in thoughtless Indolence resign'd,  
Soft Dreams of Love and Pleasure soothe his Mind:  
'Midst fair Sultanas lost in idle Joy,  
No Wars alarm him, and no Fears annoy.  
(IV. ll. 35-38)

Collins knows that men grown indolent with pleasure soon forget the reasons why they enjoy their blissful state.

Agib reveals the significance of this dialogue near the end of the eclogue when he suddenly directs his speech to "Ye Georgian Swains" (IV. l. 59). On the surface, the poem appeals to the swains of Russian Georgia, but in the context of the whole poem and Collins' concern over the direction which he saw eighteenth-century England taking, he clearly directs his plea at the men of his generation. Ostensibly, the tale of the Tartar presents an allegory meant to alert Collins' peers to the danger of a similar fate.<sup>94</sup> England's drive for trade and wealth, after all, gave rise to conflict after conflict, and the forces which lobbied for aggressive action lined up on the progressive, mercantilist side.

Collins likely considered the predominant forces agitating for an aggressive imperialist England as all one: the new science, the mercantilist theorists, the materialist philosophers, the political realists, all emerge in opposition to art and love, light and truth. In the ECLOGUES Collins sees spiritual and poetic values being forgotten in "the Waste of War" (IV, l. 60). Goldsmith picks up these points in "The Deserted Village" and states plainly that "times are altered; trade's unfeeling train/ Usurp the land and dispossess the swain."<sup>95</sup>

At this moment in his career--he was, after all, only twenty-one at the time--Collins seems incapable of countering the despair he feels or of effecting a reconciliation of lasting power. Collins, to be sure, manages a weak moment of vision in the third eclogue, but in the fourth his ability to re-affirm any absolute values disappears almost completely. Undoubtedly, this failure gave rise to his later contempt for the ECLOGUES, although the poem itself certainly works effectively on a number of levels. Unfortunately, on the one level where he yearns to succeed, he fails: in his eyes the poem does not establish his poetic identity. Unlike the young Pope who confidently pursues his task in the PASTORALS, however humbly, Collins finds his fragile edifice crumbling before it even takes final form. Collins hears malevolent powers moving behind him, destroying all; he feels himself pursued, unable to find refuge and incapable of taking a stand or fighting

back. Like his two fugitives, Collins turned his head and "thro' the Dews of Night/ Wide o'er the Moon-light Hills, renew'd this Flight" (IV. 11. 73-74).

This brings us to the second level of our analysis. One cannot ignore Collins' failure in the ECLOGUES and attempt to devise an image of Collins without understanding what he tried but failed to do. Nor without appreciating this failure, can one understand his later poetry. The "Ode On The Poetical Character," which almost every writer on Collins analyses to "discover" the real Collins, owes its birth to his experience of writing the ECLOGUES. The ECLOGUES, more particular than the later ODES, impress upon Collins the destitution of the time, and lead directly to the gestation of the ODES.

Collins' choice of the eclogue or pastoral mode follows a time-honoured tradition. Both Milton and Pope, for example, began their careers by writing pastorals, and much of their later poetry contains important vestiges of the pastoral sensibility. Spenser also develops an elaborate pastoral poetry. Even Shakespeare works with and through a pastoral vision, as Frye shows in the ANATOMY OF CRITICISM. For the young poet, as Johnson notes in Rambler #36 and in his LIFE OF POPE, the pastoral mode marks the first step towards poetic maturity, while allowing him a conventional mode of expression and secure path of experience.<sup>96</sup> In important ways the pastoral directs the young poet towards the realm of greater vision. It contains within it the

essential dialectic of innocence and experience, the imaginative union through which the poet grounds his identity and mature vision of the world. A successful pastoral vision, one nurtured in the natural life common to all, provides the poet with the strength to pursue a greater poetic path, a path which of necessity leads through the abyss. Hence the pastoral, especially the Virgilian tradition, for all its innocence and idealizing of states of mind, leads the poet through the experiences of transience, loss, dispossession, and death, and it provides the poet with the strength for greater struggles.<sup>97</sup> In order to understand what Collins' *ECLOGUES* meant to him as a young poet, we must pause for a moment and examine in greater detail the usual "progress" of the pastoral form.

The usual pastoral, Richard F. Hardin says, follows a standard movement through a basic psychological predicament. Hardin notes that Virgil's first eclogue explores

the paradox of the simple life in a civilization dominated by the "city": on the one hand leisure, time for friendship and creative life, access to the simple provisions of nature; on the other, the dependency implicit in a complex civilization with ownership of real estate, wage labor, dispossession, exile, and separation.<sup>98</sup>

Virgil describes the basic inhabitants of this city, strangely enough, as shepherds. Pope warns against seeing these shepherds as "shepherds at this day really are."<sup>99</sup> Instead, one should imagine them at a time "when the best of men followed the employment," that is, as men of nobility and some sophistication employed in the

most important of tasks.<sup>100</sup> Initially, then, the pastoral city-state promotes relaxation and bliss. Now, whether such a state ever exists makes no difference: the blissful state, devoid of the realistic details of actual life, serves to establish the drama and pathos inherent in human life. Misery and despair only appear so in relation to the possibility of their opposites. Accordingly, Virgil's first eclogue moves to a scene of despair. The Virgilian eclogues, according to Hardin, "conclude with an imminent departure from the green world."<sup>101</sup> Moreover, Hardin says, "It is a fading Arcadia that Virgil presents--the happy shepherd is being uprooted, driven to live among thirsting Africans or freezing in the remote North, while the coarse, impure barbarian soldier occupies his place."<sup>102</sup> The original vision, nonetheless, begins in the city. The fugitive, usually a shepherd but occasionally a poet, leaves the city--his original paradise--and retreats to the country. The retreat to a rural order re-establishes his ties not only with nature but with the essential currents of human happiness and human faith. Hardin notes that

After flight, the pastoral experience requires illumination: in touch with nature, man is instructed in her ways, always opposed to the artificial way of the city or court from which he has fled. This instruction will allow the initiate to live well in his complex world after leaving his pastoral retreat. In the final stage of the experience, Arcadia having been abandoned or destroyed, the pastoral initiate finds peace and simplicity

embodied within the self.<sup>103</sup>

Milton ends "Lycidas" on a note of renewed faith and a desire to return to the city, and through the mediary of Michael, he describes the culmination of the pastoral vision in *PARADISE LOST* as the "paradise within," a paradise capable of protecting one's inner faith against all external circumstances which invade the peaceful bower, so to speak, and threaten the grounds of peace. Hardin notes that, in Virgil's eclogues, the "complexities invading the simple world were products of the human will vested in political strife and imperialism," elements which also form a backdrop to Collins' poem.<sup>104</sup>

Although Collins' *ECLOGUES* show him to be a true student of the pastoral mode, he does not apply the conventions conventionally, and several interesting anomalies surface. First, Collins subverts the normal pastoral sequence, distorting a number of conventions as he develops his narrative. The distortions establish Collins' alienation from his tradition, and help to explain his failure to achieve his poetic identity. For example, although Collins situates his first eclogue in the realm of the pastoral idyll, he begins the sequence outside the city. The shepherds have left the city to the barbarian. The poet-shepherd, accordingly, warns the maids to remain faithful to "the Virtues that must lead to Love" (I. 1. 68). The second eclogue presents another distortion: the camel-trader Hassan, seeking trade freely, leaves love and



peace, only to experience the acute despair of separation. After suffering deprivation and fears he cannot dispel, he resolves to leave the folly of searching for greater material pleasures to return to a life already sufficiently satisfying. He returns "Recall'd by Wisdom's voice, and Zara's Tears" (II. 11. 84).

The third eclogue, which Richard Eversole calls "exquisite," sees Collins exploring the patterns of natural instruction and return to the city.<sup>105</sup> In this eclogue, however, Collins creates a pattern of periodic returns to nature which occur regardless of the state of the city. Moreover, in order to extend the depth of this pattern Collins goes back to the Song of Solomon to enrich his discussion. As Eversole sees it, the biblical pastoral as exemplified in the Song provides the basis for Collins' union of shepherd and prince.<sup>106</sup> Collins uses the Song, as we said earlier, to effect a marriage of the emotional and spiritual world of innocence with the material and empirical world of experience. The eclogue attempts a marriage which aims at satisfying "the claims of both nature and human society," but also opens the way to a Christian basis of social life, that is, one that governs man's daily life--business, politics, marriages, and so forth--by continually re-firing his heart with the fundamental virtues of Christianity.<sup>107</sup> In all of this Collins displays a trait characteristic of the pastoral writer. Because the pastoral writer's task mainly involves the attempt to re-establish

the city's original civilized values, the pastoral really pursues the path of "virtue or social justice."<sup>108</sup> The third eclogue tries to establish the peaceful civilized state found in Virgil's first eclogue.

In the context of the social vision which Collins expounds in his *ECLOGUES*, his fictional account in the preface of how the poem came into his hands takes on added significance beyond that of a mere device and becomes an integral aspect of the poem. Janice Haney-Peritz's discussion of this aspect of the poem seems confused and misfounded. Her anxiety over what she sees as "a troubling series of doubles" creates no trouble after one establishes the overall thematic concerns of the poem.<sup>109</sup> Collins claims that he "received them [the *ECLOGUES*] at the Hands of a Merchant, who had made it his Business to enrich himself with the Learning, as well as the Silks and Carpets of the Persians" (p. 2-3). Collins' merchant symbolizes the civilized, ideal man of the pastoral vision. Collins adds, moreover, that he can discover about the "author" of the *ECLOGUES* only that he "died of a Distemper fatal in those Parts, whilst he was engag'd in celebrating the Victories of his favorite Monarch, the Great Abbas" (p. 3). The name Abbas means, significantly, "the Father of the People" and, of course, Abbas occurs in the third eclogue as the royal youth who, married to Abra the poetess-shepherd, wears "The Lover's Myrtle, with the Warrior's Crown" (III. 1. 68).

The fourth eclogue, as we saw earlier, develops a much grimmer view of man's possibilities; indeed, given the normal pastoral structure, the fourth really belongs at the beginning of the sequence, for the fourth, not the first, presents the fugitive shepherds fleeing from their "fair Circassia" (IV. 1. 1), the blessed city of civilized bliss, to seek a mountain refuge. Virgil presents the flight from the barbarian in the first part of his narrative. Moreover, the final images in the two poems differ radically. Hardin argues that Virgil renders a "sense of transitory joy," and that the tradition in general attempts "not to bring man back to Arcadia, but to lead him to Elysium."<sup>110</sup> Collins, on the other hand, leads to greater despair. For Collins' fugitives, the future offers no return to the civilized city.

The distortion of the pastoral movement in Collins indicates a deepening alienation from the poetic tradition; well before the ODES explore his fear of poetic failure, the ECLOGUES reveal his anxiety over achieving a poetic identity. Collins tries to enter the brotherhood of poetry over a time-honored threshold, one which his precursors used to ease the movement from innocence to maturity, from life to death: a bridge spanned the abyss. Collins, however, finds the way to the bridge blocked. No myth arises to grant a continuum of time and identity. The eighteenth-century, in fact, looked askance at the pastoral myth. As Sherwin argues, eighteenth-century man felt himself separated from

previous history: "The Enlightenment meant that the past WAS past."<sup>111</sup> Earlier writers like Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton "knew their distance from the past, especially the classical past," but that distance did not translate into a "discontinuity" because they created a bond with the past through the imaginative use of myth.<sup>112</sup> Geoffrey Hartman notes that a "myth mediates a discontinuity--winter, death, paradise lost, temps perdu--and its very movement, the narrative, is a series of bridges over a gulf."<sup>113</sup> The pre-Enlightenment artist luxuriates in the past, takes it up into the present, so to speak, and bridges the gulf of time. Sherwin argues that the Enlightenment artist, on the other hand, "lacks a greater or more refined magic that would enable him to subsume outmoded forms. He cannot purify ancient myths because the Enlightenment seems to have purified myth out of existence."<sup>114</sup>

The pastoral, naturally enough, hardly suited the progressive, mercantilist ethos of eighteenth-century England, unless of course it supported that ethos like WINDSOR FOREST. The literary world did not much value the tradition either. Johnson ridicules the pastoral tradition in RASSELAS, and in his LIFE OF MILTON he dismisses it as "easy, vulgar and therefore disgusting."<sup>115</sup> Thomson's poem on Newton describes the pastoral poet nicely: oblivious to the demands of harsh reality, he lies "Dreaming in whispering groves by the hoarse brook" (l. 120). Collins, in short, finds himself split off from the past and the

security which a continuity of thought offers. Try as he might, he cannot vivify the myth, and thus he stands before the gulf of time, lost without light. The young Collins cannot succeed through the ritual of the shepherd, for the initiation rite no longer grants the young poet passage into poetical manhood.

After the failure of the PERSIAN ECLOGUES, Collins' poetry, as the midnight in the last stage indicates, becomes almost solely a poetry of destitution. Indeed, the nearer midnight approaches, the farther the abyss recedes from his vision, and the more he feels the destitution of the time. As Heidegger says, the "closer the world's night draws towards midnight, the more exclusively does the destitute prevail" (PLT. p. 94). Thus, unlike Young who manages to obtain glimpses of the abyss through "this opaque of nature" (I. 1. 47), the abyss as a defined region of the cosmos or even as a metaphor of experience does not appear in Collins' poetry.

Even so, Collins' ODES reveal him as a true poet of the abyss. The ODES, however, will not receive as much attention as the ECLOGUES: the most interesting aspect of the ODES for this study lies in the strategies which Collins employs to define his sense of the nature of poetry. Heidegger remarks that before anyone "can be truly a poet in such an age, the time's destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him" (PLT. p. 94). The statement certainly applies in Collins' case: the

question of poetry obsesses him. By making poetry a question for himself, Collins "gather[is] in poetry the nature of poetry" and dares "the venture with language" (PLT. p. 133). His ODES--and not just the "Ode On The Poetical Character"--show him daring such a venture with language. Collins chooses an apt epigraph from Pindar for his ODES:

Would I could find me words, as I move onward as  
a bearer of good gifts in the Muse's car, would I  
might be attended by Daring and by all-embracing  
Power.<sup>116</sup>

Collins' search for "words" announces his desire to gather in the nature of poetry, an act which will produce his "good gifts." The ODES as a whole attempt to comprehend the nature of the poetic character, and as he confronts the problem of the poet's identity, he battles the despair of knowing that he will never write "strong" poetry. For this reason his ODES deserve the appellation "Daring."

Collins opens the odes to "Pity," "Fear," "Simplicity," and "Mercy" with an apostrophe appropriate to each personification. In order for Collins to understand the essence of poetry, he must consider the basic elements constituting the poetical character, and Collins' development of these figures, as Wendorf notes, forms a central strategy for achieving a poetic identity in the ODES. Wendorf argues that personification "lies at the heart of the psychological drama in the ODES, providing the grounds for discovering the nature of emotional or moral qualities and establishing a framework of dramatic

confrontation in which these qualities are ultimately absorbed or infused."<sup>117</sup> These qualities become ruling virtues for the poet, virtues which lead to a peace and bliss much like that enjoyed in the civilized pastoral city; as one reads the ODES, it becomes clear that each personification forms a state of mind or heart necessary to the whole poetical character. Thus Collins relies on personification not for conventional poetic purposes, but as a radical and "daring" strategy. By both projecting and personifying human qualities and states outside and above himself, Collins deifies each virtue; then, by calling each deity down to earth to become a part of his heart and mind, he reintegrates his identity with that of divinity. Much like Renaissance man before him (perhaps this is what Frye means when he says that mid- and late-eighteenth century poets were trying to put man back on Renaissance rails again), Collins' imagination tries to verify the spirit in the body. He offers the gods a home on earth once more, a place to dwell, so to speak, where the poet can breathe the air of divine truth once again. He dares the most difficult of all poetic acts.

For example, in the "Ode to Pity" Collins speaks of Pity as "the Friend of Man assign'd" whose "balmy Hands" sooth and charm man's "frantic Woe" (ll. 1-3). Pity, sympathy, and compassion all belong to the basic emotional structure which holds a civilized society together: without Pity, each man hides within himself, incapable of breaking

through his fear and ignorance into the world of civilized light. As the power which breaks down this state of ignorance, Pity deserves the worship of all men. Hence, like the Greeks who gave their gods homes, Collins promises Pity that he will build her a shrine where, he hopes, he may live as well:

There let me oft, retir'd by Day,  
In Dreams of Passion melt away,  
Allow'd with Thee to dwell.  
(ll. 37-39)

Similarly, Collins wishes to dwell with Fear (l. 21) because Fear inspires the tragic imagination of writers like Aeschylus and Shakespeare. He also tells Simplicity that he "seek<sup>As</sup> to find thy temp'rate Vale:/ Where oft <sup>This</sup> Reed might sound" (ll. 51-52). Collins extends this to Mercy as well when he says: "To Thee we build a roseate Bow'r" (l. 25).

To live with a "god" means to imagine a continuity of time, a continuity which seems capable of renewing itself with each generation, each age. Collins found it impossible in the ECLOGUES to bridge the gulf of the past with myth; now he seeks for a more primal poetic mode, a more personal and poetically valid thinking. Collins tries, through personification, to populate the world with the basic spirits of poetic life. As Wendorf argues, "personification provides our way of knowing, and stresses our natural kinship with the qualities it bodies forth."<sup>118</sup> Thus, in the "Ode to Fear" Collins sees Fear as the spirit who "most



possest/ The sacred Seat of Shakespear's Breast" (ll. 64-65). He asks the "Dark Pow'r" to grant him the strength "to read the Visions old" (ll. 53-54), promising that, if Fear will "Teach [him] but once like [Shakespeare] to feel," he "will dwell" with Fear (ll. 69-71). Without such a primal experience of the imagination, Collins knows that his vision can never move beyond poetic doubt.

In his personifications Collins comes close to achieving a break-through into full poetic vision. However, he never seems to carry the point to its finish. He reaches only so far and then retreats from the opening which he has cleared for himself, a movement which Martha Collins sees repeating itself in most of the ODES.<sup>119</sup> Yet seeing Collins' retreats as a failure to "incarnate" as a poet, to use Bloom's term, misses both an essential feature of his poetry and the success which he achieves. In the first place, Collins lives by the same poetic law which Hölderlin outlines in "Bread and Wine." It bears quoting:

One thing stands firm: whether it be near noon  
Or close to midnight, a measure ever endures,  
Common to all; yet to each his own is allotted,  
too,  
Each of us goes toward and reaches the place  
that he can.

(PLT. p. 95)

Collins writes according to such a law of poetic development, and he reveals the psychic tension which such a law produces when he expresses his desire to go beyond, but remains where he stands. Moreover, because he fears that he cannot reach the great poetic heights necessary to maintain

the light of divine radiance on earth, Collins worries, like many of his contemporaries, that no poet writing at the time seems capable of asserting real poetic power. In the "Ode On The Poetical Character" Collins asks:

Where is the Bard, whose Soul can now  
Its high presuming Hopes avow?  
(ll. 51-52)

This line receives a good deal of attention from critics, but rarely do they note the lines which immediately follow, lines which place Collins' anxiety in a different light than the one to which critics so often call attention. The lines show Collins evaluating the importance of his poetry for his age--and perhaps for the future. Because he senses that his poetry contains important matter for poets struggling to find a voice which can carry across the abyss, he asks if a poet lives "who thinks, with Rapture blind,/ This hallow'd Work for Him design'd" (ll. 53-54)? Collins recognizes that because he writes during the world's night, his work becomes "hallow'd" or holy, the "good gifts" which he hopes to offer in the opening epigraph. However, his anxiety goes beyond the fear that he will not write great poetry to a generalized concern for all poetry. In this way, he reaches as far as he can.

Collins knows, moreover, that a true poet never succeeds unless he possesses a strong imagination or Fancy. Indeed, those same qualities which form the essence of the poetical character cannot be assimilated into heart and mind without the mediation of Fancy. Collins says that he feels

Pity "by Fancy's Aid" (l. 25), and he approaches "th' unreal Scene" of Fear's domain only when "Fancy lifts the Veil" (ll. 3-4). As Collins moves through the ODES, he imagines that a strong imaginative poet embodies each state. The implication is clear: without Fancy one cannot approach the dwelling place of the gods, cannot, in short, write true poetry, cannot, as he says in the "Ode to Simplicity," "breathe her genuine Thought,/ In Numbers warmly pure, and sweetly strong" (ll. 2-3). Collins feels most of all that he does not possess the imagination to do the job. His "failure" to develop a poetic identity in the ECLOGUES no doubt fed his insecurities on this score, but the ODES show how his insecurities also stem from his appreciation of the basic difficulty of developing a poetical character--and not just from his awe of Milton or Pope.

The "Ode On The Poetical Character," of course, provides the essential statement on Collins' insecurity. Early in the "Ode" Collins says that Fancy,

To few the God-like Gift assigns,  
To gird their blest prophetic Loins,  
And gaze her visions wild, and feel unmix'd her  
Flame!

(ll. 20-23)

In other words, the "God-like Gift"--the qualities or virtues--which form the essence of the poetical character rarely come together in any one individual. Few merit the god's gift or can exist in a state of pure spirit and body at once and "feel unmix'd" the visionary power. In the final stanza of the "Ode," as most commentators note, Collins'

vision reaches its most eloquent height. He reaches, as in the ECLOGUES, almost to paradise, but finds paradise closed off from his sight. Collins says that he follows Milton:

With many a Vow from Hope's aspiring Tongue,  
My trembling Feet his guiding Steps pursue;  
In vain--Such Bliss to One alone,  
Of all the Sons of Soul was known,  
And Heav'n, and Fancy, kindred Pow'rs,  
Have now o'erturn'd th' inspiring Bow'ers,  
Or curtain'd close such Scene from ev'ry future  
View.

(ll. 70-76)

A number of significant points emerge from this final statement, points largely left unclarified by previous exegeses. True, the passage exhibits Collins' familiar states of fear and insecurity. As he tries to enter the dwelling place of the gods--"th' inspiring Bow'ers" where Milton dwells--he finds that his efforts, like Pope's cry at the beginning of the final lines in THE DUNCIAD, go "in vain." Collins discloses the nature of his struggle with poetry in his confusion over what has happened to that sacred dwelling place: it has either been "o'erturn'd" or "curtain'd close." True, the bower exists only in Collins' mind as a metaphor for the inspiring home of god and poet, but the result of overturning the bower reverses for Collins all the conventional relationships which govern the poet's vocation: he sees that the tradition itself has suffered a reversal of values. Pope's DUNCIAD, of course, decries the same reversal; and Young attempts to reconcile it in the NIGHT THOUGHTS. Collins suffered the effect of this reversal writing the ECLOGUES. In short, the effect of curtaining off

the bower from "ev'ry future View" completely shuts the poet out of the bower: he cannot see in, nor does any light shine out. Collins adds, moreover, that his desolation occurs because "Heav'n, and Fancy," working together, deny the poet access to the source of inspiration. Heaven's closing off the bower means that the god no longer comes to earth. Thus, the end of the "Ode" indicates, to use Heidegger's term, that a "default of God" has occurred. Collins' creates an either/or image at the end of the poem which leaves him staring into a rift. The sacred home of poetic inspiration remains within the realm of the incomprehensible. However, while the collusion of the two divinities effectively precludes Collins from entering the abyss, he promises "With many a Vow" to continue singing his song over the destitute land. He thus fulfills the measure which he set for himself in the epigraph to the ODES.

Although Collins receives a great deal of attention from modern critics for his anxiety, he shares the same sense of the age as virtually every other poet of the time. Despair of one sort or another pervades the poetry of Thomson, Young, the later Pope, and Collins. One hardly thinks of Thomas Gray, however, as a poet belonging to the confusion and perplexity of the mid- and late-eighteenth century. W. P. Jones, for example, calls the first chapter of his book on Gray "Fastidious Little Gentleman."<sup>120</sup> Yet

Gray, the quiet scholar who writes an elegant, controlled poetry borrowing heavily from the classics, writes a poetry deeply imbued with the desolation of the age. Indeed, Gray worries over the problem of poetic identity with no less intensity than Collins. Although Gray will not receive as much attention as Young, Thomson, and Collins, it will be instructive before concluding the essay to show Gray working through the same problems which faced his fellow poets.

For example, in the posthumously published "Stanzas to Mr. Bentley" Gray displays, through the screen of an encomium, his sense of the time's malaise. He begins conventionally, extolling Bentley's virtues as an artist and complimenting Bentley for the high plane to which he has taken the graphic art. Bentley's drawings bring the verse to life, says Gray. Not surprizingly, such a thought raises questions about the validity of Gray's own poetry. Gray says that, if he could emulate Bentley, could "catch his strength, his easy grace" (l. 13), his poetry might match Dryden or Pope's. Even so, Gray feels, like Young, that neither Dryden nor Pope soar as high as Shakespeare or Milton, whose writings were inspired by Heaven and, as such, threw a great circle of light all around themselves:

But not to one in this benighted age  
Is that diviner inspiration giv'n,  
That burns in Shakespear's or in Milton's page,  
The pomp and prodigality of heav'n.<sup>121</sup>

Of course, "not to one in this benighted age" includes Gray, too, but Gray, not unlike Pope in his avowal that he follows

a humble muse, admits quite honestly that he follows a humbler path than Shakespeare or Milton. In this he not only displays a sure grasp of the basic anxiety of the age but, like Collins, a sense of his fate as a poet born in the rift. The poem, in fact, attests to Gray's humility in a unique way. He apparently tore the manuscript, thereby destroying the last words in the final three lines. Although a number of critics have offered emendations to fill in the missing words, the story runs that Gray tore off the corner of the manuscript in "some peculiar fit of modesty."<sup>122</sup>

Gray pursues similar themes in "The Progress of Poesy." He begins with a description of a primitive poetic time, a Golden Age of song. The natural setting places us in a pastoral landscape at a time when the gods, roaming freely, lived on earth. Song ruled the land and peace governed man's daily life. Even "the Lord of War, / . . . curb'd the fury of his car" (ll. 17-18). The Golden Age poet wrote of love "Frisking light in frolic measures" (l. 31) while the "purple light of Love" (l. 41) shone over the land, bringing cheer to all. True to the pastoral tradition, Gray recognizes that such an idyllic state hardly fits man's normal experience of life. The Arcadian vision cedes its place to life as we know it, a life characterized by

Labour, and Penury, the racks of Pain,  
Disease, and Sorrow's weeping train,  
And Death, sad refuge from the storms of Fate!  
(ll. 43-45)

Gray harbours, as his "Elegy" eloquently testifies, no illusions about the harsh reality of physical existence. Nor does he attempt to gloss over the common fate of most men with an ecstatic vision of progress: all men suffer through the world of experience. Like the Ploughman in the "Elegy," each man "plods his weary way" (l. 3) to "homely joys, and destiny obscure" (l. 31).

After developing a similar image in "The Progress of Poesy," however, Gray sets out his view of poetry's aims. He argues that the gods give man poetry to dispel the darkness and despair of mortal existence, and he wants to "disprove" the notion that the gods have "giv'n in vain the heav'nly Muse" (ll. 46-48). Gray affirms the poet's eternal relationship with the Muse, and considering the diminished status of the Muse in the eighteenth-century, his affirmation deserves respect. Gray declares that whenever the darkness of night falls over man, the Muse always breaks "the twilight-gloom/ To chear the shiv'ring Native's dull abode" (ll. 56-57). Wherever man goes, the Muse, through the mediary of the poet, brightens man's way; man, therefore, always needs the poet. Gray counsels that, despite the arduousness of the task, the poet must attend, as Heidegger tells us, to the sources of song:

Her track, where'er the Goddess roves,  
 Glory pursue and generous Shame,  
 Th' unconquerable Mind, and Freedom's holy flame.  
(ll. 63-65)



The phrase "unconquerable Mind" echoes Milton's description of Satan before he takes his solitary way through the abyss. For the poets of the mid-and late-eighteenth century, only Milton shows the strength to follow the track to "where'er the Goddess roves."

Gray defines his poetic theory further and claims that, when "the pomp of tyrant-Power,/ And coward Vice" (ll. 79-80) chased poetry from Parnassus, it moved to England. The Muses gave Shakespeare the "golden keys" (l. 91) to unlock Nature's wonders; after Shakespeare, of course, Milton assumes trusteeship of the keys. Milton rides "Upon the seraph-wings of Extasy" in order to "spy" the "secrets of th' abyss" (ll. 96-97). However, as Gray argues in "Stanzas to Mr. Bentley," no poet illuminates the abyss any longer. The "Thoughts, that breathe, and words, that burn" are "heard no more" (ll. 110-111) in England. Gray then asks: "Oh! Lyre divine, what daring Spirit/ Wakes thee now" (ll. 112-113)? The qualifications in his answer reveal, as in Collins' case, his appreciation of the solitary flight a poet takes when he ascends to the home of the Muses. If the poet who dares poetry comes, he must take his way through the abyss to the home of the gods:

Yet shall he mount, and keep his way  
Beyond the limits of a vulgar fate,  
Beneath the Good how far--but far above the Great.  
(ll. 121-123)

We should understand the term "Great" as Fielding defines it in JONATHAN WILD: the great are the tyrants, politicians,

merchants, and so forth who live as if they were gods. The "Good" are virtuous men who, as both Young and Collins argue, commune with the gods.

In "The Bard: A Pindaric Ode" (1757), Gray traces a familiar history of tyranny through the eyes of a Welsh Bard. The Bard sounds like the same "daring Spirit" whom Gray wonders about in "The Progress of Poesy." The Bard, after taking his way up through the abyss, lands "On a rock" (l. 15) which hangs over a deep chasm. Presumably safe overlooking this abyss, he "with a Master's hand, and Prophet's fire,/ Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre" (ll. 21-22), and recounts the gloom which engulfs the land when tyranny oppresses it. After describing Wales' hellish history, the Bard hopes that poetry will "In buskin'd measures move" the tyrant's heart to feel "Pale Grief, and pleasing Pain" (ll. 128-129). The appeal echoes Collins' belief that only poetry or Fancy moves man's heart to feel pity, compassion, and fear. Gray sees that tyranny oppresses men into silence, breeds ignorance, and thus leads to the darkness of the age. However, the spirit of truth and light never die and Gray declares that time, with poetry leading the way, will dispel the gloom of tyranny. The Bard asks the tyrant: "think'st thou, yon sanguine cloud,/ Rais'd by thy breath, has quench'd the Orb of day" (ll. 135-136)? The Bard promises that the light of truth will soon dispel the "sanguine cloud" by warming "the nations with redoubled ray" (l. 138).

Gray ends the poem, however, in a startling fashion. We anticipate, given the general direction of the Bard's argument, a vision of a brave new world. Instead, Gray ends with a frightening image of the Bard leaping into the abyss: the Bard "spoke, and headlong from the mountain's height/ Deep in the roaring tide he plung'd to endless night" (ll. 143-144). The violence of this image matches the ending of THE DUNCIAD in power and finality. Whereas Pope quietly leaves the world, the Bard performs a striking symbolic gesture: the poet's suicide, the willing cessation of consciousness, and the silence which follows, testify to the total destitution of the age.

## CONCLUSION

The poetry of the mid- and late-eighteenth century, although it may not always move readers, speaks eloquently and insistently about the experience of writing in a destitute time. For some readers that voice sounds strange, sometimes, as with Frye, exciting, but often troubling. The voice of the poet calls out to us from no discernible center. Indeed, when we follow the voice of destitution, we find ourselves in unfamiliar places, and travelling over difficult terrain. The landscape which these poets inhabit spans immense distances and one must navigate with care. Moreover, the paths which critics have etched across this landscape do not always provide the best routes to this poetry. Too often, for example, critics simply push the poetry to one side, obscuring whatever value it may possess, and pronounce the mediocre quality of the poetry typical of periods of transitions. Where serious work takes place, as we saw earlier in Bate's *THE BURDEN OF THE PAST AND THE ENGLISH POET* and Bloom's *THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE*, the analysis generally evaluates the poetry in terms of symptoms and neuroses--the fear of the father, the dread of

insignificance, and so forth. The criticism spawned by Bloom, in particular, often adds little to our understanding of the poetry. Few of Bloom's disciples heed his stipulation that his theory of poetic development does not "mean the passing of images and ideas from earlier to later poets."<sup>122</sup> As a result, most of Bloom's followers simply take source studies to an absurd level. The poet's voice--his identity--drowns in a sea of "other" voices, other times. We need to read the poetry of the mid- and late-eighteenth century as poetry of a specific age, poetry which speaks out of the heart of the age. As T. E. Blom argues, one of the greatest limitations of eighteenth-century criticism results from "our failure to treat the literature of *Athe* period in and of itself."<sup>123</sup> The first step towards rectifying that failure requires that we deepen our understanding of what poetry written during an age of transition says about that experience.

A poetry of destitution forms a special part of the literary tradition and the history of mankind. Without it, a great part of the poetical experience goes unappreciated. While we may read Dante's *INFERNO* and Milton's *PARADISE LOST*--both great explorations of the abyss--and marvel at the strength and imaginative faith which those two works exhibit, a poet in a destitute time gives special testimony to the vicissitudes of conception inherent in any poetry. The pain of adversity forms a significant part of the overall experience, and the joyful vision does not exist

without it. As Gray says in his "Ode On The Pleasure Arising From Vicissitude":

The hues of bliss more brightly glow,  
Chastis'd by sabler tints of woe;  
And blended form, with artful strife,  
The strength and harmony of life.  
(ll. 45-48)

In his NIGHT THOUGHTS Young struggles to achieve a similar reconciliation of pain and joy through a vision of the healing power of song in the here and now. He will not wait for "dissolution to be blest" (IX. l. 2373).

For the critic, a poet like Collins initiates him into the mysterious and secret places of the poet's soul. If a poet gives poetry to man as a sacred gift, then a poet of destitution unselfishly gives criticism the essentials of the risks inherent in all creation. To the rest of us, he gives a glimpse of the sorrow, fear, and pain we all experience as we try to discover an identity between the abyss which separates life and death, in a world that speaks of a past but promises no future. The end of Thomson's poem on Newton powerfully evokes the pathos of that feeling.

Whether a poet ascends from the abyss or falls into it, he opens up a space for the imagination and leaves a record of his presence. Young, Thomson, Collins, Gray, each records the dangers and difficulties faced by poets born in the rift. Each teaches us something of importance about the destitution of the time. In Collins' case, for example, we learn of the importance of the pastoral to poetic incarnation, and the effect on a poet when he finds the

tradition closed to him; his ECLOGUES stand as markers of the discontinuity of the time. Thomson shows how the potential and the power of the scientific vision undercuts his poetic identity. He finds his Muse silenced. Milton would never presume to astonish his Muse into silence or feel powerless to address his "High theme." As Young battles with the new science, he shows the power of darkness, the ecstasy of light, and the mysterious reality of the word. He tells of space, of silence, and of fear so great that his efforts to contain it go "in vain." Indeed, one refrain which calls across the mid- and late-eighteenth century, one beginning with THE DUNCIAD, repeats the phrase "in vain, in vain." Collins says it over and over. Gray's "Sonnet On The Death Of Mr. Richard West" begins and ends with "in vain," creating an eternal circle of continuous and irrevocable hopelessness. Whereas Milton always mediates his pain through poetic faith, the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet finds little consolation in writing poetry. When a poet like Robert Blair, for instance, offers a Christian consolation at the end of "The Grave," it rings hollow: despair, not a promise of joy, still fills the poet. Blair's soul still beats in terror. Thomson's consolation, as we saw, likewise fails to carry conviction. Collins' ECLOGUES and Gray's "The Bard" offer not a consolation but a shattering vision of despair and desperation. For the poets of the period, the meaning of pain, death, and love remain

concealed and obscured.

Yet success or failure of vision here begs the issue. After all, a poet of the abyss speaks about his inability to overcome the darkness: his "failure" forms an aspect of his experience and thus of his poetic personality. We should not look to these poets as rivals to the greatness of Shakespeare and Milton; we should simply give them their due. Indeed, the abyss calls us to listen to poets who, resolute and steadfast in a time of night, attend, singing, to the traces of the holy. Gray, Collins, and Young make a commitment, "a Vow from Hope's aspiring Tongue" as Collins says, to attend to the holy. Song remains. Later, when Blake proclaims that "everything that lives is Holy," or when Wordsworth announces his vision of a world alive with God and sacred to man, they stand upon ground hallowed by mid- and late-eighteenth century poetry. In the etching of Milton poised over the abyss, Blake's MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL confidently declares not only its author's confidence in his imaginative strength, but a new age of visionary power. Blake sees himself capable of writing his way through the abyss. Indeed, his ironic little poem "To The Muses" could only be written after the experiences of the earlier poets. That confidence was dearly bought. Our poets worked humbly to build a new place for the gods of poetry to dwell. Gray's epitaph to the "Elegy" not only describes the mid- and late-eighteenth century poet, but it provides an apt



summation of the age; as well, it gives him his due without making more of him than he deserves:

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown,  
Fair Science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy mark'd him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Mis'ry all he had, a tear,  
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd)  
a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose)  
The bosom of his Father and his God.

(11. 117-128)

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Alan D. McKillop, Introd., EIGHTEENTH CENTURY POETRY AND PROSE, 3rd ed., ed. Louis I. Bredvold et al. (1939; rpt. New York: Ronald Press, 1973), p. xxv.

<sup>4</sup> T. E. Blom, "Eighteenth-Century Reflexive Poetry," ECS, 10, No. 1 (1976), p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> James Thomson, THE SEASONS, ed. James Sambrook (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 303.

<sup>6</sup> Thomson, SEASONS, p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> Thomson, SEASONS, p. 304.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, SEASONS, p. 304.

<sup>9</sup> Thomson, SEASONS, p. 304.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Young, THE COMPLAINT, OR NIGHT THOUGHTS, introd., George Gilfillan (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), p. xxiii. Also see Samuel Jackson Pratt, OBSERVATIONS ON THE NIGHT THOUGHTS ON DR. YOUNG; WITH OCCASIONAL REMARKS ON THE BEAUTIES OF POETICAL COMPOSITION (London: Richardson and Urquart, 1776; rpt. New York: Garland Pub., 1970), pp. 2-3.

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29 Bate, p. 131.

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86 Roger Lonsdale, ed., *THE POEMS OF THOMAS GRAY, WILLIAM COLLINS, OLIVER GOLDSMITH*, (London: Longman's, Green, 1969), p. 367.

87 Lonsdale, p. 368.

88 Lonsdale, p. 368.

89 Lonsdale, p. 370. See also Richard Wendorf, *WILLIAMS COLLINS AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 73.



90 Richard Wendorf, WILLIAMS COLLINS AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 63.

91 William Collins, THE WORKS, ed. Richard Wendorf and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 4. l. 14. All further references to Collins are from this text, unless otherwise indicated.

92 See, for example, J.H. Plumb, ENGLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (1950; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 21-33 and pp. 105-115.

93 See Sherwin, p. 26, and Earl R. Wasserman, "Collins' 'Ode On The Poetical Character,'" ELH, Vol. 34 (1967), pp. 108-109 for discussions of the inspirational mount theme.

94 Wendorf makes a similar point in his study--p. 71--without drawing an analogy between the ECLOGUE and Collins' contemporary England.

95 Oliver Goldsmith, Collected Works, Vol. IV, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 289, ll. 63-64.

96 Samuel Johnson, WORKS, Vol. I, RAMBLER NO. 36, (New York: Pafraets Book Company, 1903), p. 232-238, and SELECTED, p. 544.

97 Richard F. Hardin, "The Pastoral Moment," in SURVIVALS OF PASTORAL, ed. Richard F. Hardin (Laurence: Univ. of Kansas Pub., 1979), p. 1.

98 Hardin, p. 1.

99 Pope, SELECTED, p. 8.

100 Pope, SELECTED, p. 8.

101 Hardin, p. 4.

- 102 Hardin, p. 1.
- 103 Hardin, p. 2.
- 104 Hardin, p. 5.
- 105 Richard Eversole, "Collins And The End Of The Shepherd Pastoral," in SURVIVALS OF PASTORALS, ed. Richard F. Hardin (Laurence: Univ. of Kansas Pub., 1979), p. 26.
- 106 Eversole, pp. 21-22.
- 107 Hardin, p. 5.
- 108 Hardin, p. 13.
- 109 Janice Haney-Peritz, "'In Quest Of Mistaken Beauties': Allegorical Indeterminacy In Collins' Poetry," ELH, Vol. 48, (1981), p. 733.
- 110 Hardin, pp. 1-2.
- 111 Sherwin, p. 5.
- 112 Sherwin, p. 5.
- 113 Geoffrey Hartman, BEYOND FORMALISM: LITERARY ESSAYS 1958-1970 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970), p. 15.
- 114 Sherwin, p. 5.
- 115 Johnson, SELECTED, p. 426.
- 116 Collins, in Roger Lonsdale, ed., THE POEMS OF THOMAS GRAY, WILLIAM COLLINS, OLIVER GOLDSMITH, (London: Longman's, Green, 1969), p. 414.

117 Wendorf, p. 103.

118 Wendorf, p. 103.

119 Martha Collins, "The Self-Conscious Poet: The Case of William Collins," *ELH*, Vol. 42, (1975), pp. 366-367.

120 William Powell Jones, *THOMAS GRAY, SCHOLAR: THE TRUE TRAGEDY OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GENTLEMAN* (1937; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), p. 3.

121 Thomas Gray, *THE COMPLETE POEMS*, ed. H.W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966). All further references to Gray are from this text, unless otherwise indicated.

122 Lonsdale, p. 155.

123 Bloom, *MAP*, p. 3.

124 Blom, p. 56.

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